

not so GRIMM

gentle fables
and cautionary tales

By Becky Haigler



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Dedication

*To my parents, for your wonderful
example and support*

*To my children and grandchildren,
with prayers for your future*

To my husband, my best cheerleader

To my partners, thanks!

Introduction

I was born while my parents were students at a small state college, just after World War II. We lived in Quonset huts repurposed as married student housing. My world consisted of adults reading and writing. There is a family story that the summer I turned two, on a few occasions when babysitting was unavailable, Mother took me with her to English class. We sat in the back row and I busied myself with pencil and paper, like the other students. The Prof said he didn't mind my being there, but he wanted to see the notes I took!

On my parents' bookshelves were volumes of poetry by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Rudyard Kipling, as well as *Best Loved Poems of the American People*. Sometimes, Daddy read aloud from those collections. I'm sure my parents read me stories when I was very young, but Mother started teaching me to read at age two, and I mainly remember reading to myself. I recall getting my library card before I entered first grade.

In grade school I got to order books for my own bookshelves several times a year from the Weekly Reader Children's Book Club. I read each selection many times and still have some of the favorites. Volumes of fairy tales by Hans Christian Andersen and the brothers Grimm,

bought by my parents, were another treasured source of entertainment. I read them over and over and over. I can still see the rusty orange cover of the Andersen and the gray-and-burgundy binding of the Grimm, so I'm sure those stories carved deep paths in my mind.

A reviewer for the anthology *Able to...*, which included two of my stories, mentioned that my work had a "fairy tale" quality to it. However, when I started writing magic realism stories in the 1990s, I was more aware of being influenced by the Latin American writers of that genre, especially Laura Esquivel's wonderful novel *Like Water for Chocolate*. I also studied some Latin American magic realism in the 1980s, while preparing to teach Spanish – Borges, Cortázar, García-Márquez. But when it came time to title this collection, it seemed right to reference the old fairy tales.

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Gates of Eden

Flowers didn't actually fall from Evita's lips – not at first, and not all the time. Even Evita herself didn't know for a long time what happened when she spoke. On the South Texas *hacienda* of the Montalvo family, with formal gardens and flowering hedges, no one found a stray flower here and there very remarkable.

The children's nanny noticed before anyone else, but she never understood the significance of the flowers left in her small rooms. "Evita is the dearest child!" Marta exclaimed to the cook over a late supper. "She loves to be read to. 'Oh, Marta, you read the best stories!' she'll say. And how she loves flowers. Sometimes she hides little sprigs and buds in her gown when the children come for a story before bed. I never see her carrying them, but she forgets them by my chair. When I ask her about the flowers, she never remembers. But I know it's her. It wouldn't be Cezarito, now would it?" And Marta and the cook laughed at the thought of Cezarito carrying flowers in his pajama pockets.

Evita's brother César, older by two years, possessed a temperament quite different from that of his sister. Openly curious and direct, though not rude, Cezarito sometimes seemed a bit rough, more from impatience than unkindness. Evita was in awe of César and

hardly ever spoke to him in her early years unless he addressed her first.

Building block towers in the playroom, César gave Evita orders. Acting out adventures from the stories Marta read, Evita always played first mate to César's pirate captain, or brave warrior to César's Indian chief. Once, at the beach, she begged, "Build me a castle, too, Cezarito. Yours are the best castles." César turned to acknowledge her praise as his just due and then looked back at his project.

"Hey! Get your old flowers out of here! This is a fortress for the Foreign Legion, not Sleeping Beauty's castle." He snatched up the flowering vines creeping along one wall of his fortress and threw them into the surf. Evita was as surprised as César to see the flowers and could not say why she turned away feeling guilty as well as sad.

The Montalvo children knew their nanny better than they did their busy parents, whom they saw sometimes at breakfast and for a few hours in late afternoon or on weekends. Mami and Papi were kind and regal, but preoccupied. Papi always had a phone on one ear and papers full of numbers in one hand. Mami was forever dressing to go to a luncheon or out shopping. They were content to have Marta see to the children, so long as they were healthy and well behaved.

