

BREAD
upon the
Waters

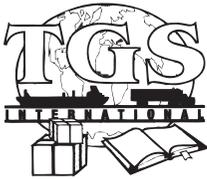
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Elizabeth Wagler

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Author's Preface

Everyone likes to read about the exploits of heroes. In reality, few of us are called to be Pauls or Peters. The majority of Christ's followers live out their lives in unrecognized obscurity.

The name of Gertel Wagner never appeared in any international publication, but all those who came in contact with her were blessed by her warmth and hospitality. She poured out her life as a loving mother, faithful in the daily grind of thankless tasks. She often prayed something similar to the Serenity Prayer—for grace to accept circumstances she could not change and for strength to do what she could to bring blessing to those around her. Even when her workload seemed overwhelming, she learned to share food with the hungry and the stranger.

Gertel's trials seemed insurmountable at times, yet she found a way to push through each one with God's help. Few people beyond her family ever knew what all she went through. Simply because of this, her story deserves to be told as a testimony to God's grace and a call to faithfulness in unseen service and generous dispersal of the blessings God has given His children.

Acknowledgments

- ∞ All praise to God, the great Enabler.
- ∞ Thanks to the Wagner family: Miss Gertie herself, who reached into her memory to tell me this story; Matt and Glenda Matute, who befriended and encouraged me; Sandra, who presided over the cooking pots and answered questions; Ken and Rosie Kratzer, who acted as liaison between me and the family in Belize.
- ∞ Thanks to Julie Glick for starting this project and giving me an outline to work with.
- ∞ Thanks to my husband Glen for encouraging me to write the story and driving me, many times, the three hours to Miss Gertie's house.
- ∞ Thanks to the editors at TGS for toiling behind the scenes to transform this story into a book.

A Summons

The elderly woman's head and shoulders rose jerkily into view as she climbed the flight of wooden stairs leading up to the house on stilts. Inside the house, seven-year-old Gertel¹ stopped sweeping with her grass broom. She straightened to watch her Hispanic neighbor ascend the last of the steps.

Señora Ramona reached the landing and paused in the open doorway, her keen black eyes focusing on the three little girls: Gertel with her broom and her two younger sisters, Marlene and Myrtle, who sat on the floor, their legs spread wide, rubbing the kernels from dry corn cobs. "*Buenos!*"² she greeted them.

"Come in," invited Gertel's mother. Muriel Morris was a slender Creole woman with a perpetually worried frown.

"Looks like everybody's busy here." Señora Ramona beamed an approving smile at the girls and maneuvered herself past the canvas mailbag hanging on a nail near the door. Gertel's father, Charles Morris, served as the village postmaster and always kept the mailbag in its place.

Señora Ramona lowered herself onto the stool Muriel pushed toward her, wiping her face with a yellow cloth. "Sure is hot today," she said. "Feels like we should have a good thunderstorm one of these days."

"It will come. It always does." Muriel sat down and pulled the baby, Charles, Jr., onto her lap. She was grateful for the break.

"I saw the boatman coming up here with a message for you this morning." Señora Ramona looked at Muriel, open curiosity in her wrinkled brown face. Even without telephones or radios, there were few secrets

¹ Gurt-EL.

² BOOEH-nohs. Short for *Buenos días*, a greeting in Spanish.

in a small village in British Honduras³ in the 1930s.

Muriel raised her eyebrows and nodded significantly toward the girls. She waved her arm at them. “You git,” she ordered.

Marlene and Myrtle jumped to their feet, glad for the chance to stop working. Corn kernels bounced from their skirts and rolled across the floor. Gertel bent to sweep the scattered kernels into a pile.

Muriel pointed her chin at her oldest daughter. “You too. Leave it.” Her tone was sharp and impatient.

The girls knew that when a friend came to visit their mother, the visitor was *her* company, not theirs. They were expected to disappear. Children did not participate in adult conversations, nor were they allowed to listen in on them.

Reluctantly Gertel propped the broom in its corner and clumped slowly down the steps to the yard. She rounded the corner of the house and padded across the grass to where her little sisters were untying the goat. “What you gonna do with her?” she asked.

“Gonna take her to play under the plantain. She likes to eat rotten plantain,” explained Myrtle.

“Well, watch her and don’t let her get away. There she goes! Run!” she shouted as the frisky animal took off, her frayed rope trailing behind her. Gertel spoke loudly enough for her mother to hear if she was listening. She wanted Mom to think she was under the plantain with the other girls.

When she was sure her sisters were occupied with the goat, she circled around through the standing dry corn and approached the house from the other side. On tiptoe she stealthily made her way to a spot under the house just beneath the open window. There she could hear Mom and Señora Ramona talking. They were speaking Spanish, but that didn’t bother Gertel. She knew Spanish because her dad was Hispanic. He had come here to British Honduras from Honduras. Many people in her village of Santa Rosa spoke Spanish, although the most common

³ British Honduras was renamed Belize in 1973.

language was English Creole.

She hunkered down on her heels, tucked her skirt around her legs, wrapped her arms around her knees, and held very still. She hardly dared to breathe. She had to know what message the boatman had brought to her mom.

About twice a week, a riverboat chugged up the river on its way to San Ignacio, a few miles upstream near the western border between British Honduras and Guatemala. Since San Ignacio was the end of the line, a day later the boat would pass again on its way back to Belize City. If there were supplies to unload for the small shop in the village or passengers to let off, the boat would pull over to the side and stop next to their little beach. That morning a riverboat had blown its whistle and tied up on the rocks beside the beach. From her vantage point in the yard, on the hill above the riverbank, Gertel had watched a crew member come puffing up the path to their house. "Message for you, Mrs. Morris," he had called out as he clambered up the stairs.

Gertel had moved closer but, hard as she tried, had been unable to hear the exchange between the messenger and her mom. When the man had gone, her mom had looked hard at Gertel, who was standing expectantly at the bottom of the stairs.

"Is Grandma coming?" she had asked. Grandma Liza lived in Belize City, far away at the other end of the river.

"Yes, she's coming," Mom answered, frowning slightly as she continued to study Gertel. "She said she'll be on the next boat. She could be here this week, depending on the river." Mom heaved a tired sigh. "So much to do," she muttered.

"What you gotta do, Mom? Grandma's skinny. She don't eat much."

"But she's . . ." Mom looked again at Gertel, almost kindly. Then she clamped her mouth shut, descended the stairs, and disappeared into the small thatched kitchen that stood to one side of the stairs.

Mom had seemed troubled. Was Grandma coming to take them to school? There had been talk of that. Gertel had never been to school. When she had begged to attend the little school in the village, Mom

had told her that when she was older she might send her to live with Grandma so she could go to a good school in Belize City. Could this be why Grandma was coming?

So Gertel sat under the open window, still as a coiled snake, and listened.

“My mother is coming to visit,” Mom confided to Señora Ramona. “She is on the way now and could be here in a few days. She says she wants to take Gertel and Marlene back to Belize City with her to send them to school.”

Under the house, Gertel felt as though a scorpion had stung her. She almost squeaked, but she held her breath and listened hard.

“It is time they went to school, especially Gertel. She is old enough,” Señora Ramona agreed. “But why send them all the way to Belize City? Why can’t they go to school right here in Santa Rosa? I know the school is not very big, but they could at least learn something.”

Gertel could almost hear her mother shaking her head. “This is a Roman Catholic school. My mother is loyal to the Anglican Church. She was not happy with me for marrying a Catholic, and she does not want my children to grow up Catholic. She wants to make sure they get a good education and are confirmed in the Anglican Church.”

“I keep forgetting you are not Catholic,” replied Señora Ramona. “I see you at worship here, so I forget.”

“I need to worship somewhere, and this is the only church here, so I go—but I am not Catholic.”

“Are you going to let them go?”

“Yes. It’s time they go to school.”

“I’ll miss that Gertel girl,” said Señora Ramona with a sigh. “She’s such a cheerful little thing.”

“She’s cheerful enough,” Mom admitted, “but she can be sassy too.”

Under the house, Gertel felt her insides tumble. She nearly stopped breathing altogether. Go to Belize City, that faraway, mysterious place? Live with her grandma, who was so ladylike? Learn to read? Oh, it was too much! She felt as though her insides would burst with nervousness and excitement.

“What will your husband say?” asked Señora Ramona upstairs.

“He will say I should do as I like,” answered Mom. “He will not be home for another month. By that time the girls will be gone.”

Their father drove a Caterpillar tractor for the lumber company that cut mahogany logs way up the river. He had to travel far into the virgin forest where the biggest trees stood, sometimes even across the border into Guatemala. He stayed away for months at a time, so they saw him only occasionally.

Just then Gertel heard Myrtle wailing. The sound was headed for the house. Those girls! They were always fighting about something. She jumped to her feet, remembering that she was supposed to be with them. It was her job to keep them happy. When the younger girls quarreled and fussed, her mom would say, “Gertel, what’s wrong with those girls? Did you do something to them?” As the oldest, she was responsible for what any of them did.

Myrtle ran toward Gertel, howling. “Marlene hit me. She’s mean,” she tattled.

Marlene was right behind her. “She let go of the rope. She let the goat go.” She gave Myrtle another shove for good measure, and Myrtle hit her back.

“Where is Chocho now?” asked Gertel, positioning herself between the two little roosters who kept trying to assail each other.

“She ran down to the river, and it’s all Myrtle’s fault,” said Marlene, aiming a kick at Myrtle behind Gertel’s back.

