

## A NOTE TO THE READER

As the author's daughter, I am honored to write a short introduction to my dad's novel. Until I found his book, I didn't know much about his life. I'm proud to know he wanted to leave his children a legacy of some sort. This book is dedicated to the three of us and his grandchildren. While reading the book, I found myself tearing up as some parts are so touching.

The character Mark is based loosely on my father and his life as he faced adversity and sometimes prejudices. He was a proud man who wasted no time signing up for active duty following the Pearl Harbor Attack. He was eighteen years old. Selflessly, he left his mother, sisters, and brothers and put everything on hold, including his dreams.

Dad found himself fighting for others' freedom on foreign soil. Without his sacrifice, their cause would have been lost. But he carried onward, no matter the cost, and endured many horrors.

Many faces haunted his dreams. He cried as his brothers fell all around. After those who survived returned home, some were left with memories to face all alone while others found themselves in the company of friends and family. Those who survived were forever scarred emotionally and physically.

He had a long career in the Air Force, taking us to many places around the world. I found our life to be exciting. We made the best of everything and loved most places we lived.

Dads are people to look up to, follow, admire, be proud of, brag about, hold, cry with, learn from, respect, listen to, talk with, impress,

rebel against, and, most of all, share everything this wonderful life has to offer with.

Dad loved spending time with my two brothers, either fishing or hunting. And he loved to make breakfast, pancakes being his specialty.

My parents had a special relationship. My mother was my dad's rock. He loved her in so many different ways, always making sure she had a cup of coffee in the morning. For fifty-seven years they shared everything life can offer. They were a great team that supported each other in every way.

There are so many wonderful things I can remember about my dad. I am incredibly grateful and happy to have had so much with my dad. I have been blessed to have had Mark as my father.

Dad was a clever man but was never afraid of having a laugh at his own expense. He was hard working, was compassionate toward everyone, and deserved the success and rich life that he enjoyed. He taught me many lessons and skills, but most importantly he gave all of us the ability to know that if we really put our mind to something, anything is possible, and that we should never be afraid to try something new. His attention to detail and perfectionism was infectious.

It has been said that you never really know someone until they pass into the next life, which he did in 1998. His story has taught me so much. I miss him every day.

Dorothy Stangle

## CHAPTER ONE



“HEY, LITTLE MAN,” they would shout at me. “Where are your sisters? Go back inside and tell your sweet pussy sisters we’ll be waiting for them in one of those empty rooms upstairs. Did you hear us, Vergara?”

Of course I heard them. Every day as I came out of that stinking hellhole known as the Lincoln Rooms I heard them, but I pretended not to.

One of the men grabbed me by the right arm and gave me a swift kick in the shinbone, but I raised my leg and stuck my knee right into his crotch as hard as I could. I stared at him, speechless, backing away from the tight little knot of men before they could slice me with their knives. I ran away as fast as I could, until I was out of breath and fell against the side of a tree, panting and cursing the day I was born.

“Why did you have to die, Pappa?” I said to the tree, to the air around me, and to the great sky above, which never answered.

“I need you now, Pappa, more than I ever needed you before. Where are you? Why did you have to leave us like this?”

I expected an answer from him. I wanted it so badly that I was angry when it didn’t come and more confused about life than I’d ever been. My father was real to me, even though his bones were in the ground. I would pray so hard for him to come and help me, but he never came. Nobody ever came to help the Vergaras.

The year was 1928, the worst year I have ever known in my life. I was only a child then, almost ten years old, but even if I had been a

man, it would still have been difficult to accept the shadow of death that lurked over my family.

It was easier for me than it was for my mother, since all I knew about death was what she had told me. “Your soul goes up to Heaven and rests for eternity with God.” But I didn’t know who God was, or what the word *eternity* meant. They were only words, without feelings, without understanding.

My mother must have known. She must have known that spending the rest of her life with only memories of death and deprivation would seem like an eternity.

We lived in Big Bend, Colorado, where I was born. At that time, my father was almost sixty years old. Everybody called him Vergara the Basque.

My father worked on a large dairy farm, which entailed not only milking but also the cultivating of feed for the large herd of cows and other stock. He was never able to take a day off and had been milking the cows twice a day, seven days a week, for four years.

Although he never complained, the hard work was beginning to show on his face and in his heart. When he became sick, we thought at first that all he needed was a good long rest, but one day he was unable to get up in the morning and had to be rushed to the county hospital, where they found he had cancer of the pancreas and colon.

It has always been hard for a proud man to accept his own weakness, his own mortality, and for my father, it was a blow like a thunderbolt.

Being the oldest boy, I was allowed to go with my mother to visit him. All he would say was, “I’m sorry for letting you down this way, so sorry for being a failure, Aurora.”

