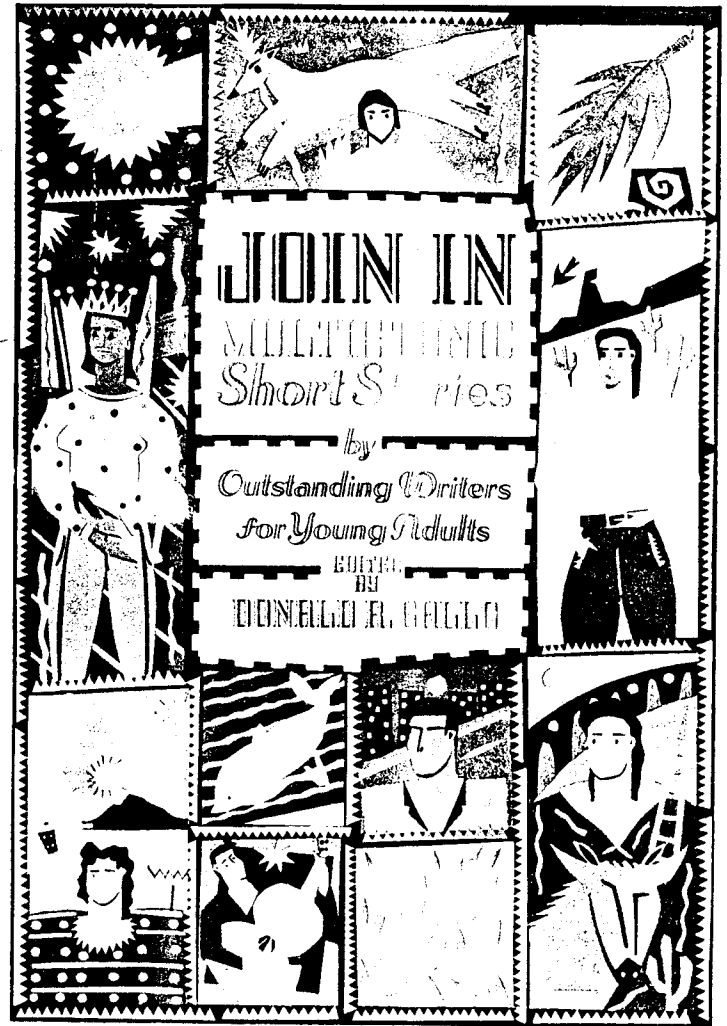


Anaya, Rudolfo
Stories by Anaya



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INTRODUCTION

Since the founding of America, our country has been composed of diverse ethnic groups. The nation's diversity has become even more evident recently, with its highest rates of immigration in nearly a hundred years, especially of Hispanic and Asian peoples. The increasing variety of cultural groups in our public schools, along with a renewed interest in (and controversy over) the content of the literature that students are required to read, has revealed the need for a greater variety of ethnic characters and cultural issues in the books available to students, especially those in the middle grades and in junior and senior high school.

A century ago, most people seemed comfortable with the concept of America as a melting pot—a giant geographical cauldron in which immigrants shed their individual ethnic identities for the larger identity of being *an American*. But many people today are not as willing to ignore their ethnic roots—they want to be both American and ethnic. They understandably want to be recog-

Maria wanted to be like the other girls, especially when it came to pleasing Frankie Calvan. But she had made a promise to her mother.

DEAD END
Rudolfo Anaya

Maria hurried down the noisy, crowded hallway to her locker. She was on her way to calculus class, and she had forgotten her notebook with yesterday's notes.

She paused when she saw Frankie Calvan and his friends standing in front of her locker. Maria's heart skipped a beat. He was handsome, and lately he had been watching her.

"Hi, Maria." He smiled and moved away.

"Hi," Maria replied, and hurried as she opened her locker.

The other girls waited until Frankie was gone, then they teased Maria.

"Hi, Maria," Sandra said, imitating Frankie. "My, you look nice today." The girls laughed. They were sharp dressers, while Maria wore only plain skirts and blouses.

"If you want Frankie to notice you, put on some lipstick," Denise said. She finished doing her lips and held out the stick. Maria shook her head. "Gotta go to class."

"The *cholas* like lips red as wine," Ana laughed.

"And get out of those ragged sandals remarked sarcastically. She was dressed in skintight jeans and a low-cut tank top that revealed her full breasts. Her lips were bright red, her eyes purple with eye shadow.