“Then let’s go get her,” said Gertel. All three of them ran down the trail to the river to look for the tricky goat, and the quarrel was soon forgotten.

When Gertel was washing the dishes that evening, she felt her mom’s eyes on her. “Your dress is too short. Grandma won’t like that.”

Gertel couldn’t help it. The question just popped out. “Are we going to Belize City with Grandma? Am I really going to school?”

Mom whirled to glare at her. “You were listening!” She raised the big spoon she had been using to stir the boiling corn and took a threatening

step toward Gertel. “How many times have I told you not to listen when I visit with my friends? You little sneak! I’ll lash you, I will.”

But Gertel was quicker. At the first syllable, she had dropped her dishcloth and scooted around to the far side of the table. Mom advanced with her spoon, but she had the baby in her other arm. When the corn in the kettle suddenly started to boil over, she had to run quickly to stir it down. In that moment Gertel escaped outside, where she stayed until bedtime.

By then, Mom seemed to accept that Gertel knew about the plans for the girls to go to school in Belize City, and she chose to forget just how Gertel had learned of them.

2

The River

Rub, rub, rub. Gertel scrubbed the small shirt against the rock, working the soap into a lather. She and her mother were knee deep in the river, doing the laundry. The little girls played at the water's edge, and baby Charles slept in a feed sack hammock dangling from a tree branch. Overhead, big, fluffy clouds floated in a deep blue sky. From between the clouds, the sun beat down, roasting their backs. Gertel worked fast, knowing that as soon as she was done with her small pile of laundry, she could throw herself into the water and cool off.

She loved the river. The path down the hill from the village ended at a wide, sandy beach. The water was shallow here, just right for washing and bathing. When they finished washing, the girls helped Mom drape the clothes over the low bushes along the edge of the beach. Then Mom picked up the baby and headed up the path to boil cassava for their lunch.

Gertel splashed back into the river and threw herself flat out into the water. The coolness felt so good on her hot skin. She hated to feel sticky and sweaty and was glad the river was close enough that she could bathe many times a day if she felt hot or dirty. She swam like a frog, kicking both legs at the same time, her knees together and her arms reaching straight out in front of her. She floated face down, her eyes open wide so she could watch the fish darting through the water. She liked looking for surprises on the sandy bottom. Sometimes she saw a turtle, and often there were snails on the sand under the water. People said there were alligators in the river, but she had never seen one.

The river was wide here. Huge trees trailed their branches over the low banks, making the water under them appear dark green. The water

was clear, clean enough to drink. Close to the banks, the water flowed lazily. But the girls were warned not to venture out too far into the middle of the river, where the current ran swiftly as though in a hurry to get somewhere.

Gertel gazed at the river whenever she could. Every morning she would run to the open doorway of their house and stand at the top of the stairs looking down the hill to the river that sparkled and glinted between the trees. Sometimes the rising sun turned the water pink and orange. She would stand there with her hands clasped behind her back, leaning against the doorframe until the rosy shades turned to sparkling crystal.

When she had to watch her little brother, she would often carry him down to the riverbank and sit on a rock under the trees and just watch the water flowing on and on. Where did all the water come from? Where did it go? What did it see as it hurried on? Did it ever stop? Why did it never turn around and go back to where it came from?

She stood in the river now and tossed a small stick into the current. She watched the river carry it away, away, until it was out of sight. Now, in just a few days, the river was going to carry her, little Gertel Morris, away on its back. She shivered at the thought. She thought about how, once she was on that river, she would not be able to stop it. She would just have to keep going. Even if she changed her mind and decided she didn't want to go, she couldn't stop it. Like a stick floating on the surface of the water, she was at the mercy of the unceasing river. She would have to go wherever it took her.

After a rain, the river became angry. The water was chocolate brown, and sometimes it rose up to the top of the bank and even tried to climb the hill. The swirling waters carried trees and sticks and pieces of lumber along with it. Then people feared the river. But it usually settled down and cleaned itself up after a few days.

Sometimes big log booms would come floating down the river. Huge logs, tied together into rafts, glided by like silent ships on their way to the dock in Belize City where the river emptied into the Caribbean Sea. Gertel had never seen the sea. She wondered if it was clear like the river.

The river was their highway—their connection to the rest of the world. Riverboats chugged up and down the waterway, carrying passengers, freight, and mail to the villages scattered along its shores. Gertel's father traveled on a riverboat to go to work upriver in the jungle where the big mahogany trees grew. Any day now the riverboat from downstream would bring Grandma to their dock, and then it would carry her and Marlene away.

"Let's catch some fish, Gertel," begged Marlene from the shallow water. Gertel swished back to shore and ran to the hollow place in a nearby tree where they kept their fishing lines. She pulled out a stick with fishing line wound around it for each of them. Little hooks dangled from the end of the fishing line. Carefully she unwound the lines and handed one to her sister.

"What'll we put on for bait?" asked Marlene.

"Run up to the house and ask Mom for some corn," suggested Gertel.

She was surprised when Marlene scooted off up the hill without a fuss. Usually she didn't want to do what Gertel told her to. *She must really want to go fishing today*, Gertel concluded.

Soon she was back with a handful of cooked corn. Gertel fixed a kernel on each hook. The girls waded out into the water. "You stay right here," she ordered Marlene. She went out a little deeper and dropped her hook into the water. Soon there was a jerk on the line, and she pulled in a little shiny fish about five inches long. Marlene caught two fish before she tired of the sport, and Gertel caught three more.

Gertel wound up the fish lines, put them back in their hidey-hole, and picked up the calabash⁴ with the six little fish in it. They sure would be good, fried with their cassava. She followed her sisters up the hill.

"We caught fish," reported Marlene, as though she had caught most of them. "Can you fry them for us?"

Mom gave the fish a quick glance. "They're too little to clean. If you want them, you will have to clean them yourself."

⁴ A gourd commonly dried and used as a container.

Gertel cleaned the fish. This was how it was. When there was work to do, the younger girls ran off to play and she ended up doing it all. She didn't really mind. She'd almost rather be working than being in the middle of the other girls' frequent squabbles.

That night when the girls were alone in their bed, Marlene confided in Gertel. "I don't want to go to school," she whimpered.

"Doesn't matter whether you want to go or not. If Grandma says she is going to take us, we go," Gertel told her unsympathetically. She, on the other hand, thrilled at the idea of going. She wanted to learn to read and do sums. She wanted to leave the village where all she ever did was wash clothes and sweep floors and help make tortillas and try to keep her sisters from squabbling. She had the vague feeling that, for some reason, her mom liked her sisters better than her. She always seemed to take the brunt of her mom's disapproval. Certainly living with Grandma would be better than living at home.

On Saturday afternoon she helped Mom prepare the church for the Sunday service. Since her father served as village chairman, it was their family's job to take care of the little wooden building that served as church and school. On most Sundays a few worshipers came to pray and say the rosary, but every few weeks the priest would come from San Ignacio to hear confessions, conduct Mass, and serve communion.

They swept the floor and dusted off the school benches. Her mother arranged a freshly washed white cloth on the table and set a new candle in the carved wooden holder. She made sure there was incense in the censer. The incense was a lump of hardened resin from a tree in the jungle. Gertel thought it stank, but she liked to watch the thin column of smoke rising into the air. It reminded her of prayers going up to God.

Remembering what Ramona had said, Gertel asked, "Is the Anglican church different from this one?"

"Yes," said Mom.

"How different?"

"We don't say the rosary and we don't pray to Mary."

Gertel had watched and listened as her Catholic neighbors knelt and

fingering the rosary beads. “Hail Mary, full of grace . . .” She could say the rosary herself in Spanish or English just from hearing others say it so often.

“I worship here cuz it’s the only church here, but I’m not a Catholic,” Mom said with a defiant set to her chin. “I was married in St. Mary’s Anglican Church in Belize City. According to custom, we should have been married here in your father’s village. The priest who comes here to give communion scolded me once for not getting married in my husband’s church, but I told him, ‘I was married in front of the altar in the Anglican church. If we had been married here, you would not have let us stand at the front; you would have made us stand in the back because I am not a Catholic, and then I would not have felt like I was married.’ He didn’t say any more about it because it was true. Maybe someday there will be an Anglican church here. There is one in San Ignacio where you were baptized, but that is too far away to go all the time.”

Gertel didn’t know anything about it. She liked to go to church with her mom. They sat on a bench and the priest read out the prayers, some of them in a language she did not understand, but they sounded like holy words. At times the congregants responded in unison. She had even learned some of the strange phrases by memory. She thought it would be fun to have a rosary and count the beads and pray. Sometimes the girls played church with an old string of beads they had found down by the river. She wondered what the Anglican service would be like. She would soon find out—when Grandma came.

3

Grandma

Gertel heard the dull *thrump-thrump* of the motor before the long, hollow sound of the boat whistle echoed from the river. She lurched out of the hammock slung between two palm trees and raced for the house, shouting, “Mom! Mom, the boat!” They had been waiting for days. Surely Grandma would be on this boat.

Mom dropped her broom, scooped up the baby, and took Myrtle by the hand. “Come, girls,” she called. “Let’s go see Grandma.” Gertel and Marlene hurried down the path after Mom to meet their grandmother.

And there she was. On the rocks beside the boat landing, surrounded by numerous bags and boxes, stood a tall, straight figure in a long, full-skirted green dress and a wide-brimmed white hat. She did not look as though she had just stepped off a boat. She looked as though she were going to a party.

“Ma!” called Mom as she hurried to meet the new arrival.