“But it’s not your fault, Miguel,” my mother quietly answered.

“We’ll get along all right, Pappa. We’ll take care of Mamma. Don’t you worry.”

This made him sit up on his elbow and shout at me. "I'm not dead yet, young man! So, don't put me in the grave, and don't weep for me, not yet, understand?"

"But I only meant that . . ."

"I know exactly what you meant," he said, lying back down again and wiping his forehead with the palm of his hand.

"He only meant that we are fine, Miguel," my mother quickly said, trying to make us both feel better. "And we miss you very much. We are praying for you to get better, every morning and every night, Miguel."

"That's all I meant, Pappa." I went up to kiss him, but he turned his face away and sighed deeply.

"I will fight this thing," he quickly said, not allowing me to kiss his face. "And I will win, Aurora. I will win this fight in the end, you'll see."

While he was recuperating in the hospital, it was clear to the dairy owner that my father could no longer work for him. He finally told my mother he would have to replace him and eventually we would have to move.

My parents knew a man who owned some property in Lamar, Colorado, sixteen miles south of Big Bend. This man had agreed to let us live in one of the houses on his farm, rent-free for a year, until my father was strong enough to return to work.

With the help of friends and the loan of a wagon from the dairy owner, Mr. Froman, we moved our belongings into the house, and my mother began looking for a job.

I already had a younger brother, Carlos; two older sisters, Delores and Susanna; and two younger sisters, Conchita and Rosalie. My mother was now pregnant with her seventh child, although she never admitted it to Mrs. Craig, her new employer.

Mrs. Craig was an extremely wealthy widow, and it was fortunate for all of us that she allowed my mother to work for her, since we now

had enough money to buy clothes, enabling me and Carlos and our older sisters to go to school.

Our good fortune didn't last long. We had to move again, and now all the children had to help out, even the little ones. I guess we were lucky to find work, since hundreds of people were already going hungry and begging for jobs and bread. But we children didn't feel lucky, having to work in the sugar beet fields all day.

We all felt like we were living like gypsies in those days, since we had to move again, this time to a small community called Granada, in the eastern part of Colorado close to the Kansas border.

When he got better, father met some Basque people there who were sheep owners and was offered a job looking after three thousand head of sheep. Carlos and I would visit him once a week, riding our horses to his camp, and everything seemed normal and happy again.

We should have known better, but we were so young and full of hope. One day they brought my father home from the sheep ranch, and we knew his days were numbered, but we never knew tragedy was also unexpected.

On the eighth of July, my youngest brother was born, and I have never been able to forget it, since it was also the day that death came into our house.

I began to think about death and what my life would be like when my father was gone. I never thought about my own death or that of my brothers or sisters, for we were young children, not old and sick as my father was. But I learned the day that my youngest brother was born that we all face the fate of death, even children.

That particular morning, little Rosalie came up to me after she had finished her prayers. Putting her hand in mine, she said, "Do you think the new baby will be a boy or a girl, Mark?"

"I hope it's a boy," I told her, "so that Carlos and I can teach him how to ride and fish."

“Well, I hope it’s a girl,” Rosalie answered, “so that I can teach her how to cook and sew.”

“You don’t know how to cook or sew,” I said, laughing and dusting the top of her head with my hand.

“Well, it’s just pretend,” she shyly answered, “but I can pretend better than Delores or Susanna, and better than Concha! After all, I am five years old now.”

Five years old, and so full of life. That was our little Rosalie. She was the prettiest one of the four girls, with large brown eyes that seemed to look at you all the time and dimpled cheeks nestled under her high cheekbones. She was a true beauty, and I loved her.

By the time my father, my two older sisters, Carlos, and I reached the beet fields that morning, my mother was already in labor. She asked Rosalie and Concha to go get the neighbors. The two little girls raced each other out the door to see who could get there first, shouting on the way that their mother was having a baby. Heads popped out of the windows all along the street, and three women with white sheets in their arms followed my sisters home.

They told my sisters to stay outside and play, but Rosalie wondered what all the white sheets were for.

“We will make one of them into a rope for your mother to hang on to until the baby is born,” one of the women told her. “The others are to be used for diapers for the baby, you see, little one?”

“Oh, diapers!” said Rosalie. “Yes, I see.”

Rosalie snuck back inside the house, grabbed a handful of the torn sheets, and took them out to the well to wash them for the new baby.

Conchita had fallen asleep in the shade of a tree, and Rosalie was all alone when she reached over the top of the well to bring the bucket up. It must have been too far for her to reach it, and we could only assume that she had climbed up onto the shelf of the well and leaned over to grab the bucket.