As Maria walked away, she secretly wished she could be like those girls. They didn't spend time with homework. Each day after school they cruised around the *barrio*. On weekends they went to parties, drank, smoked dope, and climbed in the back seats of cars with the homeboys.

Each morning they arrived late to school and sauntered into the bathroom to smoke, then when they were good and ready, they dragged themselves to class and sat. They did their nails and discussed the prior night's adventure. They were tough, and they were always getting suspended from school for one thing or another.

Maria wished she could belong to their gang. She wished she could be free and easy like them, but ever since she could remember, her mother had impressed on her the importance of an education.

"I never had the chance," her mother said, "because an education was only for boys. A girl was supposed to get married, raise kids, take care of her family. But you're smart, Maria. You must study and become educated."

Two years ago, at her mother's deathbed, Maria had promised she would not give up her dream of getting a good education. Her mother had smiled and closed her eyes. Her life had been hard, and the promise had brought a smile to her lips. Her daughter would be someone important, a teacher or a doctor. She would help people, and her life would have meaning.

Now that promise weighed heavy on Maria. She had very little idea of what getting a good education entailed, even though she tried hard at school. There was no one to talk to; her father was seldom home after the death of her mother. Once a week he gave Maria enough money to buy food for her and her younger brother and sister; otherwise, he returned only late at night. On weekends he was always gone.

Maria remembered there had been love in the family, now there was only bitterness in her father's face, a sense of loss.

She sent her brother and sister to school each morning and prepared supper at night. In the evenings she helped them with their homework. She was a senior in high school; she had too much to do. But she had to be like a mother to them and still keep up her studies.

Many times at night when she couldn't sleep, she got up and stood looking out the window. Things seemed hopeless, and she wondered how she could keep going. Then she would remember the promise she had made her mother and she would feel better.

That night as Maria was helping her little sister with her homework, the gang from school parked in front of Maria's home. They honked their horn; their car radio blasted out the latest rap.

"Hey, Marial Let's cruise!" Denise shouted.

"Let's have fun!" Ana yelled.

Maria looked through the window at the car parked outside. The kids were drinking beer and laughing wildly. The girls were dressed in low-cut blouses, shorts, and summer sandals. They snuggled against the boys and teased them.

Eduardo was driving, and Sandra had her arms wrapped around him. Next to them Frankie Galvan sat alone. He looked out the open window at Maria.

Maria saw him, and her heart melted. Frankie Galvan was about the most handsome guy in school. For the past few weeks he had been hanging around her locker, and the girls had begun to whisper that he had a crush on Maria. They wondered why Frankie was interested in Maria when he could have any girl.

"Who is it?" Maria's sister asked behind her.

"Frankie Galvan," her brother said, peering through the parted curtains. "He's the baddest dude in the *barrio*."

Maria looked out again.

Yes, he was sitting alone, his black hair was slicked back, his dark eyes staring ahead. A gold chain glittered around his neck. The kids said he took dope. A year ago, his girlfriend had died in

a car accident, and it really affected Frankie. Sometimes he hung around with the gang, but usually he was alone.

He's lonely. Maria thought. Her heart went out to him. When she saw him at school, he smiled and she felt goose bumps. She daydreamed of him holding her in his arms. She had never had a boyfriend or made love in the backseat of a car. She was too busy trying to keep the family together.

"Don't go," her little sister whimpered. Maria looked at her and saw she was afraid. "Don't leave us alone," she said, her eyes full of tears.

Maria knew her sister still hadn't accepted their mother's death. Sometimes she had nightmares at night, and Maria had to sleep with her to calm her fears.

Maria looked at her brother. He was only thirteen, but already he was a leader in his own gang. "I wanna be like Frankie some-day. Nobody messes with him," he said, then he turned away and ran out the back door.

Maria started after him, because she knew that the *barrio* streets at night could be dangerous for a thirteen-year-old. Some of the boys smoked marijuana, some sniffed spray paint, and the door of the crack house on Delmar Street was always open. Outside she could hear the kids yelling and singing. "*Hasta la vista, baby!*" Denise called.

Maria looked through the window and saw Frankie turn to look at her. His eyes were inviting. Then they were gone. Maria slumped into the sofa. She felt anger inside, a terrible anger at the unfairness of it all. Why couldn't she be out there?

Why couldn't she dress like the other girls and cruise at night? Why couldn't she sit in the backseat of Frankie's car and feel his strong arms around her, and his warm kisses? Tears wet her cheeks. Her sister stood beside her and stroked Maria's long black hair. Maria looked at her and smiled. "Come on," she said. "Let's finish your homework."

