



“The everyday reality of children living and working on the streets is not an easy topic to present to young readers, and Silvana has captured their small world, with its struggles and hopes, with respect and delicacy.”
—Dr. Maria Carbonetti,
UBC French, Hispanic and Italian Studies

VICTORIA



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by
Silvana Goldemberg
Translated from the Spanish
by Emilie Smith



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*“If I were hungry and destitute,
I would not ask for a loaf of bread,
I would ask for half a loaf and a book . . .
Enjoy the fruit of the human spirit—
not to do so is to be a slave.”*
Federico García Lorca, Granada, 1929

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*For the children who suffer from violence and poverty.
For the justice and dignity they deserve.*

*Any similarity between fiction and reality has more to
do with coexistence than coincidence.*

Silvana Goldemberg



CHAPTER ONE

MOONLIGHT SHINES ON THE PHOTO TAPED TO THE WALL beside her pillow. Lying in bed, Victoria gazes at the happy scene—she and her mother are smiling for the camera, their long brown hair done up with flowers for her mother’s birthday.

I miss you so much, Mamá. I don’t want to turn fifteen without you. I can’t. And the twins—poor little ones. Every day they ask for you.

Victoria imagines her mother answering, her voice full of love. “Don’t worry, *m’hija*. Everything will be okay.”

When will everything be okay, Mamá?

Victoria tosses and turns. She closes her eyes, but cannot sleep. She wishes that her mother were still alive, and she and her brothers were back home in their old neighbourhood on the other side of Paraná.

I’m still here in Betina’s room.

The wall is covered with posters of *cumbia* singers. An

oval mirror with a red plastic frame hangs above her cousin's empty bed. *She's probably at a boyfriend's.*

Victoria's twin brothers are asleep on a third bed. It is jammed into the small room against a huge old wardrobe, which holds their few belongings.

A snore rumbles from the next room. The slow rhythmic sound comforts Victoria. *Doña Norma is much nicer than Aunt Marta. But she's so old.*

Hours seem to pass.

Victoria wonders if the twins are stirring. She gets up to check on them. They're sleeping deeply. *No nightmares so far.* Victoria watches them dream. They lie back-to-back with their feet sticking out from underneath the quilt. Damian sucks his thumb, while Martin twists his hair.

On the other side of the small house, Aunt Marta and her boyfriend, Juan, argue. Martin whimpers and turns over before settling again.

Victoria returns to her bed and covers her ears. She thinks of her mother tucking her in while humming the tango.

Sleep, mi amor.

The angels will watch over you.

Dream, mi amor.

If tomorrow you don't find me

with you when you awake,

look to the heavens, beloved.

That's where I will be . . .

Victoria buries her head in the pillow and cries silently.
The angry voices grow louder.

"I'm sick to death of this place," Juan says. "If you don't send those kids to an orphanage, I'll leave for good!"

I wish he really would leave instead of always pretending he will.

A truck backfires by Victoria's window, drowning Juan's voice out for a moment, and then his ranting is back. "And the old lady—always bothering us. And her snoring! It drives me crazy. She should go live with her son in Buenos Aires."

"*Idiota*, Doña Norma owns the house," Marta shouts. "And I don't see *you* bringing in any money. Maybe you should go and look for work."

Glass shatters on the street. Someone screams. Victoria scrambles to the window.

Three boys are on top of Danny, the grocer's son, pounding him. A broken bottle lies on the ground a few feet away. "You'd better get the money, *hijo de puta!*"

One of the boys looks up at Victoria's window. The scar on his forehead is bright red in the moonlight. Victoria draws back into the room. *I hope he didn't see me.*

After a long moment, Victoria peeks out from behind the curtain again. The boys are jumping into the back of a rusty pick-up truck. Danny is painfully making his way to the grocery.

As the truck speeds off, the boy with the red scar shouts,
“You better have the money tomorrow, Danny!”

Poor Danny . . .

“Go to hell!” Marta yells.

A violent slam shakes the house, and Juan barrels down
the street.

He looks drunk.

She pulls the curtain shut—she doesn’t want Juan to see
her at the window.

There is a forlorn cry inside the room, followed by a
second. The twins are awake.

“COME ON, GET UP! MOVE YOUR LAZY BUTT!” AUNT MARTA’S
voice wakes Victoria. “There’s a mountain of ironing to do,
and you’ve got to take the skirts to Mrs. Meitry and get the
medicine for Doña Norma.”

Victoria drags herself up, tired from lack of sleep. The
twins’ bed is empty. She hears a shout and a laugh—they are
playing outside with the kids next door. *It’s good they have
new friends and can have some fun.*

This morning will be no different than any other since
she and her brothers came to stay with their aunt: Victoria
will clean the house, iron clothes, deliver them to clients and
make lunch. *Another “wonderful” day.*

She is washing the breakfast dishes when her aunt comes

in to boil water for *mate* to drink while she sews.