As my mother cried out in pain and baby Pablo was coming into the world, Rosalie was falling down, down into the water, beating her arms and kicking her legs helplessly. Because of my mother's screams, no one heard little Rosalie's. In all the excitement of Pablo's birth, no one realized that she was missing until the three women had finished their work, placed the newborn in my mother's arms, and were leaving the house.

They saw Conchita, still sleeping under the tree, and woke her up, saying, "Go with your sister into the fields, and tell the others that they have a new baby brother. Where is your sister, anyway?"

"I don't know," the sleepy child answered, rubbing her eyes.

"Well, go and find her, quickly now, and then tell the others. All right, Concha?"

Conchita, now six years old, called out for Rosalie, running in every direction as fast as her little legs would allow her to go. She looked everywhere for Rosalie—everywhere except in the well.

"I tiptoed up to it," she later said, "and I didn't want to look inside because it was so far down to the bottom, and I couldn't even see the bottom except if the light from the sun was shining into the well. But I knew something was wrong, so I ran straight to the fields and came to find you."

She was crying hysterically when she found us and wasn't able to say anything but, "Come, Pappa. Help!" We got up from our knees, and my father shook Conchita's shoulders, but she was still unable to speak. He picked her up and started running with her in his arms, thinking that something terrible had happened to our mother. Then the rest of us followed him, running and crying before we even knew what was wrong but knowing a tragedy had occurred and fearing the worst.

When we reached our house, out of breath and trembling with fear, we ran into our mother's bedroom. She was resting peacefully



with the baby at her side. My father put Conchita down and spoke to our mother.

“Where is Rosalie?” he gently asked, “and are you all right, Aurora?”

My mother looked up at him and murmured, “Yes, we have a new son, and Rosalie is playing with Conchita.” Then she closed her eyes, exhausted and ready to sleep.

“But Concha came to get us,” my father whispered. “Where are you, little one?” He turned to look for my sister, who had run to hide behind Susanna and was holding up the back of her skirt and sobbing into it.

“Where is your little sister, Concha?” my father asked again, trying to keep his voice under control. He took a few steps and pulled Concha out from behind Susanna’s back. Then he held her face in his hands so that she would be looking at him. “Don’t be afraid, little one, but simply answer me. Where do you think your sister is?”

“In the well!” Conchita shouted, beginning to cry again. “I didn’t see her, but I know she’s there. Oh, Pappa, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, Pappa.”

My father rushed from the house to the well. The rest of us followed as fast as we could. All except Conchita, who was now hysterical and uncontrollable. She climbed into our mother’s bed, lying on the coverlet in a fetal position, grabbing hold of our mother’s legs, trying to reach for comfort from her.

My father turned the handle of the well bucket without saying a word. We all waited in the deepest silence as we watched the rope moving slowly upward, dripping with water, until the empty bucket came into view. Then he put the ladder down inside the well, and I wondered who would have to climb down to the bottom, since my father was too sick to do this himself. One of our neighbors had to do the awful job of bringing my sister’s body up and putting her in my father’s arms.

Some of the sheets for the baby's diapers were wrapped around Rosalie, like the winding sheets used as shrouds for the dead. I could hardly bear to look at my father, holding my little sister close against his chest, so I bowed my head, as the others were doing, and asked God to please let her be alive.

Then my father shouted out, "Dear God in Heaven, help us with this child!" because Rosalie had suddenly moved. She was still alive.

My father ran with her to the house and laid her on the table in the kitchen. If only we had known what to do, we could have saved her life, but we all just stood there, looking at her dying body. She was unconscious but was trying to cough, as if to get the water out of her lungs. My father pushed her chest and raised her little arms, but he couldn't revive her. We all stood there like stones, watching her die.

My father waited until the next day to tell my mother. Her screams of anguish made us all leave the house. Only Conchita stayed with her and baby Pablo. They cried for hours; then it ceased. The first terrible fire of their grief had subsided.

We buried Rosalie, with only a stick to mark her grave, on the ninth day of July 1928. Now our mother had six children again, instead of seven.

We all knew somehow that it was time for us to move on, to pack up our belongings, sell our horse and buggy, and look for a better life somewhere else.

By the time we reached Pueblo, Colorado, we had almost run out of money, but my father had heard there was work on the western slopes of the Rockies in a farm community called Delta.

We would have to travel a great distance, from Pueblo to Salida, transferring there to a narrow-gauge railroad to get over the Monarch Pass, through Gunnison National Park, and on to Montrose. From there, we would transfer one more time and finally get to Delta.

We children had never been on a train before and had never even heard of the Rockies, so it was the beginning of a great adventure for

us, even though we weren't allowed to take our old dog, Forray, along with us. We had to say good-bye to him and leave him behind with the memories of our sister Rosalie.

