

The Hopes and Dreams Series
Salvadoran-Americans

Neighbors

A story based on history



Tana Reiff

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The Hopes and Dreams Series

by Tana Reiff

The Magic Paper (Mexican-Americans)
For Gold and Blood (Chinese-Americans)

Nobody Knows (African-Americans)

Little Italy (Italian-Americans)

Hungry No More (Irish-Americans)

Sent Away (Japanese-Americans)

Two Hearts (Greek-Americans)

A Different Home (Cuban-Americans)

The Family from Vietnam (Vietnamese-Americans)

Old Ways, New Ways (Jewish-Americans)

Amala's Hope (A Family from Syria)

Neighbors (Salvadoran-Americans)

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1 Ramón and Pilar

El Salvador, Central America, 1980

Óscar Romero,
Archbishop of San Salvador,
had more than Mass
to say today.

“I speak
to the army and police,”
Archbishop Romero began.
“We are all the same people.
You are killing
your own brother peasants.
Remember the voice of God:
‘Thou shalt not kill.’
God’s law must win.
In the name of God,
I beg you.
Stop the war!”*

** Adapted from the actual words of
Óscar Arnulfo Romero, Archbishop of
San Salvador, in his radio sermon on
March 23, 1980, the day before his death.*

All of a sudden,
a man burst in.
He fired a gun
straight at Archbishop Romero.
The archbishop fell to the floor,
shot in the heart.
His blood
turned his white clothes red.
He died on the spot.

News of Romero's death
spread throughout El Salvador.
Ramón and Pilar Samoya
in their village
near the city of San Miguel
heard about it on the radio.

The Samoyas
were young *campesinos*,
peasant farm workers.
Their house was made
of sticks and mud.
Ramón farmed
a little piece of land.
He grew corn
like the other farmers
in the village.

Pilar took care
of their two small children.
She carried water
from the river.
She ground corn
with a rock.
She cooked
on a round iron pan
over a wood fire.
Chickens and pigs
ran around the yard.
The young Samoya family
worked very hard.
Their life was simple but happy.
Until now.

Ramón and Pilar
knew about the civil war
in El Salvador.
They were surprised to hear
the Archbishop's strong words
against the new government.

“Archbishop Romero
is right,”
Ramón said.
“The killing must end.
It is time for peace.”

“Are we safe
here in our village?”
Pilar asked her husband.

“No one is safe,”
said Ramón.

“I have heard
of very bad things
happening to people,”
said Pilar.

“Some people
have disappeared!”

“People say ‘disappeared,’”
said Ramón.

“But it means dead.

The government
is the army,”

Ramón went on.

“Their ‘death squads’
go out and kill people.

A death squad
killed the Archbishop.

Then there are the *guerillas*.

They are against the government.

But they hurt and kill too.”

“Is it safe for us
to talk about this?”
asked Pilar.

“I don’t know,”
said Ramón.
“We should watch our words.
There are birds in the field.**
We can only hope
some good will come
of the Archbishop’s death.
Maybe now the world
will hear what’s going on
in El Salvador.”

***The English version of this expression is
(Be quiet) “The walls have ears.”*



2 Felipe

Over the next few months,
Ramón and Pilar
heard more stories.
Army death squads
were coming into villages
and killing people.
These stories were never
heard on the radio.
But word got around,
from person to person,
from village to village.

In some places,
guerilla forces
kept the government away.
Then the police
or a death squad
would show up
to fight the *guerillas*.
Many people were killed.
Some were killed
for speaking out
against the government.

Whole villages were burned
to the ground
for no clear reason.
This was war.

One night,
as the Samoya family slept,
Pilar heard screams.
All of a sudden,
she was wide-awake.
The screams were coming
from a neighbor's home.
Then she heard gunshots.
When the shooting stopped,
so did the screams.

“Ramón! Ramón!”
Pilar cried.
She shook her husband's arm.

“What's going on?”
Ramón asked.

“Outside!
Someone has been shot!”
cried Pilar.

Ramón looked outside.
He saw a big black dog
running toward their neighbor's home.
It was the black *cadejo**,
the force of evil.
The devil.
El cadejo was not real,
and yet it was.

Then Ramón and Pilar
heard a man's voice.
“You, *campesino*!
Come with us!”

“No, no,”
their neighbor Felipe begged.

**The legend of El Cadejo is very popular
in El Salvador and other parts of
Central America and South America.
Native ancestors believed the dog helped
people into the afterlife when they died.
When the Spaniards and Christianity
came to these places, the legend changed
to show the difference between good
(a white dog) and evil (a black dog).*

“They are taking him away!”
said Ramón.
“Why? Why?
And look!
His house is on fire!”

In no time at all
the little house
was a ball of fire.

Pilar began to cry.
“We are poor *campesinos*.
Why do they do this
to people like us?”

“Maybe Felipe
worked for the wrong people,”
said Ramón.
“Or maybe he did nothing.
I only wish
we could have helped
our neighbors.”



3 The Land

Their neighbor's home
was gone.
Felipe's wife was dead.
And Felipe had "disappeared."

Ramón looked
at the ashes on the ground.
"So this is how
a death squad works,"
he said sadly.

Village life carried on.
But a short time later,
word came
that the land would be taken.
The *campesinos*
held a meeting.

"We have always farmed,"
said one man.
"If we must leave,
what will we do?"

