



The Blessings of Children

Riley Hope



The heat in Temascalapa is inescapable. Even the convenience store we dip into to buy drinks is stuffy. The open door doesn’t provide any kind of breeze, and I swear I can feel the breath of the man standing next to me as it slices through the thick air. His head is turned slightly towards me, and he is trying his best not to gawk at the obvious American tourist. It’s for this reason; the attention that I’m attracting, that my husband’s family has only today allowed me to wander the streets of the town with them. The man turns briefly to stare directly at me before grabbing a beer from the freezer, which lets loose a puff of cold air in my direction. I step into what remains when he is gone, pretending to look at the selection of drinks. My mother-in-law approaches me with her hands cupped. “Look,” she says, extending her arms out towards me.“What are these?” I look down at the small red balls in her hands. They’re a little bumpy and feel like walnuts when I pick them up. I feel like I’ve seen them before but can’t place them. Their sweet smell is amplified by the dry air. With nowhere else to escape inside of this crammed store, the scent punches me directly in the face. I can feel myself swooning a little. At my shrug, she goes to find her stepdaughter to ask what the mystery fruits are. I stand with my back against the cooler a little longer, watching the man behind the lifted counter check out beer after beer. <i>Norteño</i>	is playing from a banged-up speaker behind him. He leans over to change a song before continuing to chat with the man standing in front of him. For a moment, I realize that I haven’t seen any women come inside the store since we’ve been in here. In fact, I haven’t seen many women in the streets at all during the two-and-a-half days we’ve been here. The realization unsettles something in my chest. I’ve never felt safe in areas where women aren’t visible. Why are they hiding? Should I be hiding? Are they even hiding or am I just not paying attention? My mother-in-law motions for me to follow her outside. Reluctantly, I unstick myself from the glass of the cooler. I briefly consider consuming a beer since it is the only cold beverage in here and then decide against being bloated for the rest of the night. The air outside seems to be even thicker than it was inside. Instinctively I look for a tree to stand under, find none, and immediately miss the mountains and green grass of Arkansas. I feel exposed here— like a prey animal standing in the middle of a clearing in winter. All soft spots and easily accessible veins. “They’re lychees!” My husband hands me one of the mystery fruits. We work hard to crack open the protective outer shell with our teeth, which is a bit like a peanut shell only tougher. The fruit begins to leak out of any cracks we’ve made, making our hands sticky. The	lychee smells less intoxicating in the open air, and my mouth begins to salivate. The opaque fruit is akin to a pear, if it had a slightly jelly-like consistency to it. It dribbles down our lips and coats our chins in the same sticky substance that is on our hands. I’m slightly distressed by the lack of nearby bathrooms to wash our hands, but quickly let it go with each bite of the fruit. I’m partial to fruits that taste almost artificial, like candy. After we’ve eaten our fill, Frida, my stepsister-in-law, holds out a water bottle and tells me to wash my hands. As soon as I am clean, the baby of the house is handed to me. Frida’s family is convinced that the baby is fond of me, but I feel like she is just being a baby. They insist that I handle her, passing the tiny bundle of clothing and fuzzy hair to me whenever the chance arises. I don’t mind really, she smells like warm milk and likes to put my pinky inside of her surprisingly strong itty-bitty fist. She watches me when I talk, probably because my foreign English sounds like silly babbling to her Spanish-trained ears. Two nights ago, upon finding out that the baby was fond of me there was a great commotion. Luz, the baby’s mother who is fifteen and much smaller than I remember ever being at her age, sits next to me with her slim legs touching mine. They coo over the giggling child in my arms, who I had been holding for just under an hour now. After commenting on how good I was with the baby—something that doesn’t really feel like a skill—they look at	me with question marks in their eyes, and I already know what they are going to ask. “Why do you not have children?” I am so used to this question, a common one from older Hispanic women. What I want to say in response is why do you have children? Luz is so young that when she carries the baby around, she looks weighed down, her delicate frame bending dangerously. Earlier in the night when I asked her if she had a lot of friends in Temas she told me that most of them abandoned her when she got pregnant. When she asks this question, I want to ask her if she would go back if she could and not have the baby. I want to tell her that I wouldn’t judge her for it if she did. I want to tell her that I couldn’t imagine having a child right now, that my freedom as a twenty-four year old was not worth sacrificing, and that had I had a baby at fifteen, I wouldn’t have kept it. I want to ask her if she even had the choice, if anyone even offered her a choice. Beyond just wanting freedom, I can’t help but think of the dramatic changes that happen to a woman’s body, how so many women I know — both in literature and in person — have lost the map that connected them to the bodies they spent years building up. I want to ask them if they even thought twice about the immense responsibility of bringing a child into the world. It feels so simple in theory to say, “I’m having a baby!” Most of all, I want to ask them if they ever wanted to be anything besides a mother. If they ever
The Blessings of Children	1	2	Riley Hope