Before we even started the journey, as we were waiting on the platform, we heard a sound that seemed like a monster, growing louder and louder, coming closer and closer. The wooden planks under our feet started to tremble, and then we saw the monster's red eye coming straight at us. We saw the smoke it was breathing that rose in clouds around its head, and even though we wanted to pretend to be big and strong like men, Carlos and I hugged each other in fear. We were still holding on to each other when the monster finally came to a stop in front of us, breathing out its last few gasps of white-hot smoky breath.

Then we heard someone laughing at us. It was the train conductor, who had stepped onto the platform. "Don't worry," he told us, grinning from ear to ear, "I won't let it bite you."

He told us the train would be climbing up into the clouds and we would need our winter jackets ready to keep us warm. He said we might even see snow higher than the train itself. Then it was our turn to laugh, since we could hardly imagine snow being that deep. But the conductor's words turned out to be true enough when we emerged from a tunnel on the other side of a mountain, winding our way through the pass.

I don't know how any of the others in my family felt about this sight, but it made me catch my breath and hold it, as if I could make myself hold on to this beautiful vision forever.

The air turned as cold as ice, which only added to my youthful impression of being in a wonderland. When I finally exhaled again, I could see my breath stretch out in front of my mouth like a wondrous steamy mist.

My hopes were raised again. The higher we climbed into the mountains, the higher I felt my heart soaring, like a bird. I had the impression my very soul had been set free, and this was very strange

to me since I had never realized how low-down I had felt before, like a bird in a cage.

When we arrived in Montrose, we made our final transfer to a regular-gauge train that would take us on the remainder of our journey, twenty-two miles to Delta. The train ran parallel to the Uncompahgre River, and the land around it was lush and green as far as the eye could see.

We arrived at the station and were surprised to see that almost everyone in town, it seemed, had come to welcome us. Since my father would be working for the Holly Sugar Corporation, their representatives had come to greet us, along with trucks and cars to move our belongings to our new home. Carlos and I rode on top of the truck so that we wouldn't miss a thing.

We were lucky enough to be given a farm with twenty acres of sugar beets to be thinned out along the banks of the Gunnison River. Carlos and I would spend many happy afternoons there, learning to fish and dreaming big dreams of becoming men.

Father was given a purchase voucher to one of the stores for buying whatever groceries and things we would all need. It didn't occur to us children that we would have to pay off these loans by doing the stoop labor of thinning out those ever-growing beet plants. The more we bought at the store, the more work we had to do. It seemed as if we would never get out of the beet fields.

Our father never told us he was dying; we children never knew that the cancer had finally begun to kill him. Only our mother knew of his agonizing pain. He was like a walking dead man without a stomach. But he worked until he couldn't stand up anymore. Then one morning he was unable to get out of bed.

Mother called the doctor, and he gave Father some pain pills to make his death more bearable, but we all knew there was little anyone could do for him now.

We were playing outside when the doctor left, shaking his head, as if to say, I can help him no more. Then our mother called us all into the house and asked us to kneel beside his bed. She was crying when she said, "Your father is dying now, and he wants to bless you all."

He made the sign of the cross and said, "I am very sorry I have to leave you now, my children. Take care of each other." And looking straight at me, he said, "Be big and strong, huh, Mark? Now is your chance to prove what a strong man you can be for the family."

"Pappa," I answered, "I will never be able to take your place, no matter how big and strong I get."

"Thank you, son," he said, looking right at me. Then he started to moan in pain. He cried out, "I don't want to die so far from home. I wish I could go back."

Mother said, "You are going back, my love, back to God."

As my father cried out in pain, my mother held him and asked, "Does it hurt so very much?"

"No, my love, my life," he answered. "I have no feeling anymore."

We children couldn't hold our sorrow anymore. We all ran outside, sobbing in one another's arms. Waiting for my father to die was like waiting for the end of the world to come. I kept hoping it wouldn't come, that maybe, if I held my breath long enough, I could save it up for him and keep him alive a little longer. But I already knew about death and how it came in its own good time.

"In God's time," as my mother said when she called us all into the house once more. "God bless him," she told us. "He isn't suffering anymore, and he died, as I always wanted him to, in my arms."

She reached over and closed his eyes, saying, "He's in God's hands now, my children."

I sat at the side of my father's bed looking at him for a long time, not fully realizing he was gone forever from my life. He looked so peaceful, with no signs at all on his face of the struggle, the fight he

had waged against the cancer. It gave me a measure of strength to see him that way, because I could tell myself everything was all right for him now.

My father, Miguel Markelino Vergara, left this world at the age of fifty-nine, in September 1928.

It was a much sadder, harder world for us all when he left us.