“We have three choices,”
said one man.
“We can do farm work
somewhere else.
We can go to the city
and look for work.
Or we can join the army.”

“Three bad choices,”
said Ramón.
“Farming somewhere else
may be no safer than here.
There are not enough jobs
in the city.
And I will not join the army
and kill Salvadorans!”

“If we stay here,
they will come and kill us!”
said another man.

“Then so be it!”
shouted Ramón.

As soon as he spoke,
he felt afraid.
What if the wrong people
found out he had said that?
He sat on his mat
and said nothing else.

Over the next weeks,
people began to leave the village.
The Samoyas stayed.

But then Ramón did something
he had never dreamed of.
He and some other *campesinos*
went to San Salvador,
the capital city.
They marched
against the government.
No one shot at them.
However, Ramón saw someone
taking pictures.
That made him afraid.

A few days after that,
a group of *guerillas*
came to the village.

Their faces were covered.
They carried machine guns.
“You must join us,”
they told Ramón.
“We will help you
stay on this land.”

“I don’t want to join,”
said Ramón.
“I don’t want to be
on one side or the other.
I just want
to farm this land.”

One of the *guerillas*
grabbed Ramón’s arms.
“Think it over, my friend,”
said the *guerilla*.
“Think it over well!”

Ramón went home
and told Pilar
about the *guerillas*.
“All I want is to farm
this little piece of land.
Is that too much to ask?”



4 An Old Neighbor

A few days
after the guerillas visited,
Ramón was walking back
from the field.
Five government soldiers
stopped him along the way.
They had long guns,
pointed at him.
One of the soldiers
pulled out a picture.
It was a picture of Ramón
from his day in San Salvador.

“Are you Ramón Samoya?”
asked the soldier.
“Are you working
for the *guerillas*?”

“No, I do not work
for either side,”
Ramón answered.

“Lie down on the road!”
ordered the soldier.
He pushed Ramón’s face
into the hot road
with his foot.
He pointed his gun
at Ramón’s head.

Ramón saw the black *cadejo*
running through his mind.

“No, no, no!
Please don’t kill me!”
Ramón begged.

“Are you ready to talk
or do you want to die?”
the soldier asked Ramón.

“I have nothing to tell you!”
said Ramón.

Just then, an old man
came along on the road.

“Stop!” called the old man.
“He is a hard-working
campesino.
Nothing else.
Don’t kill him.”

“Who are you?”
a soldier asked the old man.

“I have known Ramón
all his life.
He is my neighbor,”
said the old man.
“He has nothing to do
with the guerillas.”

The soldier took his foot
off Ramon’s head.
“Today you may go free,”
said the soldier.
“But if you know
what is good for you,
you will get out of here.
If you stay,
we will kill you.
We will give your bones
back to the earth!”

Then he kicked Ramón,
and the soldiers drove off.

Ramón finished walking
back to the village.
His head
was covered with blood.

He stayed up all night,
thinking about his next steps.
Ramón would never forget
what his neighbor said:
“He is my neighbor.”
But he knew
what he had to do.

“I must leave here,”
he told Pilar sadly.
“You and the children
will stay.
The trip will be too hard.
I will come back
as soon as things cool off.”

Glossary

Definitions and examples of certain words and terms used in the story

Chapter 1 ✦ Ramón and Pilar (page 1)

Archbishop – An important position in the Catholic church.

Omar Romero. Archbishop of San Salvador ...

mass – The main public religious celebration of the Catholic church.
... [the] Archbishop had more than mass to say today.

thou shalt – An older, more formal pronoun for “you,” and an older form of the verb “shall.”
Thou shalt not kill.

all of a sudden – Suddenly.
All of a sudden a man burst in.

burst in – to enter a place suddenly.
All of a sudden a man burst in.

spread – To go out from a place in all directions.

The news ... spread throughout El Salvador.

campesinos – Small peasant farmers.

The Samoyas were young campesinos.

mud – Wet dirt or earth. When it dries it can be used to make walls for a simple house.

Their house was made of sticks and mud.

ground (grind) – To break or mash (corn) into a powder for making bread.

She ground corn with a rock.

civil war – A war within a single country where citizens of the country are fighting each other.

Ramon and Pilar knew about the civil war.

squad – A small group of soldiers or police.

A death squad killed the archbishop.

guerillas – A group of fighters who fight against the government. In Spanish *guerra* is “war.”
Then there are the guerillas.

what’s going on – What is happening, the situation, at the moment.
Maybe now the world will hear what’s going on in El Salvador.

Chapter 2 ♣ Felipe (page 6)

word got around – The news became known everywhere.
But word got around, from person to person, from village to village.

speaking out – Complaining; demanding.
Some were killed for speaking out.

force – Power, strength.
The force of evil.

in no time at all – very fast; quick.
In no time at all the little house was a ball of fire.

Chapter 3 ❖ The Land (page 10)**carried (carry) on** – To continue.*Village life carried on.***found out** – To learn or discover something.*What if the wrong people found out?***never dreamed of** – To not think or believe something could be possible ...*Ramon did something he had never dreamed of.***Chapter 4 ❖ An Old Neighbor** (page 14)**get out of** – To leave; go away.*You will get out of here.***cool off** – To quiet down and be less dangerous.*I will come back as soon as things cool off.*