Next day, the gang hung out around the entrance to the

school, taking last-minute drags on their cigarettes before they went in. Maria and her friend Sue Yonemoto were hurrying to calculus class.

Ana stopped Maria as she passed by. "Hey, Mary, why didn't you come with us last night?"

Maria looked at her but didn't answer.

"Frankie was lonely," Sandra said. The girls around her made swooning sounds and laughed.

"She don't have a chance with Frankie," Denise said.

Just then, Frankie came around the corner.

Suddenly there was a silence in the air, a chill. Everyone knew nobody messed with Frankie.

Frankie looked at Denise and scowled. She turned away in embarrassment. Then he looked at Maria and smiled. He knew she read books and that she was smart. She answered the teacher's questions in class. She wasn't like the other girls. She was different, and he wanted her.

That night, Frankie drove up in front of Maria's house. He was alone. He parked and waited. Maria finally went out and walked slowly to the car. She could smell the fresh air of the spring night, and a faint fragrance of blossoms. It was spring, and school was almost out, and Frankie had come to park in front of her house.

She felt she was floating in air. That morning, he had looked at her and she had known he would come.

"Hi," she said, smiling.

"Hey," Frankie answered. "Want to cruise?"

Me? Maria thought. *He could have any girl in school, but he asked me.* She looked back at the house where her sister and brother stood at the window.

"I can go for a while," she said, and waved at her brother and sister. "Be back in an hour!" she called, and got into the car.

Frankie drove off slowly. Maria looked at him in the dark, his handsome features outlined against the lights of the street. The

car smelled of sweet smoke mixed with the fragrance of hair dressing. He offered her a cigarette.

"I don't smoke," Maria said.

"What do you do?" Frankie asked, a strange laughter in his voice.

Frankie headed toward the bridge. There he parked and finished his cigarette. The sounds of the city seemed distant and remote.

When he finished smoking, he took Maria in his arms and kissed her. The warmth of his kiss excited her. She had never been kissed like this. She kissed him back, but when his hands began to explore her body, she resisted.

"Why not?" he asked.

She didn't know why not. Making out was what most of the girls talked about in the school bathroom. Going all the way was expected; it just depended who you did it with. And how high you got.

"I'm just not ready," Maria answered, and she thought of the promise she had made to her mother. She knew the kids who cruised every night didn't keep up with their schoolwork.

Couldn't she do both? For a moment she thought the promise she had made to her mother was a foolish thing. Even if she got into a university, even if she got grants and loans, there was still more money needed on top of that. And where was it going to come from? Who was going to take care of her brother and sister? It was a crazy dream, and she might as well forget it.

"Maybe this will help," Frankie whispered, and he lit a joint. He inhaled deeply and passed it to Maria. "Go on, take a hit. Make you mellow."

Maria hesitated. She had heard the story a thousand times, especially from the girls:

"A little weed puts you in a loving mood."

"Mellow, mellow for your fellow."

A lot of those girls had dropped out, and some had gone on to be regulars at the crack house on Delmar.

"Go on," Frankie whispered in the dark. The glowing ember of the joint was bright in the dark, and the thin feather of smoke was like a snake that swayed as it rose.

Suck me in and hold me, the smoke said, and watch the pro-lens slip away.

Maria reached out and took the joint. She had tried smoking a cigarette once, in the privacy of her bathroom. It had made her sick. But she had wondered what marijuana was like, why it was so widely used by the kids. She had thought of trying it. Now was her chance.

She paused. Was she doing it for herself, or for Frankie? Was she doing it just to belong?

Outside, near the looming shadow of the dark bridge, she saw a shadow move. She heard a moaning sound, like a woman crying.

"Look!"

Frankie looked as the shadow disappeared into the dark.

"Bag lady," he said. "Go on, take a hit."

"She was crying," Maria said.

"You're not getting scared, are you? Miss Wonder Woman who gets A's in all her tests, scared?" Frankie chuckled.

"Did you ever hear the story of La Llorona?" Maria asked.

"Yeah, the crazy woman who cries at night?" Frankie laughed.

"Yeah, my mom used to tell it to me. It's just a story to scare kids."

"Maybe," Maria replied. "My mother told me the story really happened. The young woman fell in love with a man. He was a sharp dresser, always had women around him. He made his living playing cards. He promised to love her, got her pregnant, and then he wouldn't help her."

"Smart dude," Frankie said. "I figure if a woman wants to get pregnant, that's her problem."

