

Doña Espuelas

For Kameron Dawson and Torin Kuehnle
and for Jorge Santiago-Avilés, who told me about this Puerto Rican saying many years ago.

Her spurs are so big, but so big, that you can hang a hammock from them.

Doña Beatriz frowned as she watched her granddaughter insist for the third time that afternoon that her brother give in to another of her demands. Carlos wanted to go in to do his homework, but, using her best sergeant's voice, Carmen ordered, *Push me. I told you to push me. I'll tell Mami if you don't.* Carlos, who had been pushing her forever, bit his lower lip and continued pushing the swing.

After dinner, Doña Beatriz sat on the porch swing next to her granddaughter and said, *Mi amor, let me tell you a story about a girl I knew when I was your age.* Carmen got herself comfortable next to her grandmother, for she knew that *Abuela's* story would be long and interesting.

Where I grew up on the island, started Doña Beatriz, there lived a young couple who built the biggest and most beautiful house anybody had ever seen, when they got married. They built it on the town's highest hill. From the balcony of their living room they could see the town's lights as they were turned on every evening, and from their bedroom they could see the sun smiling at them when it woke every morning on the other side of the ocean. Alberto and Dolores had enough money to buy all the things any young couple could possibly need to be happy. They had two brand-new cars every year, beautiful furniture, elegant clothes, and fine jewelry. They also had a cook, a gardener, and a housekeeper. In addition, they took a long and wonderful trip to a

different part of the world every year.

The young couple loved each other very much, and the whole town felt that they had the perfect life. Dolores was crazy about her husband, and he adored her, filled her with surprises, and pampered her in every imaginable way. But in spite of all this, as the years passed, people started noticing that Dolores wasn't happy. She had everything, except what she most desired--a baby. Alberto and Dolores saw all the doctors on the island, and even traveled to New York to consult the American specialists, but no one was able to help them.

Then one day, after many years of hoping and praying, Dolores discovered that she was going to have a baby. When their baby girl was born, healthy and beautiful, Dolores and Alberto considered themselves the happiest parents in the world, and they named her Voluntad in honor of the strong willpower Dolores had demonstrated in her desire to be a mother. The parents thought their daughter looked like an angel --she really was the most beautiful baby anybody had seen on the island-- and they doted on her as the gift from heaven they considered her to be.

Even before their daughter was born, they fixed the nursery with all the latest furnishings and decorations from France and Italy, ordered her hand-made layette from Spain, and bought her every toy available at F. A. O. Schwarz, the best toy store in New York.

One night, when Voluntad was around six months old, Dolores and Alberto woke with a start when they heard a screech at three in the morning. They rushed into the nursery, for they were afraid that their precious baby was in danger or in pain, but as soon as Voluntad saw them, she smiled and went right back to sleep. The next night, at exactly three in the morning, they heard the same screech, and again they rushed into the nursery, only to have Voluntad smile and fall asleep again. The next night she did the same thing, and the next, and the next. After a week,

Dolores and Alberto were exhausted and very, very worried. They consulted all the specialists, but no one could give them a satisfactory answer.

When Dolores was bathing her on her first birthday, she noticed that Voluntad had a strange-looking growth on the back of both of her heels. The doctors on the island had never seen anything like it before. The specialists in New York couldn't help the distraught parents, either. Each year, as Voluntad became more willful, the growth on her heels grew larger, darker, firmer.

When Dolores noticed that her daughter didn't know how to play with other children, she organized a playgroup. She invited twelve of her friends and their young children to her house every day so the children could play while the mothers visited. She even asked Flora, her cook, to fix a delicious *almuerzo* for her guests. But, in spite of the hundreds of toys in the playroom, Voluntad always wanted the one another child had and grabbed it from him. She screeched whenever one of her playmates disobeyed one of her orders, and even pushed and bit him.

By this time, Dolores was already making Voluntad dresses with long skirts to hide the growths on her heels, which were now bright pink with purple veins and looked like a mouse wrapped around her ankles. She also had the old shoemaker, Mr. Buffini, who had learned his craft in Naples, make her daughter special shoes out of supple leather, with a soft stretch fabric on the heels to make room for her growing spurs. When Dolores wasn't around, the other mothers referred to her daughter as *Espuelitas* or "Little Spurs." After a while, the children refused to go to Voluntad's house, and one by one their mothers made excuses and dropped out of the playgroup.

When she turned fifteen, her parents had a *quinceañera* party for Voluntad. They invited

all the important people in the town, hired a florist to decorate their house, a photographer to take pictures, and an orchestra to play all night. They employed six women to prepare and serve a delicious dinner of *arroz, tostones, bacalao, lechón asado, flan, and pastel tres leches*. They hired two bartenders to serve champagne to toast the *quinceañera*.

Dolores made her daughter a special rose-colored lace dress with a satin train to cover the spurs that a simple long dress could no longer hide, for they were now the size of a fat old rat and felt like alligator skin.

All the young men who were invited to the party thought Voluntad was as pretty as a sunrise, but they were hesitant to approach her, for they had heard of her selfishness and her tantrums. Finally, Jorge got up his courage and invited her to dance. To everybody's surprise, Voluntad accepted. After that, Fernando, then Gonzalo, and, eventually, all the young men danced with Voluntad, and she was as sweet as an angel.