Grandma Liza waited until they were close enough that she did not have to shout. “Hello,” she said in a quiet, controlled voice. Gertel and Marlene tried to hide behind their mother’s skirts.

Grandma leaned down and held out her hand to Gertel. “Hello, Gertel,” she said. Mom’s firm hand guided Gertel out from behind her so she could whisper hello and shake hands with Grandma. Grandma greeted Marlene and Myrtle too. Then she straightened her shoulders and adjusted her high collar. “The trip took ten and a half days,” she reported.

“Da boat get stuck?” blurted Gertel in wonder.

Grandma pulled her eyebrows together and frowned at Gertel. “Speak English,” she commanded. “Creole is not a language.”

Gertel hung her head, ashamed. Her mother had warned her that

Grandma spoke correct English. She did not approve of the butchered English Creole that was spoken in most of British Honduras.

Gertel remembered what else her mother had told her about Grandma. Grandma had been born in Jamaica, an island out in the Caribbean Sea. Her mother was a black Jamaican woman, but her father was an Englishman. When her mother died, her father had brought her by boat to British Honduras to live with an aunt. On the journey from Jamaica, her father died and was buried at sea. Grandma had been raised by her British aunt in Belize City. When the little orphan girl had first arrived, she spoke nothing but the Creole tongue she had learned in Jamaica. She was sent to an Anglican school run by the British people in Belize City. There, the children teased her about her funny way of speaking. She had learned to speak proper British English, and that was all she ever spoke now. She did not allow her children or grandchildren to speak anything else to her.

Lugging her grandma's small bag, Gertel trailed after the adults and wondered if she was going to like living with Grandma after all. She was so strict.

Up at the house, Grandma sat on a chair, her back straight, and visited while Mom patted out tortillas for supper. Gertel stood by the door, her hands clasped behind her back, listening to the clipped, distinct words that Grandma used. They were not hard to understand, but Gertel didn't know if she could ever learn to speak that way. She would just have to keep her mouth shut around Grandma until she learned good English.

Grandma looked over at Gertel, standing in the doorway with her hands clasped behind her back, and chuckled quietly. "She still stands like that," she said to Mom.

"Just like an iguana." Mom laughed too. "She was born that way."

Gertel had heard the story before, but she enjoyed hearing Mom repeat it.

"I'll never forget it," Mom recalled now. "The evening before that child

was born, her daddy came home with a trussed⁵ iguana. You know how they tie their legs up behind their backs so they can't crawl away. It was already dark, and I had gone to bed, so he just laid that iguana down on my pile of firewood under the *comal*.⁶ When I got up in the morning, the kitchen was still dark. I reached under the *comal* for a stick to start the fire and I laid hold of that iguana's tail. I screamed loud enough to wake the dead, and I dropped it like a hot coal! I thought it was a snake. I was so frightened I shook like a leaf for an hour. I was mighty mad at my husband for playing such a trick."

"And that night your baby girl was born with her hands behind her back like a trussed iguana," finished Grandma, laughing quietly. "I remember how surprised I was to see a baby appear like that."

"And she still likes to stand like that," Mom said as she nodded at Gertel standing in her familiar pose against the doorframe.

Gertel didn't know what to think about the iguana story. She stood like that because it felt right. Maybe it was because she liked to be busy, and if she had nothing else to do with her hands, they could hang onto each other behind her back. She smiled to herself, hung her head, and rubbed her bare toe in an arc along the floor.

"I never did like iguana," Grandma went on. "Grandpa likes it. When we were first married, he wanted me to cook it, but I told him if he wants iguana, he will have to cook it himself. Too much like a snake for me. One time he brought an iguana home and asked if he could take my cooking pot to his brother's place so they could cook it for him. I let him take it. The next time I started to cook rice in that pot, it smelled like iguana. I took that pot, rice and all, and threw it out the door. I couldn't stand the smell. I told him he is never to lend my pots to anyone again."

The girls enjoyed listening to Mom and Grandma tell stories of the olden days. Mom and Grandma looked alike. They were both slim with

⁵ Tied up with rope, string, or a cord.

⁶ (koh-MAHL) A large, flat disc of metal or clay on which tortillas are baked.

fine, wavy hair and creamy brown skin, unlike Gertel. She was dark and had short, frizzy hair like her dad. Marlene had pretty hair like Mom and Grandma. Maybe that was why Mom seemed to like her better.

Even though Grandma was strict, Gertel could sense her love. She felt that Grandma would be fair. Perhaps she would not always be displeased with her as Mom was. Gertel decided she wanted to go live with her in that faraway, storybook Belize City.

The next few days were busy ones spent washing and packing the girls' few dresses, shoes, and hair ribbons into a satchel, as well as preparing food for the journey down the river. Grandma did not expect the trip to take very long this time because it had rained and the river was higher. On the way up there had been many low spots and exposed rocks that the crew had had to winch the boat over, but now they would be going downriver with the current. Grandma hoped it would take only two or three days.

While Mom and Grandma made johnnycakes⁷ and powder buns⁸ and fried chicken to take along, Gertel wandered across the path that led through the community pasture. White egrets flew up from around the cows where they were picking ticks from the animals' hides. *No cows or egrets in Belize City*, she thought. She turned down a narrow path that led to a small thatched hut surrounded by red and white hibiscus bushes. "*Buenos!*" she called.

"Come in," answered a voice in Spanish. As Gertel entered the dim hut, Señora Ramona stood up, brushing the masa⁹ crumbs from her colorfully woven wraparound skirt. She welcomed Gertel with a hug and an endearment: "So my little *chica*¹⁰ has come to say goodbye." She chased a chicken off a low stool for Gertel to sit on. "Are you happy? Do you want to go to Belize City?" she asked, pulling her dark eyebrows together and staring hard at Gertel.

⁷ Johnnycakes are sometimes called "journey cakes"; they are similar to baking powder biscuits.

⁸ Same as a johnnycake, only sweeter.

⁹ Flour made of dried corn.

¹⁰ (CHEE-kuh) An endearing term for a young girl.

“It doesn’t matter if I want to go or not, I have to go,” said Gertel, watching Señora Ramona pat out tortillas and lay them on the *comal*. “But, yes, I think I want to go,” she added.

“Well, don’t forget your old friend,” warned Señora Ramona.

“I won’t.”

“And don’t forget your Spanish,” added Señora Ramona, shaking her finger at Gertel. “When you come back, I don’t want you to forget how to talk to me.”

Gertel couldn’t imagine that she would forget how to speak Spanish any more than she would forget how to count, but she said nothing. Señora Ramona gave her several tortillas to carry home, and she wandered back across the field, stopping to watch a heron circle and land in the river. No river in Belize City. But there was the sea. She wondered if she would go swimming in the sea. Grandma said the sea was salty. What would it be like to swim in salty water? You surely couldn’t drink it. Ugh! Although they collected rain water in a barrel for drinking, the girls often drank water straight out of the river because it was so clear. Grandma scolded them; she did not drink river water.

“When will the boat come?” Gertel asked Grandma that evening while they were eating their rice and beans.

“Children should not speak unless they are spoken to,” Grandma reminded her sternly. “That is one of my rules, and you might as well learn it now.” Gertel gulped and looked down at her plate. How could she ever remember all of Grandma’s strict rules?

Riverboat Journey

At last the day of departure arrived. The boatmen helped Grandma step from the rocks into the boat and take a seat on the bench along the side of the long, narrow, flat-bottomed craft. Gertel and Marlene scrambled in after her. Their bags were loaded onto the barge that was pulled behind the boat, except for the basket that held their food; that sat on the floor at Grandma's feet. Mom handed over two long-necked gourds filled with drinking water, and Grandma quickly tied them with string to one of the poles that held up the roof of the boat. She dropped the gourds over the side of the boat so the river would keep the water cool inside the gourds. With a blast of the whistle, the motor sputtered to life, and the boat slowly pushed out from shore.

"Goodbye!" they called as they waved at Mom, Myrtle, and baby Charles, standing alone on the rocks. The girls were too excited about riding in the boat to be sad. Away they went, out into the middle of the wide river. Soon they were rushing along at what seemed to them a fast rate. The trees on the riverbank became a green blur as the current aided the motor in carrying the boat downstream. Gertel stood up to look behind and watch the barge following them. One crewman stood amid the bundles and parcels with a long pole in his hand, ready to push the barge away from the bank or any floating logs that might get in its way. The captain sat on a stool near the back of the boat, his hand on the tiller of the motor. One corner was blocked off with boards; that was the kitchen where a cook prepared food for the crew and the passengers. Two more crewmen, also holding long poles, held their positions, one on the front by the big winch and one on the side.

Two other passengers traveled with them. One was a farmer traveling

to Belize City to sell a load of corn. The other, a Hispanic man from across the border, was going to visit his aunt at a village down the river.

“Look at the iguana in that tree!” Marlene cried, pointing to a large orange reptile spread full length on a big branch that hung over the river.

“And see the morning glories?” Gertel pointed to a purple-pink curtain of flowers that cascaded over the trees on the other side. Oh, there was so much to see! The girls twisted and turned on their wooden seat so they wouldn’t miss anything.

“Sit still, girls,” complained Grandma. “Next you’ll be in the river.” Gertel thought it would be fun to jump into the river, but right here in the middle it might be too deep.

Soon they stopped at a cluster of houses nestled close to the riverbank under some spreading mango trees. A man loaded several bunches of plantain onto the barge and climbed into the boat. An hour later there was a “halloo” from the far bank, and the boat pulled over to take on two lumbermen returning from their stint in the jungle.

