

## **Growing Up**

**By**

**Ann Clark**

“See you later, Grandma.”

“Okay, honey. Have a nice time at school.”

“I will. Bye.”

“Goodbye.” Mariam kissed her grandmother on the cheek, grabbed her backpack off the floor, and ran down the street to catch the bus. As she stood at the stop, she reviewed her science notes for the upcoming test that would take place later that day. The furious wind howled at the bus stop, flapping the notes up into Mariam’s face. Suddenly, she felt someone poke the back of her shoulder. She spun around to face two boys. One had long brown hair that reminded Mariam of the peanut butter on the sandwich in her lunchbox. It fell so far in front of his dark, brown eyes that Mariam seriously doubted he could see anything. He had been having a battle with acne all over his face, and it seemed as if the acne was winning. The other boy had a buzz cut, and Mariam thought it made his face look rather like a box. Grey eyes protruded perhaps a little off center of the rest of his face, and Mariam noticed with satisfaction that one of them was blackened. However, recognizing these boys was a bad thing. Mariam bit her lip. These boys had tormented her without mercy for years.

“Derek. Zane,” Mariam mumbled. “Just what I need to start a wonderful day.”

“Hey, Mary,” Zane said, flipping his peanut butter hair out of his eyes. “What’s that?” He gestured at her science notes.

“Um, just some notes for science.” Mariam averted her eyes. “But,” she looked back up, “please don’t call me Mary.” It was her mother’s name, a name that nobody, even her grandmother, would ever be allowed to call her.

“Really?” Derek sounded impressed. “Notes for science? Lemme see.” He snatched the notes out of her hand.

“Hey! Give them back,” Mariam shouted, annoyed. “I need those notes for science. I have a big test today.”

“Really?” Zane asked, feigning surprise. “That’s funny. I have a test in science today too. I really need these notes to study with as well. Do you have any more notes for our test? I could really use those as well.”

“You can’t have them.” Mariam’s voice was surprisingly strong, considering the fact that she didn’t usually stand up to these jerks. Derek and Zane had bothered her ever since kindergarten when the three of them were playing in the sandbox together. Apparently, Derek and Zane didn’t share well with others.

“Really? You have more?” Derek asked, flashing a grin at Zane. Mariam winced, annoyed with herself for giving Derek and Zane the advantage of knowing that she had valued possessions in her backpack. Sure enough, Derek pulled Mariam’s backpack off her shoulder and started digging through it.

“Stop!” Mariam yelled, extremely annoyed now. She was being completely ignored by both Derek and Zane who were digging through her backpack with gusto

now. She had struggled for a few minutes before realizing defeat, and allowing Derek and Zane, as always, to take away her things.

“Look! I found more,” Derek called to Zane, as he ripped the notes out of Mariam’s backpack. Mariam tried to snatch them back, but before she could do so, Derek tore them in half and half again and again and again. He opened his hands and let the pieces of Mariam’s notes take flight in the harsh wind. Derek and Zane continued to demolish everything in Mariam’s backpack. They pocketed her lunch money, tore up days of homework and notes that she had taken in class. By the time the bus finally pulled up to the stop, Mariam was fighting back tears. She picked up her backpack from the mud where Derek and Zane had left it, and told the bus driver that she had forgotten something at home. She waited for the bus to pull away from the curb, then sat down and sobbed. What was she supposed to do now? She couldn’t go to school without her work, but even the thought of skipping school was unthinkable. Mariam supposed that she would have to go to school without her work and try to come up with an explanation for her teachers. She stood up, tears still running down her face, and very nearly ran into her grandmother’s car.

“Mariam, what’s wrong?” her grandmother asked, rolling down the window.

“Derek and Zane,” Mariam said simply.

“Ah.” Mariam’s grandmother knew all about Derek, Zane, and the years of trouble that followed them wherever they went.

“Get in, Mariam,” her grandmother said, kindly. Only after Mariam had gotten into the car, and they began to drive towards town, did her grandmother speak.