This aristocratic life was part of the reason Evita's flowering talent went so long unnoticed. She had no reason to observe her mother at domestic tasks, and the daughter's adoring

comments on her mother's beauty were never accompanied by a single flower.

Mami's singing, however, often inspired Evita to plead, "Again, Mami. You sing so beautifully. Just like my music box." And Mami or the maid would later find daisies or small gardenias behind the sheet music or in the creases of the padded music bench.

Papi always sighed somewhat impatiently at the carnations or wilting pansies that turned up in his pencil box after he had spent a few minutes amusing the children with drawings of animals and fairies, so different from his usual columns of figures. "Your pictures are better than the ones in my books," Evita liked to say, unwittingly strewing blossoms with her words.

Cezarito attended a public school in the small city at the edge of the family's estate. Evita, however, at the appropriate time, went to Our Lady of Perpetual Virtue Academy for Girls. She made friends in the usual way, and though the girls had their disagreements, as children will, they also encouraged each other.

The other girls might notice the black-eyed Susans or snap dragons that happened in their desks and exclaim with pleasure, but they accepted them with all the other miracles and mysteries in their world and did not connect them to Evita's conversation: "You are the best speller in class, Sara." "You color so neatly, Ana." After all, such turns of praise came no more often from Evita than from other girls. It was not as though bouquets filled the room whenever Evita spoke, only that her words of genuine

praise for honest effort took form, became flesh as it were, in fresh flowers.

Evita knew she felt a little pleasure when flowers were discovered in the schoolroom, on the playground, or under a friend's pillow during an overnight visit, but she still had not put it all together in her mind. It did not occur to her to claim the power or the responsibility that the floral offerings signified.

In her sixth year at school, Evita turned eleven and began to experience the stirrings of puberty. To say she blossomed was no cliché in Evita's case. In addition to a heightened physical beauty, Evita began to develop the quiet, observant knowing many truly beautiful women possess, and there was an increase in her kind comments and their floral accompaniments.

Evita also enjoyed a particularly gifted teacher that year. Miss González earned many tributes from Evita such as, "That was an interesting geography lesson." Or, "You explained the arithmetic so I could understand." Finding her favorite tiny red carnations in desk drawers, in her pockets, in her handbag, both pleased and puzzled the teacher.

Miss González could not resist trying to solve the mystery of the flowers, especially since no one in the class claimed responsibility for herself or credited any other girl. When questioned alone or in groups, the students shrugged. For the girls in Evita's class, stray flowers were an incidental fact of life, no more remarkable than finding someone else's bookmark left in a book from the library. Miss González's inquiries

however, along with Evita's own maturing heart, led to the beginning of the girl's understanding of her unique ability.

By the time Evita's parents allowed her to go to public high school, she had command of the gift. She had never articulated the process to anyone, not even to herself, but she understood that to speak in praise of someone's efforts resulted in the appearance of flowers. With the passion and excess of youth, the blossoms were sometimes elaborate: gardenias, anthuriums, or rarely, an orchid. At times, with close friends, admiring their poems, drawings, or athletic prowess, Evita actually felt soft petals lapping at her lips. She always managed to turn away and gather the forming flower into her hand. The sight of Evita with flowers was so common her friends scarcely noticed. Nevertheless, she began consciously to restrain her once-spontaneous affirmations and occasionally to plan a shy tribute.

At first, the joy Evita felt producing a few violets for a friend's hair or a rosebud for her mother was innocent. It took a few years for the experience to become an expression of power on her part. Even though no one else was aware of the change, Evita sometimes felt superior – a queen dispensing favors to the common folk.

Silk flowers began to appear. They were of the highest quality and quite exquisite. Cunning baby orchids and flawless tea roses, fashioned in rich hues of real silk, turned up now and again instead of natural blossoms. These puzzled Evita but also exhilarated her. The real flowers had

been a part of her life since she could remember, but these, the silk ones, seemed a true expression of her own skill and she felt a thrill whenever one appeared. She looked for her favorite, a daisy, and successfully willed it to appear a few times by flattering friends into helping her.

