



SINNERS ON FOX STREET

A Novella and Stories

Yolanda Gallardo

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Recovering the past, creating the future

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WHOSE TRADITION?

Through cold gray eyes, she stands in her habit, staring at the young brown boy reading his composition about tradition. Her breathing is heavy with anger at his words.

“My family likes to celebrate all of the holidays with lots of good food. On Thanksgiving Day, my mother makes a turkey with lots of stuffing. She’s a good cook, who likes to cook lots of good food.”

Titters spread through the classroom at the loud sigh from the lady with the ruler. “Easter time is lots of fun. We color hard-boiled eggs, and then mommy hides them, and we have to find them. And on Halloween, we dress up in costumes and dunk for apples. That’s fun too. I like to dunk my sister’s head in the water.”

Tap . . . tap . . . tap . . . tap . . . the ruler can be heard hitting the desk over and over again. “And on St. Patrick’s Day my mother cooks corn’ beef’n cabbage. I like corn’ beef, but I don’t like cabbage. It is sour.”

BAM! The ruler slams down on the desk, sending shards of wood about the room. The boy’s eyes stare in terror as the menacing figure of this mother of mercy grabs the composition out of his hands and tears it to pieces, her hand trembling with fury.

“Those are not your traditions. Those are American traditions. You will stay after school and write a composition that is not based on fiction, young man.”

He does not protest. He does not know how. He does not know what he has done wrong. It’s the end of the day and the paper before him remains blank.

FOX STREET: A NOVELLA

Prologue

When I first moved to Fox Street, the neighborhood was predominantly Jewish. Everyone knew their neighbors and couldn't help but report everything the children did, which didn't help the situation if you wanted to be bad. Every now and then, we'd suffer a pot of water on our heads for being too raucous in front of the neighbors' windows, but all in all, it was a good place to be brought up, even if it meant the neighborhood women would watch your every move while sitting on their favorite wooden milk crates, knitting, crocheting or just being *yentas*.

Little by little the neighborhood began to change, and, as the moving vans carted away many of our friends, we developed new ones. It changed from a predominantly Jewish neighborhood to Puerto Rican. There were fewer neighbors overseeing us, and we managed to get into trouble with more frequency. It became a different life; some of it is brutal, some of it joyous. I have written *Fox Street* with as much honesty as possible, as much as memory allows. Although I do confess to a bit of embellishment, just to keep your attention.

So, here, with humility and hope, may it serve to stimulate your own memories of the events and environment that account for who you have become.

I

Imagine if you will, pouring yourself a tall, cold glass of milk. Then bring that glass to your lips, head back, and let that fresh liquid slide down your throat. Now gulp down that milk with gusto until that tiny piece of wax from the container sticks in your throat. It's just a tiny bit of wax that one more gulp of milk will wash down with no problem. Quickly now, as you are about to wash it down, think of a nice brownish-black roach, any size, with its tiny legs and hard back. Suppose that tiny piece of wax is really not wax but a brown, six-legged . . . now run to the bathroom and vomit your guts out. That's the way we drank milk as kids, and that's the way I still drink milk: vigilant, careful. Milk is supposed to be good for you, right? Sure it is. It's good for your teeth and bones and all kinds of other good things, but on Fox Street you were never sure just what you were eating or drinking, so you didn't take any chances, no matter what they told you in school.

Another thing, did you ever sit down at the kitchen table for breakfast and pour out a bowlful of cornflakes and watch as the roaches hiding in the cornflakes box scattered all over your plate? Did you ever have them crawl over your arms and legs, trying to escape as you brushed them off and stepped all over them? Did you ever feel the squish under your shoes and try to scrape their remains off of your soles, then try to sit down to eat breakfast?

“No, thank you, Mom. I’m going to school.”

Now, before you conclude that my mother kept a dirty house, you should know that she had three daughters, me included, and one son and she taught us all to immediately clean up whatever we dirtied. Make no snap judgments. Our tiny four-room apartment was damn clean. My older sister mopped and waxed the floors of that place at least four times a week. And when I say “waxed” I mean you

couldn't enter the apartment for over three hours until her floors were dry. What if you had to go to the bathroom? Sound like an exaggeration? Nope! My sister was a housewife since she was five years old. Me, I was more of a tomboy and not exactly immaculate, but I damn right did my cleaning. Or else! "Or else" means getting the shit kicked out of you.