Maria continued. "The girl's father said the family's honor had been soiled, so he kicked her out of the house. She had nowhere to go, no one to turn to. When the baby was born, she drowned it."

Frankie sat up straight. "It's not a real story, is it?"
 Maria nodded. "She drowned the child here, beneath the bridge."

"You're kidding," Frankie said.

"She had no help," Maria continued. "She went crazy and drowned the baby. Now she cries at night, looking for her child."

"Damn," Frankie whispered. He looked out into the darkness. The night had grown cool. There was only silence in the night, strange sounds, the distant wail of a siren.

"I'm going to be different," Maria said softly.

Frankie looked puzzled.

She handed the marijuana cigarette back to him. He took it. "Why not?"

"I don't want to drown my children," Maria answered.

Frankie didn't understand what she meant. He touched saliva to his fingertips and put out the joint. "What's the matter with you? You don't smoke, you don't dress like the other girls. You think you're too good?"

Maria shuddered. She had heard that accusation before. The girls whispered behind her back. "She thinks she's too good for us. Runs around with the Japanese girl. Calculus Club. Just too damned good!"

First, Maria had tried to explain. No, she didn't think she was too good for them. But she couldn't explain to them about the promise to her mother. She couldn't tell them she wanted to go to college, because few of the girls from that school had ever dared try. Most of them drifted off, got married, or just disappeared. Maria didn't want to just disappear. She wanted her life to have a meaning, and that meant keeping to her mother's dream.

"Take me home," Maria said. She knew that saying take me home meant she was saying good-bye to Frankie Calvin. It also meant not belonging to the gang.

"Yeah, okay," Frankie answered. He started the car, and they slowly drove back to Maria's.

As they drove, Maria felt the anguish of her choice. Why, she asked herself, *oh why, couldn't I just let go? Let go of my dream? Follow Frankie?* He was the only young man who had ever invited her out, held her in his arms, kissed her. She wanted to reach out and touch him and say she would stay with him.

She felt a longing for him, and she knew that she would always remember this night. But seeing the figure of the woman in the night had reminded her that life was a struggle, and she had to take care of herself. Frankie's life was headed toward a dead end. She just didn't want to wind up with him on that street.

He parked in front of her house and looked at her. "Hey, I like you. I'm sorry for what I said. So you're different. That's why I like you. Maybe I can call you later."

"School's almost over, and all the exams are coming up," Maria said.

"School isn't everything," Frankie smiled in the dark. "You gotta have some fun."

Yes, she thought. *School isn't everything.* When he kissed her, she had felt she really cared for him. Maybe she had put too much of her time and energy into schoolwork.

"Maybe after exams are over," she said.

"Yeah, maybe." He nodded.

"Good-bye." She smiled and leaned toward him. "Thank you."

She kissed Frankie on the cheek.

She quickly got out of the car and ran into the house.

Rudolfo Anaya

Son of a farmer's daughter and a *vagüero*, Rudolfo Anaya was born in an adobe-walled house in the small village of Pastura, New Mexico. Since 1952 he has lived in Albuquerque, where he earned degrees from the University of New Mexico, where he earned degrees in English at that university since 1974. He has been a professor of English since 1974.

His first novel, *Bless Me, Ultima*, required seven years of writing but its publication in 1972 won Anaya the Premio Quinto Sol Award and earned him a position of preeminence in the history of Chicano literature. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s he was the most widely read Chicano writer in the world, and *Bless Me, Ultima* has been the most widely taught Chicano novel in the American Southwest.

While *Ultima* reflects the author's childhood feelings and experiences, his second novel, *Heart of Aztlan*, explores the relationship between the people of New Mexico and the land they have inhabited for centuries, along with the effects of the social and political issues of the 1960s. That book was followed by *Tortuga* in 1979 and *Silence of the Llano* in 1982. He has also published two nonfiction books: *Lord of the Dawn: The Legend of Quetzalcoatl* and *A Chicano in China*. He has edited several anthologies of Chicano short stories and folktales, including *Cuentos Chicanos*.

In addition to his own writing, Rudolfo Anaya helped found the Grande Writers group, and in the late 1970s, while he was on the board of the Coordinating Council of Literary Magazines, he was instrumental in helping small presses establish themselves as significant developers of many of the country's young writers who had not found acceptance by large New York publishing houses.

His most recent novel, published in 1992, is *Albuquerque*, a story of romance and political intrigue, blending the historic past and the challenging present of that vibrant Southwestern American city.

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