“What happened?”

Mariam spoke for a few minutes, recounting the whole story.

“Mariam,” her grandmother said. “It’s great that you stand up to bullies, but sometimes that’s not the best method. With Derek and Zane, you just need to stay out of their way. You need to show them that what they’re doing doesn’t bother you in the slightest.”

“But it does bother me,” Mariam replied. “They really annoy me.”

“I know that,” her grandmother said, “and you know that, but they don’t need to know that. If they think what they’re doing bothers you, they’re going to keep doing it. You need to show them that what they’re doing doesn’t affect you at all.”

Mariam smiled.

“You’re so smart, Grandma. I bet stuff like this happened to you all the time, right?”

Her grandma stiffened, and the knuckles on her hands gripped the steering wheel so tightly that they turned white. She remained silent for a moment before answering, “Yes, but that’s not important. What’s important now is you. I’ll call the school and say you’re sick. We’ll spend the rest of the day getting notes from your friends and re-doing all of your homework, all right?”

Those words were enough. Mariam’s smile at her grandmother was a ray of sunshine.

“Thanks, Grandma,” she said. “Thanks so much.”

The next day at school, Mariam was ready for anything. She had all of her homework and had copies of her friends' notes. Grandma had driven her to school so that she wouldn't see Derek and Zane at the bus stop. However, to her dismay, after her Grandmother had left, Derek and Zane, already at the schoolyard, had spotted her and were racing across the grass towards her. Mariam, filled with panic, remembered her Grandmother's advice, and quickly dug into her backpack. She pulled out a book and pretended to be engrossed in it, even after Derek and Zane began to talk to her. However, although appearing calm, she clutched her backpack around her shoulder as if she was protecting a newborn baby.

“What's up, Mary?” Zane asked, his dark brown eyes once again barely visible through his thick mane of peanut butter. Mariam ignored him, pretending to be deep into her book, but hoping against hope that he and Derek would just go away and leave her alone.

“Hey, Derek,” Zane continued. “Tell our friend Mary what we found at the police station the other day.”

“Oh, that,” Derek said, the acne on his face more pronounced than ever. “Well, so Zane and me were up at the police station with Zane's dad the other day. Zane's old man wanted to show us around the place, seeing as he works there and all. Anyway, while he was showing us around, he got real thirsty, and went to go get some water in one of the rooms in the back. While he was doin' that, Zane and me, we decided to poke around a bit.” Despite Mariam's every effort not to pay the least bit of attention to Derek or Zane, she found herself listening intently to everything they were saying.

“We saw a bunch of old records,” Derek continued, “on a certain Samantha O’Hara. Isn’t that your grandmother, Mariam?”

Mariam went cold. Her grandmother couldn’t have a police record. That was impossible. Derek and Zane were obviously lying about her grandmother, whom she loved more than anyone else in the world. But then she thought back to the other day in the car, to her grandmother’s white knuckles on the steering wheel. However, her grandmother had brought her up to care about her grades, and not to pick fights with other kids. Her grandmother didn’t have a police record. She couldn’t! While this furious battle was raging inside Mariam’s head, Derek continued his story.

“As I was sayin’,” this Samantha O’Hara had dealt in drugs, skipped school, and was suspended all the time,” Derek grinned happily. “She sounds like a great role model for us, huh Zane?” He flashed another toothy grin at Mariam, looking like the Cheshire Cat. Mariam, however, was too upset to notice. She took a few deep breaths. Derek and Zane were lying, that’s all, she thought to herself. Nevertheless, she would stop by the police station after school and check. Mariam was good friends with Sergeant McKinney, and she was quite sure that he would set things straight.

“Hey, Derek?” It was Zane. “Wanna go shoot some hoops? I’m getting bored just standing here talking. Obviously, Mariam’s way too into her book to listen to anything we might have to say about her grandma’s criminal record. Let’s go.” They pranced off, laughing like a couple of hyenas. After they left, the warning bell sounded for classes. Mariam ran towards school, not wanting to be late, and glad to leave the hyenas and the suspicion behind.

