The Day It Happened

The day it happened I was washing my hair. I had long hair then that went halfway down my back and I washed it once a week and rinsed it with lemon juice "to bring out the blond highlights" Mami said. Then I’d set it into pin-curls that took an age to do because there was so much wind around and around my finger. But if Mami was in a good mood, and she looked like she might be that day, she curled the back for me. I usually did all this on Saturday so I would look great for church on Sunday, and for a date Saturday night if I ever had one. jeez.

Naturally the moment when it all began I was rinsing the big soapy mess. Noisy Maria was leaning out the window drying her dark red fingernails in the breeze when Josie stepped out of our apartment house doorway with a suitcase in her hand. Maria sucked in her breath so hard the sound brought my mother, who took one look, crossed herself, or so Maria says, and started praying. Someone needed to pray for Josie. It was five o’clock and Ramón was due home any minute.

I wouldn’t have known anything about any of this if Olga next door hadn’t rung our doorbell and banged on the door just when Mami was too deep in prayer to hear and Maria was leaning out over the sill with her eyes bugging out. I cursed, very quietly of course, because if Mami or Papí heard me curse I’d get a slap across my face. I wrapped my sopping head in a towel and opened the door to Olga’s “Oh my goodness, oh dear. Oh honey, did you see? Look out the window this minute. I wouldn’t have believed it if I hadn’t seen it with my own two eyes. That poor little kid. I hate to think…” and on and on as we crossed the apartment to look out on the street.

Little Mikey from across the way was telling the rest of the kids how he’d found a taxi for Josie the minute he’d hit Southern Boulevard and how he’d hailed it and how the driver had let him ride back to Brook Street in the front seat—even though all of them had seen him arrive and step out with his back stiff with pride. Meantime Josie was back down in the street with Doña Toña from across the hall and Betty Murphy upstairs right behind her, all of them loaded down with two lamps, a typewriter and a big box of books. Doña Toña was muttering something we couldn’t hear up here on the second story but it was probably either the prayer I was hearing on my right or the “…hurry oh hurry Oh God he’ll be here any minute are you mad girl, are you mad?” that came at me from the left.

It was hard not to be scared as well as glad that Josie was packing up and leaving Ramón. They’d been married only six months but already they were in a pattern, like the Garcías down the block who did everything the same way on the same day, all year. Ramón worked late till seven every week day and five on Saturday. When he arrived he expected a good dinner to be on the table at the right temperature exactly five minutes after he walked in the door. He yelled if she didn’t get it right and sometimes even if she did.

Saturday evening they went out to a party or the bar down the avenue, both of them dressed up and Ramón looking proud and cheerful for a change. Josie always looked great. She’s so cute. Small and plump with long lashes on her dark eyes and, get this, naturally curly hair. She smiled a lot when she was happy but she hadn’t been happy much lately. I think she was happy only and not at all since she got pregnant. I wasn’t supposed to know this. God, I was almost thirteen! But Maria, who was fourteen and a half and thought she was twenty, listened on conversations in the living room by opening the door a sliver and she told me all about it.

Saturday nights there was sure to be a fight. Either it was that Josie was “no fun, a man can’t be a man with such a wet rag around.” Or it was that Josie was “a tramp. Why else was that guy staring at you, eating you up with his eyes?” The first time it happened, soon after they moved in, it woke me up from a deep sleep and I was so scared I crept into Maria’s bed. I’d never heard such yelling in my life. When my parents fight it’s during the day and in angry whispers. It sounds like a snake convention in my parents’ bedroom. That’s bad enough. Maria and I get real nervous and nothing’s right until they make up and talk in normal voices again. But Ramón could be heard right through the floor at two in the morning. And then he took to throwing things and then he started hitting her. The first time that happened Josie didn’t go to morning mass at St. Francis and Mami went down to her apartment to see if she was sick or something. Josie came to the door with a big bruise on her face. After that Mami went to fetch her every Sunday and stayed with her if she was too ashamed to go to church.

After she found out she was pregnant Josie had talked it over with Doña Toña and Doña Toña had talked it over with Mami and by and by we all knew she was scared he would hurt the little baby growing inside of her and worried about the child growing up with Ramón for a father. He expected too much of everyone and little kids hurt so when a parent thinks whatever they do is all wrong. Hi! Tell that to Mami and Papí, will you.