Sometimes the river flowed beside pastures where white hump-backed cattle grazed in knee-deep grass. At other times they crept alongside jungle so thick with tangled vines, it was like a dark wall on either side of the river.

“What do you think is hiding in the jungle?” whispered Gertel to Marlene. “Lions? Tigers? Bears?”

Marlene shuddered and moved closer to her sister.

“There are no lions or bears in British Honduras,” said Grandma, who had overheard them. Her fingers kept right on working the crochet hook while she sat primly on the rough wooden seat. “There are jaguars, which some people call tigers, and tapirs, and plenty of snakes.”

The girls felt safer when they saw some men chopping through the jungle close to the riverbank. Their machetes swung rhythmically back and forth as the high grass and smaller trees fell in swaths on either side of them.

At noon Grandma opened her basket, handed them each a piece of chicken, and told them to help themselves to the johnnycakes. Gertel leaned over the side of the boat as she nibbled on her cake. Some large

crumbs flaked off and dropped into the water. She watched them float to the back of the boat. She dropped some more crumbs on purpose and was delighted when a school of small fish swirled to the surface and nibbled at the crumbs. Marlene, seeing her, joined the game. The girls had fun dropping crumbs and watching the fish come up for them.

“Stop wasting food,” snapped Grandma. “I didn’t make that food for the fish to eat.” But she didn’t sound too cross. “I suppose the fish have to eat too,” she added, and her mouth turned up a bit at the corners. “The good Lord has blessed us with plenty of food to eat. We should always be willing to share with those less fortunate. If we feed the fish, someday the fish might be food for somebody—so go ahead and drop your crumbs.” She chuckled softly at her little joke.

As the afternoon sun beat down, the travelers were grateful for the roof over their heads. The breeze across the water kept them from feeling too hot, and the girls leaned over and dangled their hands in the water to cool off.



A river boat on the Belize River like the one Gertel and her sister traveled on.

Before dark, the boat pulled into a landing with high, steep banks. Two small boys scrambled down the narrow path from the top, toting a bulging sack. “Oranges!” they called out. They dragged their sack to the boat and passed out oranges to the passengers. The cook had made rice and beans for everyone, and the oranges were a welcome treat. Grandma sliced their oranges in half, and the cook let them sprinkle some red pepper on the surface before they sucked the juice out of them.

“Why did the boy bring us oranges?” asked Marlene.

“He is sharing,” Grandma explained. “Most people here are glad to share their abundance with others. His pa likely has a good crop of oranges, and he knew the boat passengers would enjoy them. I hope you girls are always generous. The Good Book says, ‘Freely ye have received, freely give.’ ”

The girls were allowed to bathe in the river, and they splashed and played happily in the clear water. After pulling clean dresses over their heads, they climbed back into the boat. For the adult passengers, the crew had tied hammocks across the boat from the roof supports. Grandma made beds for the girls on the floor of the boat under her hammock. As darkness fell and the cicadas started to vocalize, the crew unrolled tarps that were tied to the edge of the roof. These would keep the mosquitoes out. Everybody was all snug and secure on the little riverboat.

The familiar nighttime jungle chorus swelled around them: the humming of insects, the intermittent cries of nighthawks, and the faraway roaring of howler monkeys. The gentle rocking of the water lulled the girls to sleep.

Their journey continued the next day. Gertel was surprised at how winding the river was. She always thought the river flowed straight east to Belize City. “Oh my, no!” exclaimed Grandma. “It twists and turns and loops back on itself. Right now we are moving north. The river empties into the sea north of the city.”

Before noon, they came to a place where rocks stuck out of the water. The captain steered the boat closer to the bank where the water rushed through a narrow rock-free channel. He shut off the motor, and the crew members used their poles to keep the boat from brushing the rocks on either side. All at once the boat stopped with a jerk. They were stuck. The men worked hard with their poles to move the boat, but it would not budge.

“Okay, men. We’ll have to winch ’er,” called the captain, maneuvering around the people and bundles to reach the big wooden spool, wound with heavy steel cable, which was mounted on the front of the boat.

One of the men jumped off into the water, carrying the hook at the end of the cable. He scrambled over the rocks while the cable unwound behind him. Once at the shore he pushed his way along the edge of the jungle to a large cabbage bark tree ahead. There he wrapped the cable around the tree and fastened it with the hook. Then he waved an arm in signal.

“Everybody out,” called the captain. “Get all the weight off we can.” The girls were glad for a chance to get into the water. They struggled around and over the rocks to the shore from where they could watch the action.

On the boat, a crewman began to wind the big handle of the winch. The other men used their poles to push against the rocks. The male passengers helped by pushing the boat from behind. Slowly the boat began to move, and soon it was floating again. The passengers waded up to the boat and climbed in.

“That was fun,” said Marlene.

“Humph!” grunted Grandma, trying to arrange her wet skirt so it would dry quickly. “Not if you have to do it half a dozen times a day.”

The hot sun made the girls sleepy. They leaned against Grandma, one on each side, and closed their eyes. When they awoke, they were still chugging down the river, rounding one bend after another.

“Look at the monkeys,” called Marlene, pointing. In the trees, hanging out over the river, were dozens of black howler monkeys. The girls were used to hearing the howlers roar at night, but they had never been so close to them before. Here the channel ran close to the bank, so their boat floated right under the branches where the monkeys perched. The girls held their hands over their heads. They were afraid one of the animals might drop on top of them. The monkeys’ beady, black eyes stared down at the girls. Reaching out with their long, hairy arms, the monkeys swung from branch to branch. One little baby rode on his mother’s back. Another one threw some nuts down on the boat roof as they passed by. They acted so much like little people.

At one village a girl carrying a dressed chicken came down to the boat landing. Seeing a girl her own age, she shyly handed the chicken to Gertel.

Gertel looked at Grandma doubtfully. "Take it to the cook," Grandma instructed. Turning to the girl, she said, "Thank you very much."

Gertel scrambled over the bags and bundles to the back of the boat and stood on the bench to hand the chicken over the low wall to the cook. He grinned, took it from her, and said, "Dat go good witt our rice and beans."

Gertel stood and watched him expertly chop the chicken into pieces and fry it in a pan of lard. Here at the back of the boat the vibration from the motor rattled the bench so much her teeth chattered. She soon returned to her seat.

"The river is bigger now," Gertel pointed out to Grandma.

"Yes, see there? Another river has just emptied into this one. All along the way, other rivers and creeks join this one. All the water runs into the sea."

This was a wonder. If all the water ran into the sea, where did it go then? She dared not ask Grandma too many questions, but she was learning that even if Grandma was strict, she was also kind.

During the afternoon a black cloud rolled over the sun, and they saw the tops of the cohune palm trees swaying in the breeze. Then raindrops began to pelt the roof of the boat, and a spear of lightning shot from the cloud, followed by a rumble of thunder that was louder than the boat motor. The captain shut off the motor and threw out the anchor. While their small vessel rode the waves caused by the wind, the rain dumped down, lightning lit up the sky, and thunder crashed. The girls were used to thunderstorms. Squalls were almost daily fare during the rainy season, but it was a little scarier to be out in a boat on the water during a storm. They were glad when the rumbles moved off to the west and the sun came out from behind the cloud.

That night they tied up at a place where the houses were close enough to the river that they could see the glow of cooking fires from open doorways. The girls romped about on a narrow sandbar and splashed in the water before settling down for the night in the bottom of the boat. Tomorrow, Grandma told them, they would arrive in Belize City.

5

Belize City

The next morning at one of the many villages they passed, a small boy handed out warm corn tortillas to the passengers, now numbering a dozen. All the passengers seemed to be headed to the city to buy or sell or visit.

Small trees grew in the water, so it was hard to tell where the river ended and the bank began. The water appeared to spread out into the surrounding forest. In some places spindly trees grew masses of roots like curved claws reaching down into the water. “Mangrove swamps,” said Grandma. “The sea is just over there.” She pointed with her crochet hook.

The girls knelt on their bench and peered through the thick mangroves, but they couldn’t see the sea.

“What is that?” squeaked Marlene, pointing to an enormous wooden structure ahead that towered above the river.

“That is the Haulover Bridge,” explained a male passenger. “We are leaving the river now and entering Haulover Creek. The river empties into the sea just over there, but this creek flows on down into the center of Belize City.”

The girls stared in fascination as they drew nearer to what looked like a huge wooden spider web. The only bridge they had ever seen was a big log lying across the creek near their home. A horse pulling a wagon was trotting across the bridge just as they passed under it, and the girls ducked instinctively. Gertel didn’t know what held the thing up. Maybe it would crash onto her head. It took only a moment to slip under the bridge. When she turned around, the horse and wagon were just reaching the end of it. She didn’t know if she would ever want to ride across the Haulover Bridge.

The waterway was narrow now. Other boats maneuvered around them on the river: dugout canoes and small boats with no roofs. Gertel feared they would crash into each other.

Some of the banks had been built up with rocks. The water was not as clear as it was out in their western district of Cayo. Gertel could no longer see the fish that had swirled around the boat along the way from her village.

More houses appeared along the banks. They were made of wood and built on poles like their house at home. Some were painted bright blue or green or pink, but most were just gray weathered boards. They rose from muddy, cluttered yards. Only a few tufts of grass and scattered trees grew around them. The houses became closer together as they neared the center of town. The water grew dirtier and dirtier. The shallow sides of the creek were strewn with rusty tin cans, broken boards, scraps of cloth, and food garbage. And the smell! The city stank. It smelled like their outhouse on a hot, sultry day. Gertel clamped her fingers over her nose.