"Will you help me choose the poems for my folder, Susan?" Evita asked. "You always get the best grades in literature class." Or, "You bake wonderful brownies, Stella. Won't you bring refreshments for choir practice?"

During Evita's final year in high school, with comments such as these, silk blossoms outnumbered natural ones. Sad to note, the consciously-produced daisies appeared more often than ever. The quality of the flowers began to decline, from expensive silk to cheaper organza, and finally to rather shoddy cotton in garish hues. Evita scarcely noticed the change. She was bored with her gift. She did not care whether those for whom she produced blossoms received them or not. Long ago she had stopped collecting any unclaimed flowers.

Once in a while, at home, a remark to the cook, "Elena, your *carne guisada* is my favorite," would result in a spray of bluebells or baby's breath. Admiration for Cezarito appearing on the Dean's list could still cause rosebuds. These were some of the only people left in Evita's world whom she acknowledged as her superiors in any area of life that mattered to her. Evita remained, of course, unfailingly polite and was still solicitous of the feelings of others. There was,

however, a slight brittleness at the edges of her brightness. C  zar remarked upon it during the summer as Evita prepared to leave for a prestigious women's college in the northern part of the state.

"Well, Kid, I used to worry about you," C  zar said. "You were kind of odd, you know? Always playing with flowers. I never thought you'd be able to go away on your own, but you've got a little toughness to you now. I guess you're going to be all right. You call me if you need anything, okay?"

This rough expression of affection from C  zar took Evita by surprise and she exclaimed sincerely, "I'm glad you're my brother, Cezarito!" The soft creaminess of the gardenia's petals brushing past her lips as she spoke was unexpected. In her confusion, Evita ducked her head to C  zar's chest, but not before he saw her startled expression and her hand fly to her mouth. He wondered if she were going to be sick and so returned her clumsy embrace reluctantly.

"Hey, what's the matter? Are you okay?" Regaining her composure, Evita pulled back and nodded. She held out the perfectly formed, naturally soft flower to C  zar and smiled shyly. He laughed. "Up to your old tricks again I see. Can I have this?" He tucked the gardenia into the lapel of his summer blazer and left to pick up his date.

Flowers for Cezarito always reminded Evita of the way things used to be, but it did not soften her brittleness, nor discourage her from the petty flatteries she had learned.

At college, in a new environment, Evita felt a little insecure. Except for her roommate, she made acquaintances, but not real friends. The first day the dorms opened, she had spontaneously praised her roommate's flair for decorating and quickly discovered white carnations scattered on the bedspreads. She gathered them up and searched for a container, muttering something about always forgetting to put flowers in water. For a while after that, learning her new routine and keeping up with her studies so absorbed Evita that she hardly thought of anyone else. When she finally began to get settled and take an interest in campus activities, she naturally employed the motivating techniques she knew best: sincere praise and its poor cousin, flattery.

Knowing the power of her words, Evita determined to be sparing in her encouragements. She worried a fair amount about people noticing flowers scattered around. After all, no warm gardens flourished in the college town and no generous bouquets graced the hallway tables as they had at home. So, she experimented a little in the dormitory, praising one roommate's skill with her hair and another for her perfect popcorn. When Evita looked for flowers in the room, she found some small embossed-cardboard bouquets, like old-fashioned Valentines. She traced the raised designs with her fingers again and again, as if her touch would tell her whether these flowers, too, came from her lips.

A few more trials convinced Evita her flowering words could be expressed, in this harsher climate, on fine quality paper, so as not to startle anyone with the incongruous appearance of blossoms in winter. She felt both a twinge of disappointment and a breath of relief that she would not have to be careful of her speech after all. The flowers were an aspect of her past she might recall fondly but whose passing she did not mourn. For a time, Evita collected the Victorian-style cards when she came across one. The paper on the cards gradually became thinner and shinier. The raised designs became flatter and finally disappeared, so the slips of paper flowers her compliments produced were only like misplaced magazine illustrations, fallen out of a child's scrapbook.