The whole day was a blur. Mariam couldn't concentrate at all. Every time she tried to tune in to what her teachers were saying, the conversation with Derek and Zane came back to her. The only thing that she could concentrate on was getting to the police station as soon as school was out. After what seemed like years, the last bell rang. Mariam, though anxious for the day to end, was wary of how it would turn out. She grabbed her book bag out of her locker, snapped it shut, and walked out of school towards the police station. All the way, Mariam simmered over Derek and Zane. They were just a bunch of lying freaks, and she would go to the police station and prove to them that her grandmother, Samantha O'Hara, did not deal in drugs, or skip school, or whatever else they had accused her of doing.

Mariam pushed open the door to the police station.

"Hello," she called. Sergeant McKinney answered her.

"Hello Mariam," he said. "What brings you around here?"

"Well, Mr. McKinney, I was wondering if you could tell me about my grandmother."

"What about her? She's one of the nicest people I know. She and I went to high school together. Did you know that?" Mariam listened politely as Sergeant McKinney went into a long, detailed, one-way conversation about the years that he and her grandmother had gone through school together.

“That’s great, Sergeant McKinney,” she said at last, putting up a dam to the stream of his memories. “What I was more curious about was her childhood. What was she like growing up?” Sergeant McKinney pressed his lips together, and looked around the station, anywhere but at Mariam, a light red color shading his cheeks.

“Well, Mariam, that’s hard to say. That’s probably a conversation that you should be having with your grandmother.”

“Please?” Mariam begged him.

“Well, just between you and me, she was pretty messed up as a kid. She was in trouble a lot. However, Mariam, seeing how she got out of all that inspired me. I wanted to help kids change their lives, as she was able to do. That’s why I became a police officer. She inspired me and helped me to become who I am today. She is responsible for who I am. Your grandmother is an amazing person, Mariam.”

“So she did do drugs, and skip school, and she was suspended?” Mariam whispered, feeling like someone had punched her in the gut. McKinney’s cheeks began to show signs of red again.

“It’s just between you and me, Mariam, but I can’t deny it. You really ought to be talking to your grandmother about this.”

“Thank you for your help, Mr. McKinney. I’ll stop by some other time,” Mariam said quickly, grabbing her backpack off the floor, and practically jogging out the door. By the time she was out, she was sprinting all the way home.

“Grandma?” said Mariam as soon as she got home, “Have you ever skipped school or done drugs or been suspended?”

“Why? Do you think that I have?” Mariam’s grandma asked. Mariam paused for a moment before answering.

“Well, Derek and Zane told me that you did after you dropped me off at school.”

“Oh, honey,” her grandmother said, “you can’t believe everything everyone tells you, especially not Derek and Zane. Of course I didn’t do drugs, or skip school, and I most certainly have never been suspended.” A single tear fell from Mariam’s eye and rolled down her cheek.

“Apparently, I can’t believe everything you say either,” said Mariam, more tears joining the first one. I found out the truth at police station.” Her grandmother’s stunned expression told Mariam everything that she needed to know. “I never could have imagined that Derek and Zane would be telling the truth and that you would be lying, Grandma.” With that, Mariam ran into her bedroom, barely able to see, her tears were so thick. She slammed the door shut behind her.

“Mariam?” said her grandma, knocking on Mariam’s bedroom door. “I’m coming in.”

“Go away,” Mariam shouted back. “I don’t want to talk to you.” Mariam’s grandma pushed open the door anyway. Mariam was sitting on her bed, facing the wall, away from her grandmother. Her grandmother sat down on the opposite side of the bed, watching her hands as if she expected that by staring at them, all could be well between herself and her granddaughter. Mariam’s grandmother took a deep breath.