At last they reached the landing site at the Swing Bridge. This bridge was not as high as the Haulover, and Grandma explained that it was a bridge that could move out of the way if a tall vessel needed to pass through. How could a bridge move? Such strange things they had in the city.

At the landing, several burros¹¹ hitched to two-wheeled carts were waiting to carry goods or passengers. A hubbub of voices rose as the cab men shouted, the passengers greeted waiting friends, and little boys darted in and out, watching the activity. Grandma directed the loading of their luggage onto one of the carts and gave instructions to the cab man to deliver it to her house on Euphrates Avenue. "We can walk," she told another driver who offered to give them a ride. "It is not far."

Grasping a little girl firmly by each hand, Grandma marched away from the water, between high brick buildings. Here there were no dirt

¹¹ Small donkeys.

paths or grassy meadows or green trees, only brick and cement and cobblestone. They turned a corner and walked alongside a canal. The canal was even dirtier and smellier than the creek. Straight sides ended in water that looked like tea, with all kinds of rubbish floating on the surface. *No wonder Grandma didn't want to hear about drinking water from the river,* thought Gertel. This water was not like their clear, clean river.

The girls' heads swung from side to side as they trotted to keep up with Grandma. So many houses, so many children playing in the streets and under the houses, so many dogs sniffing at the garbage, and so many corners. Gertel began to wonder if what her uncle had told her was true. When he heard she was going to Belize City, he had teased her by saying, "Ha! In Belize City the houses move around. The streets move around. You'll get lost for sure."

She didn't really believe the houses were moving around, but they all looked alike. And they had turned so many corners it seemed they might soon arrive right back at the Swing Bridge where they had come from. How would she ever find her way around in this place?

"This is it," announced Grandma, leading the way up a flight of wooden steps into a small house. Gertel caught a glimpse of bright red flowered curtains and a checkered tablecloth before Grandma opened a door into a tiny bedroom where the one bed took up most of the space.

"This is where you'll sleep. You will share the room with Lolette."

Mom had told them that their cousin Lolette already lived with Grandma. Lolette's mother was Grandma's oldest daughter. As was often done, she had given her first child to her mother to raise. Older ladies needed someone to fetch and carry for them after their own children had left home. Lolette had lived with her grandma since she was a toddler.

Lolette came soon after they arrived. She was just a few months older than Gertel and was delighted to have two cousins to play with. "You can share my bed," she invited generously. She showed the girls where to hang their extra dresses and made room on the single shelf for their underclothes. Her many little braids swung back and forth as she sat on the bed, bouncing up and down in excitement.

“Where is Grandpa?” asked Marlene.

“He’s working. He’ll be home tonight.”

“Who cooked for Grandpa when Grandma was gone?” asked Gertel.

Lolette looked at her in surprise and then rolled over on the bed in a fit of giggles. “Why, Grandpa *is* a cook. That’s what he does all day. He is a stevedore.¹² He works at the dock, cooking for the dock workers. He can cook just as well as Grandma. And sometimes they ask him to go onto a big ship in the harbor and cook for the sailors. They like to eat rice and beans.”

“I like to eat rice and beans too,” said Marlene.

“Let’s go see if Grandma has food ready for us,” said Lolette. She led the way into the little kitchen attached to the back of the house by a short veranda.

“You girls go on and sit down at the table. I’ll bring your food, and you can sit up and eat like civilized people,” said Grandma. “I want you girls to learn good manners.”

She made them bow their heads while she recited a blessing, and then the girls happily dug into their large bowls of rice and beans. There was nothing better, they agreed.

That night the little girls from the country watched, fascinated, as a man carrying a ladder and a can of gas walked down the street. High on a pole near their house hung a gas lantern. The man stopped by their pole and propped his ladder against it. Then quick as a cat, he was up the ladder and had lifted the globe off the lamp. He pulled a rag out of his back pocket and wiped the glass, then filled the lamp from his can and lit it with a match. A circle of golden light lit up the street beneath the lamp on a pole.

“Who puts them out in the morning?” asked Marlene.

“The same man,” answered Lolette. “He comes back around 6:00 and blows them all out.”

“You mean he has to climb the ladder and do it?”

¹² Someone whose job is loading and unloading ships.

“Yup.”

“What a lot of work!” Gertel marveled.

Lolette shrugged. “It’s his job.”

The girls stood in a row at the edge of their yard and watched as the lamplighter moved down the street and repeated his act at the next pole. All about them, little pinpricks of light glimmered through the darkness. Lights on poles! What wonders would they see next? The poles were far apart and the light so feeble that they left a large, dark expanse between them. Gertel thought that if she had to go down the street after dark, she would run as fast she could from one puddle of light to the next.

Before they crawled into bed that night, Gertel asked Lolette where the outhouse was.

“It’s in the back yard,” she answered. “But we don’t go outside after dark. Here.” She reached under the bed. “You use this if you have to go at night.” She pulled out a white enamel bucket with a lid.

Gertel stared at it in horror. “You mean you go in *that*?”

“Sure.”

“Uh-uh.” Gertel shook her head. No way was she going to sit on a bucket in the bedroom.

“That’s all right. I don’t like to use it either,” said Lolette, pushing the offending bucket back under the bed. “If you use it, you have to empty it in the morning.”

Empty it? Gertel shuddered. She would wait.

To her dismay, she discovered the next morning that the only thing inside the little wooden outhouse was another white bucket.

“Why don’t you dig a hole for an outhouse?” she asked Grandpa, who was chopping firewood beside the kitchen.

He stopped chopping and looked at her from under bushy gray eyebrows. “Well, now,” he answered, “the land here is so low that if you tried to dig a hole, it would fill up with water real quick. You can’t dig a hole here in the city. That’s why they built the canals—to carry the waste out to the sea.”

“You mean . . .”

He nodded his head soberly. “That’s right. We all empty our buckets into the canal early in the morning so no one can see us. Don’t know why we try to hide, because everyone does it.”

Gertel shook her head. No wonder the canals stank—they were full of sewage. She wondered if she would ever smell fresh air again. She knew for certain she would never swim in those canals.

Early every morning Grandma walked to the market and bought fresh meat and vegetables for the day. The girls soon learned that Grandma cooked some strange things. She often put carrots or cabbage in her chicken stew. They were used to eating river fish, but Grandma sometimes cooked seafood like lobster and conch and shrimp.

One day she set a bowl full of yellowish-green mash in front of them. “What is this?” Gertel asked Lolette, sniffing at the food suspiciously. “It’s split peas. It’s not so bad.”

Gertel sniffed again. She didn’t like the smell. She was sure the taste would be worse. Marlene was stirring her food around with her spoon too, but none of it was going into her mouth.

Gertel looked around. Grandma was out in the kitchen. She snatched up her bowl, carried it to the little front porch and, leaning over the railing, scraped the obnoxious mess onto the ground. The skinny yellow dog that slept under the house rushed out and lapped up the food in a minute. He wagged his tail and looked up expectantly. Marlene appeared beside Gertel and dumped her split peas over the railing. The dog gobbled it up before returning to his hollow under the house. The girls went inside and filled up on bread.

Grandma always made plenty of food. She always had extra johnny-cakes or powder buns that she would hand out to the many children who ran in and out of the yard at will. More than once Gertel noticed Grandma handing a dish of food to a poorly dressed man who walked along the street picking up empty bottles. Gertel thought about the people who had shared food with them on their journey down the river. Grandma was doing the same thing here in the city.

After that, whenever Grandma fed them something new that they

were sure they wouldn't like, they fed it to the dog. Since Grandma always ate in the kitchen, she never found out. The dog started to get fat.

The time had nearly come for school to begin. One day Grandma took all three girls shopping. She bought new writing slates for Gertel and Marlene, new black shoes and white socks for all of them, and bright hair ribbons to match the dresses that a seamstress had made for them. Gertel had never had so many new things in her life.

"Now we need to get hats," said Grandma. "You can't go to church without a hat. It isn't respectful." She led them downtown and into a store. A row of girl-sized straw hats lined a shelf in the dark, crowded shop. Gertel picked up a sunny yellow hat with a blue ribbon. It fit her just right, but it was too small for Marlene. Marlene had big feet and a big head. Grandma thought both girls should have the same kind of hat, and there were no bigger yellow hats.

Marlene insisted that she wanted a white hat. Grandma found a white hat with a green ribbon that fit Marlene's big head. The white hat she chose for Gertel slid down and rested on her ears, but she knew better than to argue. She really preferred the yellow hat, but she would just have to wear this oversized white one.

6

School

On the first day of school, the girls woke up early and slipped into the new light blue dresses Grandma had laid out for them. Gertel's dress felt funny around her legs. When she bent over to see what was wrong, the hem brushed her ankles.

"This dress is too long," Marlene complained, leaning over to watch her own hem descend toward the floor.

"Stand up straight," ordered Grandma, coming to inspect their appearance. She bent down and checked the length of the hem. "An inch or two below your knees," she reported, nodding in satisfaction. "Just right. The school code says you have to have your knees covered."

"But I won't be able to run fast in this long dress," wailed Marlene.

Grandma got that lecture look on her face. "The Good Book says that women should dress modestly. That means to cover your body. There will be no short skirts or low necklines or dresses without sleeves in this house."

Gertel said nothing. She might as well get used to it. There was no sense in making a fuss. Grandma had given them the dresses. They should be grateful.