By the time the flowers degenerated into cheap gum-machine trinkets, Evita wasn't looking for them anymore. In any case, she would not have recognized such carnival prizes as being descendants of the beautiful bouquets of praise she once produced. Rarely, rarely, a sprig of lily-of-the-valley or some blue forget-me-nots happened, usually after a telephone conversation with C ezar.

C ezar had noted Evita's "toughness" in the summer after she finished high school, and in fact, she developed a protective shell to deal with her surroundings on campus. By spring, she could hold her own in any class discussion, crowded shop line, or dormitory gossip session. Her brightness now seemed shiny and rather

hard, though not brittle anymore. There was no sense at all that anything could break her.

Where beautiful speech had been her gift and then her tool, eloquence now became a weapon for Evita. Her skill at debate in both formal and informal settings gained admiration on the campus. She pondered careers in journalism, law, or politics, where she might continue to enjoy the prestige and power accompanying such skill. Evita also developed a reputation as a wit. Her joking remarks tended to be slightly pointed, if not actually sharp. For the first time in her life, some people who knew Evita were not glad to see her when she entered a room.

In May, there was a population explosion in a genus of small lizard on the campus. Specimens of varying sizes appeared in nearly every building and even in second-floor dormitory rooms. It was not a plague of lizards, but rather a minor natural phenomenon, as an increase in the number of seasonal wildflowers might be noted in a year of good rainfall.

Evita was more conscious of the lizards than her classmates. She spotted one of the skittering visitors two or three times a day during the last month of classes. She had always a vague sense of disquiet when she saw one. She knew the feeling was not fear or revulsion. Having grown up with a brother and a large garden, Evita had no dread of lizards. She found herself occasionally looking up in mid-sentence, knowing, expecting to see one of the small reptiles darting along the baseboards with his bright eye turned to her.

Evita had no name for her uneasiness. She discovered that her anticipation of the lizards' appearances coincided with jokes made at the expense of others, especially if the subject of the jest were not present. One night after a student recital, Evita declared to a group reclining on the floor of the dorm lounge, "When Barbara hit that high note, I thought a fire truck was going by!" Almost immediately she heard the tiny lizard scritch-scratching on the linen sleeve of her crisp spring blouse and felt the tiny claws running down her forearm. Everyone laughed, first at the joke, then at the visitor.

Evita shivered involuntarily and made an excuse to go to her room early. In her mirror, she saw the smooth hardness of her face. She did not need Cezarito or anyone else to tell her the brightness was gone. She thought it was how grownups were supposed to look.

The last few days of classes and exams were difficult for Evita. She did not sleep well or study effectively. Her acquaintances all found her uncharacteristically quiet. The lizards found their way back into the hedges and rock walls of the campus.

Evita packed her belongings at the end of the term and waited in the quadrangle for César's car to appear to take her home for the summer. She stacked her bags and boxes on the sidewalk in the shade of a large tree to wait. The appointed hour came and went. The shadow moved on, leaving Evita's things in the glare of the sun. By the time César finally arrived, Evita was sweating and irritated.

César apologized. "Sorry, Kid. I took a shortcut to avoid the tollway, but there turned out to be construction delays on the road."

Evita was not pacified. She didn't stamp her foot, but stood with hands on hips to declare, "That was a really stupid and selfish thing to do, Cezarito. I've been waiting here since..."

Evita could not finish her sentence. She gagged and coughed. César gasped and stepped backward as a small frog leapt from Evita's mouth toward him. He cringed in disgust as Evita retched again and again, emptying her stomach.

"I'm so sorry, Cezarito," she cried. "Help me. Please help me. You always know what to do." At this last declaration, Evita felt the white petals of a tiny snowdrop brush her palm, stretched out in supplication to César. She sobbed more deeply at the sight and crushed the blossom to her desperately.

César embraced his weeping sister. "Let's go," he said. "I'll take you home."