I don’t think there was anyone in the neighborhood on Ramón’s side, not even Joe who liked to bully his wife and daughters but didn’t realize he did or Tito who talked all the time about “wearing the pants in this family.” Ramón was too much, even for them. Josie was so clearly a fine person, a quiet homebody, a sweeptypie. Ramón was out of his mind, that’s what most of us thought. I mean you had to be to be so regularly mean to a person who adored you. And she did, at least at first. You could see it in the way she looked at him, boasted about his strength, his good job, his brains. The way she excused his temper. “He can’t help himself. He doesn’t mean it”.

And now she was packed up and sitting in the taxi. Waiting for him to come home, I guess. That was too much for Mami and she scooted out the door with Olga, Maria, Papí, no less, and me right behind her with that soaked blue towel wrapped sloppily around my head. “Al Mami, Al Jesús, María y José, Jesús María y José,” came faintly up the stairs in the front of the hurrying line. I knew Mami and I knew she meant to stand in front of Josie to protect her from that bully and, sure as shooting, Papí was going to protect Mami who was going so fast in her house slippers she almost fell down except that Olga gripped her hard and kept her upright.

When we streamed out the door into the small crowd that had gathered by now it was to see Ramón coming down the street with a sour look on his face.
He looked up once or twice but mostly just stared at his feet as he strode up the block. He swept past us and almost into the house the way he did when he came home weary from the shipyard and the long ride home. He would have missed seeing Josie for sure, as I was praying he would, except that she called to him.

"Ramón," she said in her soft voice, stepping out of the taxi. "Ramón." He looked up and around then, took in the crowd, the taxi with a tall lamp lying on the back seat and Josie in her good suit. He stood looking at all this and especially at Josie for a long time. When he spoke it was only to Josie, as if we weren't there at all. He had to clear his throat to say "Josie?"

I was totally surprised and confused. He sounded so small, you know. So uncertain. It was Josie looked tall now and hard. If I hadn't known what I knew I would've said Josie was the bully in the family. She looked him straight in the eye and said stiffly, as if they were lines someone had given her to memorize, "I warned you. I said I would leave if you ever hit me again. I am not safe with you. Our child is not safe with you. I'm going now. I left arroz con pollo on the stove and the electric bill on the table." He didn't answer so she turned to hug Doña Toña and Mami before sitting herself back down. It was then that Ramón acted. Before I could blink he'd hunched himself at her, thrown himself on his knees and gripped her around her stockinged legs. "No! No te vas Mas. Tu no comprendes. Eres muy joven para comprender. Tu no puedes dejarme asi. Estamos casados para la vida. Té amo para siempre, para siempre. Josita, mi amor, no te vas. Si te vas me mato. Te lo juro. No te puedes ir. No te puedes ir..." and on and on in a hoarse voice while Josie stood there frozen, fear on her face. There was no sound but Maria whispering occasional translations into Olga's impatient ear "Don't go." "You're too young to understand." "We're married for life." "I'll love you always." "I'll kill myself, I swear it."

It went on forever, Josie standing there, Ramón kneeling, all of us listening, tears running down my face, Josie's face, Mami's face. It was Olga who ended it, who walked up to Ramón, knelt down beside him, put an arm around him, and started talking, telling him Josie was a mother now and had to think about what was best for her baby, that it was his baby too, that he had to let her go now so she could bear a baby healthy in body and soul, that she knew he loved Josie, that his love would let him do what was best for them all. He was crying now, arguing with her while he slowly let go while he said he never could let her go, that she was his whole life, that he would die without her, while Josie kissed Toña quickly on the cheek and climbed in next to the taxi driver who sat there looking the way I probably looked, dazed, like he'd stumbled into a movie screen and couldn't get out. She had to tell him to drive off.

(1992)

Questions for Discussion and Writing

1. Why do Josie's neighbors and even her family treat her beatings as a drama to be observed rather than as an outrage that must be stopped?
2. Why is even Josie herself embarrassed by the beatings? Do you think she should be? What is her mother's attitude toward the abuse?
3. Can you make the argument that Josie would never have found the stamina to leave Ramón if she had not discovered she was pregnant? Support your claim with evidence from the story.

4. How would you describe the remarkable change that Ramón undergoes? Can you reconcile his machismo swaggering in the first part of the story with his contrite weeping at the end?
5. What do you think Morales's point is in telling this story? In other words, can you state her theme?
Literature and the Writing Process

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