When they had eaten, Grandma hurried Gertel across the street to Miss Hazel's¹³ house. Miss Hazel combed and French-braided Gertel's kinky hair into corn rows¹⁴ from the front to the back of her head. Marlene and Lolette had smoother hair that Grandma herself could braid.

Grandpa had made each of them a slender wooden box with metal

¹³ In Creole culture, any lady, married or unmarried, is addressed as "Miss," usually followed by her first name.

¹⁴ Narrow rows of French braids.

hinges and a handle. In the new boxes they carefully arranged their slates, slate pencils, and a felt cloth for cleaning the slates. Then they closed the little brass clasp. Dressed in their new clothes and shoes and swinging their new boxes, the three girls set off down Euphrates Avenue. "I went to school last year, so I know what to do," Lolette stated imperiously. "I'll show you where to go."

On they walked, along streets lined with boxy houses, beside the smelly canal, around corners, and between the big brick buildings of downtown. They crossed the Swing Bridge, but the walls were so high Gertel couldn't even see the water flowing beneath them. They turned left and then right and there it was: St. Mary's School. The school consisted of two long buildings, one on either side of a brick church adorned with a cross and topped by a square steeple.

The school buildings stood like stark yellow concrete boxes, two stories high, punctuated with rectangular black holes for windows. Children swarmed over the dirt yard, running, jumping, shouting, laughing, skipping, kicking, or just standing. All the activity made Gertel think of an anthill. She felt shy and alone in that throng of children.

A bell clanged mechanically, bringing all the activity to a halt. The children ran to form lines in front of the classroom doors. "You will be in Infant One. That is your room. Go stand in that line," Lolette said, giving them a push in the right direction. They knew they would complete Infant One and Infant Two before starting Standard One, which would be their third year of school.

Taking Marlene by the hand, Gertel swallowed hard and stepped into line behind a fidgeting little boy. A large, very black lady in a white blouse and dark blue skirt stood at the head of the line. "Inspection!" she called in a loud, no-nonsense voice. She leaned over the first girl in line, who spread out her hands, palms down, so the teacher could see if her nails were clean. The teacher inspected her face and hair, and the little girl spread her lips in a grimace so the teacher could see that she had brushed her teeth. With a nod of approval, she moved to the next child in line.

Gertel furtively checked her own fingernails. Good, they were still clean.

When the teacher reached the little boy in front of her, she took one look at his fingernails and then pulled a wooden ruler from her pocket. She gave his knuckles a sharp slap and pointed to the spigot across the yard. “Go wash your hands!” she ordered.

Gertel held out her trembling hands. The teacher loomed over her, running her fingers efficiently over Gertel’s. “Good,” she pronounced. Gertel breathed a sigh of relief. *I’m gonna wash my hands every morning!* she promised herself as she followed the line into the classroom.

Once inside, the teacher, who introduced herself as Miss Stuart, arranged the children in alphabetical order and then had them stand while she read from the Bible. Gertel was too busy scanning the room to remember what she read that day. Two pupils shared each wooden desk. Gertel’s deskmate was a very dark-skinned girl named Maribelle. Gertel, who had always felt dark beside her sisters and Lolette, felt light-skinned beside Maribelle. A big blackboard stood on a wooden stand beside the teacher’s desk. The teacher had written numbers and letters on the board. Some calendar pictures adorned the walls between the three windows. A shelf across the back held a few books.

Miss Stuart closed the Bible and asked the children to shut their eyes, bow their heads, and repeat the Lord’s Prayer with her. Gertel had learned the Lord’s Prayer long ago. She helped say it, but not many others did.

“Now we will sing our national anthem,” announced the teacher. “Our country, British Honduras, is a colony of Great Britain, so we sing ‘God Save the King.’ You must all stand at attention. Stand up very straight with your arms at your sides like this, your head up, and your eyes straight ahead. This is to show respect to King George VI.” She pointed to a picture hanging beneath the Union Jack, the British flag, in the center of the front wall. Gertel thought the face in the picture looked very much like Mr. Smith, the principal of their school.

Gertel had never heard of King George. She wondered where he lived. Mr. Smith was a white man from England. Gertel had seen him talking

to her teacher before school.

Some time passed before the teacher was satisfied that everyone was standing at attention. Then they sang:

*God save our gracious King,
Long live our noble King,
God save the King.
Send him victorious,
Happy and glorious,
Long to reign over us.
God save the King.*

That first day they copied numbers from the blackboard onto their slates. Then they printed the ABCs. The teacher helped each student write his or her own name. Gertel could already do this. They learned a poem about a girl named Mary who had a little lamb that followed her to school. Gertel thought that was rather silly. She should have tied that lamb up properly at home before she went off to school. But it would be funny to have a lamb or a goat like Chocho in the classroom.

The teacher spoke English, just like Grandma. When one little boy asked, “Wha da ma slate pencil gone?” the teacher scolded him.

“In school you will speak English,” she said. “Mr. Smith, our principal, says Creole is not a language. He will not allow anyone in his school to speak Creole. Say, ‘Where is my slate pencil?’ ”

When the noon bell rang, Lolette found her cousins and led them to the lunch line. Some women handed out platefuls of rice and beans and fish in exchange for a penny. “If we had another penny, we could buy a piece of banana bread,” said Lolette. “But Grandma gives us only one penny a day.”

On the way home the girls chattered about their day. Gertel spoke animatedly about the interesting things she had seen and heard, but Marlene did not have a lot to say.

When they reached home, Lolette led them straight into the kitchen

where Grandma was mixing powder buns. “Good afternoon, Grandma,” she said. “We’re home.”

Grandma looked up. “Hello, Lolette.” She looked hard at Gertel. “Gertel?”

Gertel didn’t know what she was expected to say. “You have to say ‘Good afternoon’ to her,” whispered Lolette behind her hand.

Gertel quickly said, “Good afternoon, Grandma.”

“That’s better,” said Grandma with a slight smile. “How did you like school?”

“I no like school,” blurted Marlene. “I no know dat king song, and I can’t write me name. And dat lee boy behine me, he done poke me in de back.”

“Marlene.” Grandma’s tone was severe. “I did not address you. I was speaking to Gertel. You will not speak unless you are spoken to. And I will not tolerate Creole in my house. I don’t know what is wrong with your mother. She knows English and yet she allowed you girls to grow up speaking Creole and Spanish.”

Gertel resolved again to keep her mouth shut until she learned proper English. As for school, she knew she would like it. If she kept all the rules and learned everything the teacher taught her, she would get along all right.

In the days that followed, the girls became familiar with the route to school. They learned to sing “God Save the King” and to say their ABCs. They had lessons in adding numbers and sounding out the letters of the alphabet. At recess they played tag or skipped with the other girls in their class. Every evening they walked home and greeted Grandma before they changed their school clothes.

On September 10 they took part in a parade. Miss Stuart explained to them that the tenth was an important day for British Honduras. On that day, in 1798, the British defeated the Spanish in the Battle of St. George’s Caye.¹⁵ From that time on the land belonged to the British.

¹⁵ (KEE) An island that forms on top of a coral reef.

“That is why we speak English today and are loyal to the British King,” she said. “If the Spanish had won the battle, we might all be speaking Spanish. British Honduras is the only English-speaking country in Central America, all because the English fought to keep this land for themselves.”

None of it made much sense to Gertel or to her classmates. Many of them did speak Spanish, though; for some of them, it was a lot easier than the proper English they learned in school. But though the holiday meant little to them, they all looked forward to the parade and celebration on St. George’s Caye Day.

That day the whole school marched in time to the music from a band in front of the government buildings while crowds lined the streets to watch them. Other schools marched too, so their teachers had drilled them for days ahead of time. They stood four abreast, at attention, just as they did when they sang “God Save the King.” One of the older boys carried the Union Jack on a tall pole in front of the formation. Miss Foreman, an upper-grade teacher, stood beside their lines and shouted out, “One, two, three, *march!* Hup, two, three, four; hup, two, three, four.” They had to lift their knees high and march in exact time. Over and over they practiced under the blazing sun until their legs ached with weariness.

Once while they were waiting for another class to get into line, Gertel swung her arms behind her back and clutched her hands together in her comfortable, familiar pose. “You there, in Infant One!” shouted Miss Foreman. “Stand at attention.”

Gertel jerked her hands against her sides.

On the day of the parade, Miss Foreman marched beside the columns of St. Mary’s, cheering them on. “Come on, St. Mary’s. You can do it! Show them your stuff! Hup, two, three, four.” Gertel noticed that she carried a little book in her pocket, and if her eagle eye caught anyone out of step or misbehaving, she jotted down a name in her book. The next day a number of children got scolded or punished for disgracing the school.

On the tenth they also stood and listened to boring speeches delivered by sober men with whiskers and dress suits. After the speeches, they all trooped back to school, where each child received a paper bag of goodies—candy, peanuts or popcorn, a cupcake, and a whole bottle of lemonade. Gertel's lemonade was grape flavored. Some of the others had orange or lime, but all of it was fizzy and bit their tongues when they sipped it. What a celebration St. George's Caye Day had been—grander than Christmas!

St. Mary's Church

The bell in the steeple of St. Mary's Anglican Church pealed out its call to worship at 6:00 on Sunday mornings. Grandma laid out their green-checked dresses on the bed while the girls bathed in the little washhouse in the yard.

"I don't want to wear this dress," Marlene whined on the fourth Sunday morning. "I get tired of wearing the same dress to church every Sunday."

Grandma arranged her face into its "I will tolerate no nonsense" look. "You will wear what I choose. I buy your clothes; I decide what you wear. Little girls should not question their elders. It is not respectful." Dutifully the girls donned the green-checked dresses.