Victoria takes a deep breath. “*Tía*, since the twins are going to start school, I was thinking that I . . . ”

“Oh, so you’ve been thinking, have you?” her aunt snaps.

“Yes,” Victoria says. Now that she’s started, she may as well continue. “It’s just that . . . I’d like to go back to school.”

“Stop bothering me with your nonsense.”

“Please, *Tía*. My mother . . . ”

“Don’t even think about it.” Her aunt is furious. “You have too much to do around here. I can’t slave away all day so the *princesa* can live in luxury.”

But Victoria has dreams. “I’d still be able to help out. School is only a few hours a day.”

“I said no. Now peel those potatoes for lunch!” Kettle in hand, her aunt storms out of the kitchen, leaving a trail of steam behind her.

“Someday I want to be a teacher,” Victoria says. But nobody hears her.

She peels the potatoes. *Aunt Marta doesn’t care about me. She just wants me to work for her. Mamá would want me to go to school.*

“What are you cooking up, *cosita*?”

Victoria freezes. It’s Juan. He puts a hand on her waist and leans into her, his breath stinking of the cheap nasty wine he drinks.

She ducks away and shoves him. Juan staggers and tries to

stay upright. Victoria shows him the peeling knife and yells, “Keep your hands off me!”

“Hey, *linda*, don’t get upset about nothing.” Juan smiles as he speaks, showing his yellow teeth. His eyes are bloodshot.

Why does Aunt Marta stay with this man?

Juan moves toward her.

“Get away from me, disgusting pig! Don’t ever touch me again!” Victoria shouts. She runs to Betina’s bedroom and slams the door shut.

“VICTORIAAAA!” HER AUNT SHOUTS. “GET BACK TO THE kitchen and finish cooking lunch. Stop wasting time!”

*Why doesn’t she ever believe me when I tell her about Juan?
Can’t she see for herself what he’s up to?*

“VICTORIAAAA! What are you doing? Get out of your room and stop sulking!”

Victoria looks at her mother’s photo. *She was so kind and strong for us. I have to be strong as well.*

“*Mierda!* VICTORIA!” Her aunt is shouting again, now from Doña Norma’s room. “VICTORIAAAA! Bring the mop. The old lady has pissed on the floor. VICTORIAAAAAA! DO YOU HEAR ME?”

THAT EVENING, VICTORIA RETURNS FROM PICKING UP HER aunt's sewing. Juan's bike is crowding the narrow entry hall, so she squeezes by, careful to keep the clothes from brushing up against it. The house is quiet except for Doña Norma's snores.

As soon as Victoria enters the dining room, Juan comes in from Marta's room. "Hi, cosita!" He reeks of alcohol.

Victoria steps back in disgust and fear. "Where are the twins and Marta?"

"Who cares where the hell they are. We're okay without them," Juan says, cornering her against the wall.

"Leave me alone." Victoria shoves the sewing at him and spins away. But Juan lunges at her, grabs her arms and presses against her. His smell nauseates her. In horror, she punches and kicks at him; but the more she struggles, the more violent he becomes.

Finally, Victoria sinks her teeth into his arm, biting hard. Juan yells and slaps her sharply across her face. Reflexively, she knees him, and Juan doubles over and falls down.

"Go to hell, hijo de puta!" Victoria says, and she bolts into the street where she can choose her own misery.

CHAPTER TWO

VICTORIA DARTS INTO AN ALLEY AND SKIDS TO A STOP. TWO guys are dragging a third. One is holding a gun. She recognizes him. *The one with the scar.*

Victoria quickly slips behind a broken garden fence into a yard and crouches down. Her heart pounds so strongly she's afraid it will jump out of her chest.

"No . . . please . . . no!" someone shouts.

It's Danny.

Silence follows his plea. Victoria is desperate with fear. She looks at the house across the yard. It's dark. She gets up, determined to seek help.

A muffled gunshot rings out.

A light snaps on from a window across the alley, illuminating Danny's thin body lying in the dirt. Victoria claps her hand over her mouth to stop herself from screaming.

Footsteps.

The boys are fleeing. The smaller one stops and stares at Victoria. He's wide-eyed, frightened.

"Quick!" hisses the one with the scar. He sees Victoria, scowls ferociously and slows.

Shouts, and the two boys vanish into the dark alleyways.

Two women burst out of a door and run over to Danny. "*Jesús María*, the kid's dead!"

Victoria gets up and dashes between the houses. She races down narrow streets and keeps running until her chest aches. Finally she reaches Urquiza Park and stops in front of the statue of an Indian girl holding an arrow. A dizzy spell knocks her off balance and she crouches down, gasping for breath.