The next week, Jorge invited her to the movies. They had a good time, and they went out a few more times. Then one day, when Jorge declared his love for her, Voluntad's eyes glazed over, her brows arched, and she screeched, *Who do you think you are? You are nothing but a little squirt. You disgust me! How could you possibly think I might be interested in you? Get out! Right now! And never speak to me again!* Jorge was crushed, for this was the first time in his life he had fallen in love, and after weeks of her sweetness, he had forgotten the warnings he had received from his parents about her mean and willful disposition. He felt humiliated and never told anybody what happened.

After a few weeks, Fernando asked Voluntad to go to the town's annual fair with him. She said yes, and they had a wonderful time together. They continued going out and, after several

months, he also declared his love for her. With sparks in her eyes and razor blades in her voice, she said, *Oh, I can't stand you, you little creep. You are as meek as a girl and as pale as a worm. How could I ever love you? Leave me alone! You make me sick!*

During the next few years, many young men courted Voluntad. After flirting with them and encouraging their attention, once they declared their love, she was disdainful in her rejection. She told one that he looked like a giraffe, called the next one a dwarf, the third, a skeleton, and another, a pauper. She broke the hearts of most of the eligible men in town. Some married someone else. Others left town. The townspeople started calling her *Señorita Espuelas*.

After her father died, Voluntad took special pleasure in being mean to her mother. Doña Dolores was getting old, but she still tried to please her daughter every way she could. Even with her arthritic hands, she made her long skirts with wire hoops in the hem to cover the spurs that were still growing. They were now purplish with thick black veins and had hairy bumps. Voluntad was never pleased. She made more and more demands on her mother and found fault with everything the old woman did.

When she was around thirty, a young, handsome, rich man came to town. As soon as Alejandro and Voluntad saw each other, they fell in love. He heard rumors about all the men she had spurned, but it was too late. He was already head-over-heels in love with her. Even when he found out about her spurs, he didn't care. After a few weeks, he put a sapphire surrounded by diamonds on her ring finger, and the happy couple set the date for their wedding.

Doña Dolores made plans for an elaborate church wedding and an elegant reception at home. She had the house painted inside and out, planted new shrubs, re-upholstered the living room furniture, hired the famous chef who had just arrived on the island, and with her own hands

sewed an exquisite trousseau for her daughter. She invited the mayor, the veterinarian, the two doctors, the lawyer, the chief of police, the teachers, Father Ricardo, the most important merchants, her old friends, and all the distant relatives on both sides of the family. She could not invite any young people, for Voluntad had no friends.

After months of behaving like a woman in love, on the eve of her wedding, Voluntad decided she had to make sure Alejandro understood that her wishes would always have priority over his. She told him that she refused to have a baby, that his mother would never be welcome in their house, and that any order to the servants would have to go through her. She added that he would have to ask her for his spending money every day and that whenever she asked him to take a day off from work, he would have to comply with her wishes without asking any questions. That night Alejandro packed his bags and left town. No one ever heard from him again.

Soon after, tired and disillusioned, Doña Dolores passed away. Everybody in town went to her funeral, for they knew her as a kind woman who had suffered much.

Voluntad continued living alone in the big house on the hill. She never went into town again. Once in a while someone would catch a glimpse of her walking in her garden, or looking out from her living room balcony. Some fishermen said they had seen her looking at the sunrise. She always wore the wedding dress her mother had so lovingly made for her. People started calling her *Doña Espuelas*.

Many years later, after all of her mother's friends had passed away and her own contemporaries had forgotten her, one very windy afternoon, Voluntad walked into town wearing her yellowed, tattered wedding dress covered in multicolored stains. The seams were fraying, the

hem was coming undone, and the shreds of the long train could no longer cover the spurs which were now gnarled, dark as a mudhole, hard as a rhino's horn.

The children of the town had often heard about Voluntad, for their mothers used to tell them that if they were willful, they would grow spurs on their heels like Doña Espuelas, but they had never seen her. When they saw the old woman walking towards them with the aid of a cane to balance the weight of her spurs, they stared. She lifted her cane and waved it at them screeching, *You dirty urchins, what are you gawking at? Didn't your parents teach you any manners? Shoo! Get lost, you little vermin.* At that moment, a strong gale swept her off her feet, and with her long train acting as spinnaker, lifted her all the way to the top of an old flamboyán in the middle of the plaza and dropped her there with her left leg on one branch and her right foot on another. Just then, an even stronger gale picked up the hammock Fulgencio López was exhibiting in front of his general store and hung it from Doña Espuela's spurs.

The men in the plaza tried to get her down from the tree, but they were unable to do it. As far as I know, she is still there getting burned from the noon sun, drenched in the afternoon monsoon rains, and soiled when the black birds fly over her. The townspeople feed her out of charity. On moonlit nights the town's drunk sings her a serenade and the mangy homeless dogs howl at her.

When Doña Beatriz finished her story, Carmen was silent for a long time. She then lifted her face and, looking at her grandmother, whispered, *I think I have been bad and willful like Doña Espuelas. Abuela, if I am good from now on, will I still grow spurs on my heels like Voluntad?* Doña Beatriz embraced her granddaughter tenderly, and caressing her long hair said, *Why do you ask, mi amor? Do your heels hurt? Let me look. Put your legs up on my lap.* Doña

Beatriz then rubbed Carmen's heels in circles as she said, *Oh, Sweetie, there's something here. It feels like a little bump, and the skin is rough. Have you been tormenting your brother?*