The three girls, in their white Sunday hats, followed Grandma along the streets to church, trying to avoid the worst of the mud and debris to keep their shoes and socks clean. The church stood between the two school buildings, which looked stark and abandoned today with their closed windows and bare yards.

It was cool and dim inside the church. Uncle Albert had told them the church was built using bricks brought as ballast¹⁶ on ships from England. The ships unloaded the bricks on the docks and filled up their holds with squared-off timbers from the mahogany logs that had been floated down the river past their home village.

Gertel enjoyed watching people: the ladies in their lovely, pastel dresses and the men in white dress suits with gold watch chains across their chests. The ladies' wide-brimmed, flower-bedecked hats, colorful as a

¹⁶ Any heavy material carried on ships to make them more stable.

cloud of butterflies, bobbed above the pews. No lady would enter the church without a hat.

The priest appeared, dressed in rich, black robes, the traditional vestments of the Anglican Church. To Gertel, his robes looked luxurious, with their gold braid trimmings glittering in the lamplight. He stood behind the carved pulpit and read solemnly from a small book, words that sounded holy and grand. The worshipers held their own prayer books and responded with more fine-sounding phrases. A choir accompanied by a small organ led the singing while the congregation sang along, reading the words out of their little books.

Then the confirmed members filed up to the front, one bench at a time, and knelt at the railing that stretched across the front of the platform. The priest moved along the line and handed a wafer to each communicant before returning along the row, offering each person a tiny sip of wine from the goblet he carried. Gertel, who was usually hot and thirsty by this time, thought she might drink the whole cupful if she had a chance. This, Grandma had explained, was called communion. *It is almost like a Catholic Mass*, Gertel thought, *except that only the priest got to drink the wine at the Catholic service*. She looked forward to the time when she would be old enough to take communion.

Grandma expected the girls to sit up straight, listen to the sermon, and refrain from fidgeting. She always quizzed them later to see if they had learned anything.

One Sunday when they were seated in their bench, a lady with a sleeveless dress slid into the seat in front of them. The girls heard Grandma's audible "Humph!" When they glanced up at her, she had drawn her lips into a straight line and was shaking her head at the woman's back. A lady with a sleeveless dress in church? Shocking!

When the people on the bench in front of them filed to the front to receive communion, the sleeveless lady went too and knelt with the others. But when the priest reached her, he stooped, whispered to her, and passed by without giving her a wafer. The lady got up, looking very ashamed, and returned to her seat. Gertel sneaked a look at Grandma.

She nodded in agreement. The priest would not serve communion to a lady dressed immodestly.

After church they hurried home, changed their dresses, and ate the food Grandma served them. They were not allowed to work or play noisy games on Sundays. It was a day of rest. "Thou shalt do no servile work therein," Grandma often quoted. After lunch, she sent them into their bedroom to rest. Rest? How could lively little girls rest in the middle of the day? The girls dreaded this part of Sunday. Grandma sat in her rocking chair in the main room and read her Bible on Sunday afternoons.

In their hot little room, the girls whispered and giggled and drew on their slates. They were supposed to learn their verse for Sunday school, but it was hard to stick to it. Sometimes Grandma would call out from her rocker, "What is going on in there?" and they would stifle their giggles in their pillows. They were glad enough to go to Sunday school at 3:00.

Back to the church they trudged, through the hot streets, where a teacher told them a Bible story and asked them questions to see if they had understood. They went to Sunday school, rain or shine. If it was raining, they would dash from their house to the next one, hide under its porch, and then run to the next shelter. They often arrived bedraggled and muddy, but so did everyone else.

One Sunday soon after Gertel and Marlene had come to live with their grandparents, Grandpa gave them each a shilling and told them they could go to the matinee after Sunday school. The matinee, a moving picture show for children, began at 5:00 on Sunday afternoons.

Right after Sunday school, Lolette said it was time to go to the matinee.

"Shouldn't we go home first and leave our lesson books? We don't want to carry them to the matinee," objected Gertel.

"If we go home first, Grandma will make us stay there," said Lolette with the voice of experience.

They went and watched in fascination as the little Swiss girl, Heidi, slid down the mountain on her toboggan. Although she enjoyed the picture, Gertel felt embarrassed. Not one other little girl wore a hat,

and certainly no one else was carrying Sunday school books.

The next time they had money to go to the matinee, Gertel made up her mind to assert herself. "I'm taking my things home first," she said after Sunday school.

"You'll be sorry," warned Lolette.

Gertel marched down the street and, after a moment's hesitation, Marlene followed her.

When they reached home, Grandma looked up from her rocking chair. "Where's Lolette?" she asked.

"She went to the matinee and we are going too, but we decided to bring our books home first," explained Gertel.

"You aren't going all the way back to the matinee. It's too far," said Grandma irritably. "You just change your clothes and stay right here."

"But, Grandma, nobody wears white hats to the matinee," Gertel wailed.

"Carrying Sunday school books to the matinee is nothing to be ashamed of," retorted Grandma. "Now do as I say."

Gertel sighed. Lolette had been right. After this they would go straight to the matinee and not try to come home first.

One Sunday when it was exceptionally hot, Lolette suggested to the girls that they skip Sunday school. They agreed. It was much too warm to go traipsing through the streets in the middle of the afternoon. Uncle Albert, who lived nearby and often ate at Grandma's, had given them money for the matinee, so they thought they would skip Sunday school. Then they wouldn't have to drag their Sunday school things along to the matinee.

At 3:00, the girls were lying quietly in their bed, hoping Grandma had fallen asleep in her chair. All at once Grandma's stern voice came to them from the other side of the door. "What's happening? I don't hear any noise. Are you getting ready for Sunday school?"

"Oh, Grandma, the sun is too hot. It's too hot to walk all the way to Sunday school," Lolette whined.

"I'm so hot, Grandma," Marlene added her endorsement.

"Humph!" came from the other side of the door. But she didn't say anything more. They heard the rocking chair creak as she sat down again.

The girls waited for a long time in their stuffy room. When they figured it must be time for the matinee, they got up and quietly began pulling on their dresses. They hadn't heard the rocking chair creak for a while, so Grandma must have fallen asleep.

"Now what's happening? What are you doing?" called Grandma from her chair.

"We're getting ready to go to the matinee," said Lolette in a small voice.

"It's too hot to go to the matinee," said Grandma decidedly. Her rocking chair thumped as she rocked furiously.

The girls looked at each other. They knew they didn't dare leave the room. That Sunday they did not go to the matinee. After that they always went to Sunday school and carried their books along to the matinee afterward.

One Sunday Grandma sent Lolette to visit her mother and her younger brothers and sister.

"Was it fun?" asked Gertel when she came back.

"No!" said Lolette, looking stormy. "I hate going there."

"Why?"

"Because my mom doesn't love me. She didn't want me. She gave me to Grandma when I was a little girl. I won't call her Mom. She isn't my mom. Grandma is my mom."

Gertel felt sad for Lolette. Sometimes she thought her own mom didn't like her very much, but she had not given her away. She had even acted a little bit sad when Gertel and Marlene left on the riverboat. How would it feel to have your mom give you away? *If I ever have children, I'll never give them away*, she vowed.

Turtle Soup

The little country girls were used to rainy season, but they were not used to the foul-smelling floods that rainy season brought to the city. When it rained too hard, the canals overflowed, spreading their garbage and filth across the streets and into the yards. Sometimes the girls had to wade through several inches of sludge to reach the outhouse or the wash house. The receding water left all kinds of rubbish behind it. Then the girls had to rake the yard, and Grandpa would dump the stuff right back into the canal.

“It’s going to be a high tide tonight,” announced Grandpa one night when he returned from the docks, his boots covered with mud. The water that swirled into the yard the next morning was cleaner. Grandpa explained that it was sea water from the high tide.

Most of the houses in the city were built on stilts so the water wouldn’t come into the houses. As often as he could, Grandpa would bring home a bucket of sand or gravel that he had gotten from a ship and dump it in the yard. People tried to build up their yards above the constant floods that flowed into them. “Don’t know why they built a city on a swamp like this,” Grandpa would grumble.

All their drinking and washing water came from a hand pump two blocks away. Usually Grandpa or Uncle Albert carried two big buckets down the street to get the water, but sometimes Grandma sent the girls with empty gallon jugs. The girls loved to jerk the pump handle up and down, but too often other people were lined up to get water. Bigger children would push their way to the front of the line and make the girls wait. Gertel did not like the fights at the water pump. She longed for their wide, clean river with its unlimited water for washing and bathing.

Here she bathed by pouring a calabash of water over herself, and if she used too much water, Grandma would scold.

Naturally there was no swimming. Even though the school was only a few blocks from the Caribbean Sea, she never caught a glimpse of it, let alone swam in it. But she did reap some unfortunate consequences from its polluted floodwaters.

Gertel had seldom been sick, but she hadn't been in Belize City long before she came down with a severe sore throat. Grandma made her swallow herb tea and wrapped a rag smeared with Vicks medicated ointment around her throat. It made her eyes burn. For a few days she lay in bed with a fever and did not want to eat anything because it hurt too much to swallow.

Several times during that first year, her tonsils became inflamed. Parasites had entered her body through her bare feet, and these parasites caused tonsillitis.

"Don't go barefoot," Grandma ordered. "Make sure you have your shoes on. And stay out of the water when the yard floods."

To Gertel, who was used to going barefoot, wearing shoes all the time was a trial. It was hot enough without having to wear shoes.