“Mariam,” she said, “I know you don’t want to talk to me, and I can completely understand why. Really, I can. Nevertheless, I need to talk to you more than anything. Mariam, when I was growing up, my father wasn’t the best of fathers. He taught me, through his actions, that school was bad, and that getting high and being suspended was acceptable.” She paused, peering at Mariam, who still faced the wall.

“When I was a young woman,” her grandmother continued, I got married to an amazing person. Your grandfather.” She smiled fondly at the memory of him. “We got up and moved across town, which was as far away from my parents as I could get. We didn’t have much money, you see. After that, I never spoke to them again. By that point, I knew that drugs, alcohol, and skipping school were bad things. However, it was too late to do anything about the past. Your grandfather and I had only one child. Mary. Your mother. I never told her about my past. The only person who knew my secret was your grandfather. It worked out perfectly. She always looked up to your grandfather much more than she looked up to me, and consequently she never asked me about my childhood.” Mariam’s grandmother’s face was sad and old, and it had more lines on it than ever, as if recounting the story of her life made her ten years older. “When your mother got married to your father, it was the happiest day of my life. He was such a fine gentleman, I was sure that he would take better care of your mother than I ever did. Then, they had a baby girl. You. You were one of the most beautiful babies that I had ever seen.

But then, only two months after you were born, I told your parents that they should get out of the house and relax, go out to dinner or something. I told them that your grandfather and I would take care of you. That very night, coming home from

dinner, their car slid on some black ice. They hit a tree, and were instantly killed.” Her voice shook, and tears were rolling down her face, as well as down Mariam’s.

“I was now to raise another baby girl. Your grandfather passed away a month later, so I was left to do it all on my own. I assumed that I could get away without telling you about my past. I figured that I could raise you like I did your mother. I never should have assumed that. I never should have lied to you about my past. Once you asked, I should have come right out and told you. I didn’t. My only defense is this: I wanted you to grow up learning the right ideals. I didn’t want you to know that I skipped school and did all of those other bad things for fear that you would think those things were all right to do. I hope you can find it in your heart to forgive me. Mariam’s grandmother got up from the bed, pushed the door open, and left Mariam’s room.

Mariam sat still for a long time after her grandmother left. She sobbed silently, tears cascading down her cheeks. After a few minutes, she got up, and silently padded downstairs. Her grandmother was standing at the kitchen counter, reading an old recipe of Mariam’s mother, a few tears still marked her cheeks. However, when she saw Mariam, her eyes spilled over. She embraced her grandchild with open arms.

“I forgive you, grandma, I forgive you,” Mariam whispered, snuggling within the folds of her grandmother’s sweater. “I forgive you.”

## Epilogue

Fifty years later

“Tell us a story, grandma. Tell us a story.” The clamoring voices of the children reached the top of the stairs where their mother listened with a smile.

“Alright. One story before you go to bed. Only one. What do you want to hear?” The children were silent for a moment, and then announced their favorites.

“Sleeping Beauty.”

“No, the one about the guy on a deserted island, Rob’s son or something.”

“No, we heard that one yesterday. I wanna hear Cinderella.”

“How about a new story?” It was the grandmother speaking.

“Okay.”

“Yeah, that sounds all right.”

“Uh huh.”

“What’s this one called?” Grandmother paused for a moment before continuing. “This is my favorite story. It’s called Growing Up.” She started to speak, her voice sounding like beautiful bells to the children.

“Once upon a time, there was a girl named Mary. She had a grandma too, just like you. One day, while she was at the bus stop, reviewing her notes for science...” Mariam told the whole story to her grandchildren, pausing at all the right places and

raising her voice in excitement or anger or tenderness when the main character was crying. Upstairs, the mother of the children listened, leaning over the banister that she might hear better. It became her favorite story as well. She told it to her grandchildren, and they in turn told it to their grandchildren, and so on, until generations of children had heard and understood this story of love, trust and growing up.

Ann Clark