So why the roaches if we were so clean? The whole building was infested. Hell, the whole area was infested. I remember getting up in the middle of the night to go to the kitchen for a glass of water. I opened the door of the cabinet underneath the sink and a mouse scrambled along the top of the door. I ran screaming into the room, waking up my father and mother, who went into the kitchen, me behind them, to kill the mouse. My brother and sisters had all been awakened by my screams as well, and bolted into the kitchen too. There, hanging on the door, was the dead mouse. I had squashed it by slamming the door and didn't even know it.

I don't know why I ran screaming into the room. It wasn't the first mouse I had seen. I had seen rats bigger than cats when some of the kids and I would go swimming in the East River. And how many times had I seen the mice in the house running back and forth from the stove to the sink during dinnertime? It was ridiculous that I would get so upset, but I just never could get used to the vermin.

God, I just thought of the time a friend of mine came to my house for a visit many years later. She had never been in a slum before and to her it was all very exciting. To her way of thinking, we lived fascinating lives, and she couldn't get her fill of stories we told her for hours about our experiences. I guess it's all very colorful and exciting, if you've never had to live it.

At one point in the evening, she went into the bathroom. When she returned, she was white as a sheet. She could

hardly talk as she pointed to the floor. My mother and I went in to investigate, and there we saw a squashed mouse. It was half dead, half alive. Apparently, my friend had stepped on it. After embarrassing apologies, as she threw up in the toilet, we quickly swept the half dead mouse into a dustpan, dumped it into the toilet bowl and flushed it away. I don't think my friend ever found the slums fascinating again.

Flushing mice down the toilet bowl always made me nervous. Someone had once told me that a mouse came up out of the toilet and bit her on the ass as she was urinating. I never really believed it, but somewhere in the back of my mind I couldn't forget that story. So I always flushed the chain before sitting on the toilet bowl. Just in case.

Another problem while urinating was the roaches. It was necessary to lift up the toilet cover and seat and shake them, just in case there was anything crawling around the bowl. If you didn't, it was your tough luck if you found a roach crawling on your underwear. Ever try to pee while trying to rip off your underwear? It was no fun, believe me; so you learned to check that bowl first.

As we grew older, we competed with each other trying to kill the rats and mice that ran behind the dressers and under the bed in the middle of the night. We used to take broomsticks and use them as spears. We were like great hunters in the jungle. We'd turn off the lights and wait quietly on our bunk beds, spears ready, until we heard that scratching noise. Someone would switch on the light, and we'd all take aim and, *WHAM*, throw our spears. We killed quite a few of those filthy rodents. Our hunt was often interrupted when my father would come into the room and tell us to go to sleep.

My father used to set up regular mousetraps, the kind that would snap over the mice like a guillotine. I remember a Jewish neighbor, who lived across the hall from us for a

short time, had fancy traps. Her traps looked like little cages, and she would call us into her apartment and let us look at the mice she would trap. We asked our mother for those kinds of traps, but she would have no part of it.

None of us ever got bitten by a rat, but one of the kids up the block once had. She was quickly rushed to the hospital and lived, contrary to all the stories we were told. I'm sure a lot of kids died from rat bites but, thank God, I never knew any of them.

I just thought of a clipping in a Latino newspaper that I once saw. It showed a picture of a lady killing a whole bunch of rats in her bathtub. She lived a couple of blocks away. All of us kids just cracked up laughing at the picture. She looked so funny there, holding up a broom in the middle of all those rats.

The worst of all the animals that we had to contend with, in my opinion, were the water bugs. Just in case someone doesn't know what a water bug is, it looks just like a roach but is much larger and much blacker. Those damn giant bugs could fly, or at least it looked like they could. They were much slower than roaches, so they were easier to catch. The problem was, who wanted to catch them? You could hit them with a broom over and over, but they wouldn't die. The only way to kill them was to step on them. Now, who in their right mind wanted to step on those giant roaches? Somebody had to, so everyone would stare at each other and say, "You kill it," "No, you kill it," until the one with the strongest stomach or the one who wanted to appear the bravest would finally step forward and crush it under their shoe, as we all went running away in disgust.

Stepping on a water bug, you could feel the crunch underfoot right up to your teeth. It is the most disgusting feeling I have ever experienced to this day. You just had to vomit afterwards—or, if not immediately after, then sometime during the day.