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Gertel and Marlene regularly fed some of their food to the dog. Split peas and certain vegetables such as broccoli or beets went over the railing into the yard whenever Grandma wasn't looking. They never went hungry since there was usually plenty of rice or bread to fill the gap.

"Why do you make so much food?" Gertel asked Grandma once.

"Always cook for the stranger," she answered. "The good Lord has blessed us with plenty to eat, and He has told us we should entertain strangers. I make extra so I have some to share with those in need."

Someone always ate up the extra food. Grandma often carried food to shut-ins or poor, elderly people. Uncles and cousins often stopped in, and no one went away hungry. She fed peddlers and dock workers and

sailors that Grandpa brought home from the docks, and she handed out buns to the many skinny children who ran about the streets as though they had no one to care for them. Gertel figured Grandma wouldn't begrudge the dog the extra food the girls didn't like.

Grandma washed clothes under the house in large tubs set on a wooden stand. She rubbed soap into them and scrubbed them on a corrugated scrub board. "You girls are big enough to wash some of your own things," she announced one Saturday. "Get your hair ribbons and underclothes."

Gertel carried her armload of clothes to the wash stand and filled a small basin with water. Busily she began soaping and scrubbing and wringing out her clothes.

Lolette came down the stairs, her load of laundry dangling from her arms.

"I want to use the basin," she announced, elbowing Gertel aside and dropping her clothes on the stand. She grabbed at the basin. "Give it to me."

"Wait till I'm finished," said Gertel, clutching at the basin. "I'm nearly done."

"If you don't give it to me right now," hissed Lolette, "I'll tell Grandma that you feed the dog the food you don't like."

Gertel glared at Lolette, but she closed her mouth, angrily fished the rest of her clothes out of the basin, and stepped back. Then she saw Grandma standing right behind Lolette. How long had she been there? Grandma's dark eyes flashed fire. "You throw away my good food?" she exclaimed. "I could have given that to someone who wanted it!" In her indignation over the wasting of food, the wash basin squabble seemed to vanish from Grandma's mind. She grabbed Gertel's arm and yanked her across the lawn to a bush. Breaking off a branch, she bent Gertel over her knee and lashed her.

"Marlene did it too!" Lolette cried, her eyes big.

Grandma paused, considering, and then shrugged. Marlene was nowhere in sight. *It isn't fair*, thought Gertel. *Just because I'm the oldest*,

I have to take the punishment for both of us.

A few evenings later Grandma served them a soup with some strange-looking lumps of meat floating in it. Gertel peered suspiciously into her bowl. “What is this?” she asked Lolette, holding up a spoonful of the meat.

“It’s turtle.”

Gertel studied the lumps of meat floating in the broth and wrinkled her nose, but she didn’t say another word. Outside the dog whined and thumped his tail. Gertel gulped, but she opened her mouth and swallowed a big spoonful. It wasn’t so bad.

That night the dog went hungry.

One night Lolette discovered Gertel’s freckles. Gertel had forgotten to take a clean dress to the wash house with her, so she ran up to their bedroom with only a towel wrapped around her. The girls always dressed and undressed discreetly, but now Lolette stared at Gertel’s bare shoulders and exclaimed, “You’ve got the pox!” She opened the bedroom door and called, “Grandma, come see. Gertel’s got the pox.”

Grandma came into the room, inspected Gertel’s shoulders, and humphed at Lolette. “Pox, nothing. Those are freckles.”

Gertel had always had freckles—scattered dark brown spots on her shoulders, back, and thighs. The only other dark-skinned person she knew of who had freckles was her dad. She figured that was one more reason her mother seemed to like Marlene better than herself. Marlene’s skin was light brown and clear—no ugly freckles.

“Listen,” Grandma said, shaking her finger at Lolette. “It doesn’t matter what color your skin is, black or white or brown or yellow or freckled. God made all of us in His own image, and no one is any better than anyone else because of skin color. Don’t you forget it!”

Home for the Holidays

Gertel's first year of school went by in a blur, and then it was time to make the trip back up the river to their home. Grandma baked a sack full of johnnycakes and fried some fish for the journey. Grandpa built each girl a lovely wooden valise for her clothes. Like their school boxes, it had a little metal clasp and a handle for carrying. Gertel felt rich with her whole valise full of clothes. They boarded the riverboat at the Swing Bridge like seasoned travelers.

Gertel noticed that the motor pulsed louder than it had on the trip downriver, yet the boat moved more slowly, pushing against the current. Although she was too young to realize it, she was learning that her life was like the boat. If she did not resist the difficult circumstances that came her way, but rather simply accepted what she could not change, her life would flow more smoothly and happily.

On the second day, the boat picked up three *chicleros*.¹⁷ They had been in the jungle for weeks, gathering chicle from the sapodilla trees. The boiled-down resin was shipped to the United States, where it was made into chewing gum. The *chicleros* were rough-looking, loud-talking men who looked and smelled as though they hadn't bathed for a month. The girls shrank up against Grandma and tried to stay out of their way.

The next morning the *chicleros* were gone and so were all of Grandma's johnnycakes. Grandma shrugged. "They were hungry," she excused. "Probably hadn't eaten properly for days."

At the next village, somebody gave the cook a bag of black beans, which he cooked and shared with the passengers. That night when they

¹⁷ Men who make or harvest chicle, the gumlike substance obtained from the sapodilla tree.

tied up at a cluster of houses, Grandma told one of the ladies who was washing in the river that their johnnycakes had been stolen. She asked the lady if she would make them some more. "Sure," the lady replied cheerfully. "I just got a bag of flour off the barge, so I will bring you some tomorrow morning."

True to her word, she came down early in the morning and handed Grandma a large bag full of fresh buns. The girls eagerly bit into them. But, ugh! They tasted nasty. "Kerosene," said Grandma, sniffing at her bun. "That bag of flour was riding beside a can of kerosene and absorbed the fumes."

The girls were so hungry and the buns were so soft that they ate them anyway. About an hour later their stomachs started to hurt. "O-o-h," they moaned, holding their arms across their middles and leaning over.

"It's that kerosene," muttered Grandma. She dug in her handbag and brought out a bottle of coconut oil. She spooned out the semisolid oil and sprinkled it with salt from a small jar. "Here," she ordered. "Open your mouth." She administered a dose to each little girl. In a few minutes both of them were leaning over the side of the boat, retching as the buns came back up. Then they felt better, but they fed the rest of the buns to the fish.

"Cast your bread upon the waters," Grandma had often quoted when feeding her extra food to strangers. *I'm casting my bread upon the waters now*, thought Gertel. She hoped it wouldn't make the fish sick.

On the third day they neared a long series of rapids. The boat could never climb the rocks against the tumbling water. The crew members waded to shore and hacked their way through the bush with machetes until they found a sturdy tree on which to fasten their cable. Then they winched the boat until it was alongside the tree. They tied the boat there while they carried the winch hook to another tree farther upstream.

All this work took several hours, and the girls were free to wade along the shore. What a treat to play in the clear, sparkling water! Through the water they could see many beautiful rocks. Some were red, some were marbled, and some had glittery flecks of gold in them. They gathered

them up in their skirts and carried their treasures back to the boat, where they lined them up on the narrow platform on which the winch was mounted.

When the man came to turn the winch, he shouted at the girls. “Hey, you, get rid of these rocks. They are weighing down the boat.” They had to throw their treasures away, but that didn’t stop them from looking for more.

The girls were delighted at the sight of the howler monkeys again, as well as the flocks of bright green parrots that screeched among the tree-tops. At one place a large turtle lay, tied up on the rocks. Gertel figured she knew where that turtle was headed: into the soup pot. She would have to tell Señora Ramona about all the strange things she had eaten in the past year.

At last they reached their landing. There was the beach, the tree where they hung little Charles’ hammock, the path leading up to their house . . . and there was Mom, hurrying down the path with a much bigger Charles in her arms and Myrtle trotting along behind.

“Hello, Mom!” called Gertel.

Mom laughed. “I see you have learned to speak English.” Gertel was surprised. She didn’t know when it had happened. Living with Grandma and hearing it spoken every day at school had filled her head with proper English. She stumbled at first when she tried to speak Spanish, but after listening to Señora Ramona talk to her mother for a few minutes, it began to come back to her.

Little had changed in Santa Rosa. Gertel washed clothes in the river and swam and bathed to her heart’s content. She carried Charles on her hip down to the river and let him splash in the shallow water. She visited Señora Ramona and ate tortillas and cassava and gibnut¹⁸ meat. No split peas or turtle soup here!

Her mother’s new friend, Lucinda, often spent time at their house. She and Mom would talk and laugh together as they shelled corn or

¹⁸ The gibnut, or paca, is a large tropical rodent widely hunted for its meat.

cleaned beans. They were such good friends that they sometimes ate out of the same dish, dipping their tortillas into a common bowl of chicken soup. Lucinda didn't have a husband. She was a petite Hispanic woman with gold earrings dangling from her ears and bangles that clattered around her wrists. Grandma would not have approved of her. She took care of a couple of children, but Gertel didn't know if they were her own or someone else's.

Marlene and Myrtle returned to their love-hate relationship, playing and fighting together as though Marlene had never been absent.

Their father came home and quizzed them on what they had learned at school. "You make sure you behave good and don't make no trouble for Grandma," he admonished. He didn't talk to them very much, and they were glad when he left again.

Although she knew she would miss the river, Gertel eagerly looked forward to her return to the city for another year of school.