Poor Danny. He was so kind. Sometimes he gave her leftover vegetables at the end of the day to give to her aunt.

Tears run down her cheeks. She stumbles over to a water fountain by the ice cream stand and splashes her face. She drinks so quickly that she chokes.

"Hey, *che!* That's only for customers," one of the men who works there shouts.

"Sorry," Victoria says, moving to a nearby wooden bench. She sits down, clutching the edge of the seat and tries to calm herself.

A group of boys approaches her. "What are you doing here? This is our spot!" the tallest one shouts.

"I just needed to rest a bit," Victoria says, but she gets up and walks away unsteadily.

“That’s right, go home to your mommy,” the boy sneers. The other boys laugh and high-five him. He lights up a cigarette.

VICTORIA WEAVES HER WAY DOWN MORE STREETS, TRYING to be invisible. A hand grabs her shoulder from behind. She freezes.

“Give us your money!” a voice hisses.

Victoria doesn’t answer.

She is spun roughly around. A different group of boys is threatening her.

“Give us your money or you’ll regret it.” The boy is stocky, and he has tattoos all over his arms.

“I don’t have any money,” Victoria says.

“Let’s see if this loosens up your pocket,” the tattooed boy says, punching her in the stomach.

“I’ve got nothing. Please leave me alone!”

The boy pushes Victoria away in disgust, and she falls, her frail body slapping hard against the pavement.

Everything hurts, inside and out. It is too much. Everything that has happened to her; everything she has lost.

Just then a shout rings out from the shadows. “Hey! Leave her alone!” A skinny old man is walking toward them. “Get them, Brownie!”

A large brown dog runs up and leaps at the boys, barking and snarling. They run off, cursing.

“Come back, Brownie. Here, boy!” the old man says, coming up to Victoria. “He won’t hurt you.”

“Thanks for helping me,” she says, picking herself slowly off the ground.

“You’re lucky they didn’t kill you,” the old man says. He is pushing a supermarket cart full of junk. He has a kind face, with twinkling grey eyes and a beard. There’s a small black puppy with a white spot around his left eye trotting behind him. “I’m Pepperoni, but you can call me Pepe.”

“I’m Victoria.”

Pointing to the dogs, Pepe adds, “You’ve met Brownie, and this little one is Bite’m.”

“Bite’m?” Victoria asks.

“Yep. Now I’m going to lie down. I’ve been hoofing it all the way from Oro Verde.”

“That’s really far,” Victoria says, remembering bus rides there with her mother and brothers to visit her great aunt Raquel.

“It is. Look, I know a safe place to sleep, if you have nowhere else to go.”

The worn-out wheels of the cart slap against the street as they walk. The dogs follow.

When they arrive at Centenario School, Pepperoni gestures for Victoria to follow him up the steps. He points

to a spot near the front door. "You can sleep here." Then he pulls a thin blanket full of holes out of his cart and offers it to her.

"No, thanks. I'm okay," Victoria answers. She is touched by his kindness, but the blanket smells so awful, she can't bear to take it.

Pepe shrugs and wraps it around his shoulders.

Victoria sits down and leans against the wall of the school, hugging her legs. Brownie wags his tail and curls up next to her. Bite'm comes over and licks her cheek. While Victoria pets the dogs, Pepe searches through his cart, moving bottles and bags until he finds a suitable piece of cardboard.

"Here, lie down on this. It will help you stay dry."

"Sure, thank you." Victoria takes it gratefully.

Pepe takes a bottle out of his jacket pocket and drinks greedily. Finally he stops, burps, looks at Victoria, as if asking forgiveness for his lack of manners, and offers her a drink.

She shakes her head, managing a smile.

Then he takes a bruised apple out of a bag and hands it to her. "Here, che. You must be hungry."

"Thanks." Victoria takes the apple and rubs it against her shirt. It's sweet and juicy, and she savours every bite.

Bite'm licks his paw, and Brownie scratches behind his ear.

"Your cart is like a magician's hat," Victoria says, "You make things appear from it."

“Well, young lady, to avoid disappearing, you need to be a kind of magician,” Pepperoni says. Lifting up the bottle, he adds, “Now let it rain!” and takes another sip.

He must have a sad story, being all alone and homeless. Victoria lies down on the cardboard and feels a chill from the cement under her. Now I'm homeless too. She shivers. But I can't go back tonight. Not tomorrow. Not even the day after tomorrow.

She covers her face with her arm to block out the cold. *I hope the twins are sleeping well. I hope they won't worry too much when they find out I'm gone. She blows an imaginary kiss to each one. I promise, Mamá, I promise I'll come back for them.*