dreamed of white beaches or shining stages. I am afraid of losing the woman I have created just to be a mother. Just one achievement among many that somehow takes precedent over everything. But because that isn’t socially acceptable, and I don’t have the Spanish ability to explain all that, I shrug and say something about money,which is a small part of a larger truth. In the evening heat her little baby body is overheating me. While the family stands on the side-walk and chats, I find a perch nearby on a concrete stoop outside the store. My husband comes to sit next to me, making silly faces at the baby. Her chubby hands reach up and grasp for anything she can get—hair, fingers, necklaces. I ask her questions in English like she’s a fully grown woman. The <i>Norteño</i> from the store drifts outside and mingles with the rapid fire <i>chisme</i> that’s passing between the older family members. Between the stone and stucco buildings, the sun sets, bathing the cobble streets in a tangerine color. The sunsets here are unlike the ones in Arkansas. Every evening the sun puts on a show, dipping slowly below the horizon in brilliant shades of orange and yellow. I think it’s because there are no trees to encumber it, nor tall buildings to reflect the colors back and mute them. It’s a pure sunset. An older woman on a motorcycle pulls up to the curb with a screech. On the back seat a young boy sits, not much older than Frida’s twelve year old	brother, who appears excited to see the other child. The older members of Frida’s family are also excited, moving in a mob structure to greet the woman as she dismounts her bike. I’m only half listening but gather quite quickly that this woman is related to them. They motion me over to meet her. At 5’3” I am towering over this woman who leans back to get a full view of me. It feels awkward to be so much taller than someone for once and I find myself trying to get smaller in order to feel normal again. “<i>Se parece de muñeca.</i>” She says, keeping her eyes on me at all times. The compliment is nice, but I feel that she’s only saying that for my fair skin which ignites some kind of white guilt in the back of my brain. I thank her anyway. The family, which has already passed around any kind of compliment in relation to my paleness they could think of, suddenly erupts with requests that I remove my sunglasses. Luz takes her daughter from my arms, smiling encouragingly at me. The <i>tia</i> leans in closely, anticipating the reveal of my eyes. She audibly gasps when they come off and a chorus of <i>que bonita</i> begins. The sudden influx of attention is making my face burn and my guilt even worse. I thank her again because my Southern raising will not let me not say thank you. Thankfully, it’s over as quickly as it began. The circle has reconverged and the <i>chisme</i> is flowing again. I slip off to sit on my stoop again, my husband following suit. Not far from us, the two young boys	are pulling toys out of a bag and chatting. People are milling about on the streets as the sun goes down on the last work day of the week. The hissing sound of a beer bottle being opened floats down the street. It’s peaceful in a minorly chaotic way. “At least they didn’t take your glasses off for you,” My husband says grinning. A night ago, Frida’s uncle had come to visit and meet his extended family from America. In the middle of munching on chips, the baby’s father and his <i>tio</i> had appeared in front of me. Without warning, the older man reached across the counter to remove my glasses from my face. I had flinched at the sudden contact and moved away from his fingers before removing them myself. Frida’s younger brother had been insistent that everyone get a look at the color of my eyes since I’d arrived, so I was used to it. What I wasn’t used to was unwarranted touching, something that had been a norm upon arriving in Temasacalapa. I’d gotten used to the hair touching and hugging, but the hands going for my face had startled me. A man and his mother pass us giggling as we sit on the stoop.. When the man walks past the two younger boys, he looks down at them—once and then twice. At the end of the sidewalk, his mother crosses the road, but he turns on his heels. In an instant, he is standing over the boys sitting on the stoop beside us. With his hands still clasped behind his back, he leans down to ask them something. I can’t hear him over the noise of the street, but the boys appear shocked,	staring up at him with wide eyes and raised eye-brows. Despite the heat, something about the way the man is leaning inches from their faces makes my skin go cold. A quick glance at the adults confirms what I already suspected, they were busy chatting and hadn’t noticed the man standing there. I nudge my husband as the man asks another question, now reaching into his pocket and pulling out a wad of cash. The folded pesos in his hand seem to ooze malice. It floats over the top of the music and the smell of the lychee fruits. My body moves before my mind, and I am standing next to the boys in an instant, staring down at this man who won’t look me in the face. My husband is on my heels. The man straightens and tucks the money back into his pocket before turning sharply in the direction that his mother went. The space where he had been standing feels like it exists inside of a vacuum, the pressure of his absence heavier than the lingering afternoon heat. I remember a class I took on self-defense. Predators don’t like attention. If you look a dog in the eyes, they falter. They pride themselves on being sneaky and invisible. My stomach flips as we watch him walk away, his tail between his legs. I’m sure there will be other boys. When I ask the boys if they know the man, Frida’s little brother furrows his brow and answers me with the voice of a mature young adult rather than the child he is.
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“Creo que está enfermo. Hay muchos como él.”

He claims to not know what the man asked them before he pulled the money out of his pocket. The older members of the family never turn around. Later that night when I tell my mother-in-law the story, she is not shocked by the conduct of the man or that none of them noticed him.

Down the street, a dog fight breaks out, and a group of men encourage it by shouting. The dogs kick up dust as they tussle and nip. The sun has almost tucked itself away completely. The boys go back to trading cards, though they are now sitting much closer to my feet. I crack open another lychee with my teeth. The older adults spend a few minutes gushing over how precious babies are, what a blessing children are. I hear someone say that people don’t protect their children enough in today’s dangerous world. Someone hands me the baby without checking if it is me they are handing her to and not some stranger on the street. Her little body suddenly feels twice as heavy. She blows bubbles into the atmosphere, unaware of the world spinning relentlessly around her. I wonder if she will ever understand the responsibility of being a blessing.



Riley Hope was born in Little Rock, Arkansas, and has lived in the state her whole life. She attended the University of Central Arkansas, where she earned an undergraduate degree in Creative Writing and a minor in Spanish. After graduating, she lived and worked in Monticello, Arkansas, with her loving husband. In 2022, they moved to North Little Rock, where they now live with their two dogs and two cats. Fast forward to December 2025, Riley received her graduate degree in Professional and Technical Writing from the University of Arkansas Little Rock and she now interns for Braddock Avenue Books.

Riley has been writing for as long as she can remember. For birthdays and Christmas, all she would ask for were empty notebooks to fill with stories. She has been published once before in UCA’s literary magazine, The Vortex. She hopes to continue writing and one day publish a book.

