

The Scholarship Jacket

By: Martha Salinas

The small Texas school that I attended carried out a tradition every year during the eighth grade graduation: a beautiful gold and green jacket, the school colors, was awarded to the class valedictorian, the student who had maintained the highest grade for eight years. The scholarship jacket had a big gold S on the left front side and the winner's name was written in gold letters on the pocket.

My oldest sister Rosie had won the jacket a few years back and I fully expected to win also. I was fourteen and in the eighth grade. I had been a straight A student since the first grade, and the last year I had looked forward to owning that jacket. My father was a farm laborer who couldn't earn enough money to feed eight children, so when I was six I was given to my grandparents to raise. We couldn't participate in sports in school because there were registration fees, uniform costs, and trips out of town; so even though we were quite agile and athletic there would never be a sports school jacket for us. This one, the scholarship jacket, was our only chance.

In May, close to graduation, spring fever struck, and no one paid any attention in class; instead we stared out the windows and at each other, wanting to speed up the last few weeks of school. I despaired every time I looked in the mirror. Pencil thin, not a curve anywhere, I was called "Beanpole" and "String Bean" and I knew that's what I looked like. A flat chest, no hips, and a brain, that's what I had. That really isn't much for a fourteen-year-old to work with, I thought, as I absentmindedly wandered from my history class in the gym. Another hour of sweating in basketball and displaying my toothpick legs was coming up. Then I remembered my P.E. shorts were still in a bag under my desk where I'd forgotten them. I had to walk all the way back and get them. Coach Thompson was a real bear if anyone wasn't dressed for P.E. She had said I was a good forward and once she even tried to talk Grandma into letting me join the team. Grandma, of course, said no.

I was almost back at my classroom's door when I heard angry voices and arguing. I stopped. I didn't mean to eavesdrop; I just hesitated, not knowing what to do. I needed those shorts and I was going to be late, but I didn't want to interrupt an argument between my teachers. I recognized the voices; Mr. Schmidt, my history teacher, and Mr. Boone, my math teacher. They seemed to be arguing about me. I couldn't believe it. I still remember the shock that rooted me flat against the wall as if I were trying to blend in with the graffiti written there. "I refuse to do it! I don't care who her father is, her grades don't even begin to compare to Martha's. I won't lie or falsify records. Martha has a straight A plus average and you know it" That was Mr. Schmidt and he sounded very angry. Mr. Boone's voice sounded calm and quite.

"Look, Joann's father is not only on the Board, he owns the only store in town; we could say it was a close tie and..." The pounding in my ears drowned out the rest of the words only a word here and there filtered through. "... Martha is Mexican... resign... won't do it..." Mr. Schmidt came rushing out, luckily for me went down the opposite way toward the auditorium, so he didn't see me. Shaking, I waited a few minutes and then went in and grabbed my bag and fled from the room. Mr. Boone looked up when I came in but didn't say anything. To this day I don't remember if I got in trouble in P.E. for being late or how I made it through the rest of the afternoon. I went home very sad and cried into my pillow that night so grandmother wouldn't hear me. It seemed a cruel coincidence that I had overheard that conversation.

The next day when the principal called me into the office, I knew what it would be about. He looked uncomfortable and unhappy. I decided I wasn't going to make it easier for him so I looked him straight in the eye. He looked away and fidgeted with the papers on his desk.

"Martha," he said, "there's been a change in policy this year regarding the scholarship jacket. As you know, it has always been free." He cleared his throat and continued. "This year the Board decided to charge fifteen dollars—which still won't cover the complete cost of the jacket".

I stared at him in shock and a small sound of dismay escaped by throat. I hadn't expected this. He still avoided looking in my eye's.

"So if you are unable to pay the fifteen dollars for the jacket, it will be given to the next one in line."

Standing with all the dignity I could muster, I said, I'll speak to my grandfather about it, sir, and let you know tomorrow." I cried on the walk home from the bus stop. The dirt road was a quarter of a mile from the highway, so by the time I got home, my eyes were red and puffy.

"Where's Grandpa?" I asked Grandma, looking down at the floor so she wouldn't ask me why I'd been crying. She was sewing on a quilt and didn't look up.

“I think he’s out back working in the bean field.”

I went outside and looked out at the fields. There he was, I could see him walking between the rows, his body bent over the little plants, hoe in hand. I walked slowly out to him, trying to think of how I could best ask him for the money. There was a cool breeze blowing and a sweet smell of mesquite in the air, but I didn’t appreciate it. I kicked at a dirt clot. I wanted that jacket so much. It was more than just being a valedictorian and giving a little thank you speech for the jacket on graduation night. It represents eight years of hard work and expectation. I knew I had to be honest with Grandpa; it was my only chance. He saw me and looked up.

He waited for me to speak. I cleared my throat nervously and clasped my hands behind my back so he wouldn’t see them shaking. “Grandpa, I have a big favor to ask you” I said in Spanish, the only language he knew. He still waited silently, I tried again. “Grandpa, this year the principal said the scholarship jacket is not going to be free. It’s going to cost fifteen dollars and I have to take the money tomorrow, otherwise it’ll be given to someone else.” The last words came out in an eager rush. Grandpa straightened up tiredly and leaned his chin on the hoe handle. He looked out over the field that was filled with the tiny green bean plants. I waited, desperately hoping he’d say I could have the money. He turned to me and asked quietly, “what does a scholarship jacket mean?”

I answered quickly; maybe there was a chance. “It means you’ve earned it by having the highest grades for eight years and that’s why they’re giving it to you.” Too late I realized the significance of my words. Grandpa knew that I understood it was not a matter of money. It wasn’t that. He went back to hoeing the weeds that sprang up between the dedicated little bean plants. It was a time consuming job; sometimes the small shoots were right next to each other. Finally he spoke again.

“Then if you pay for it, Marta, it’s not a scholarship jacket, it is? Tell your principal I will not pay the fifteen dollars.”

I walked back to the house and locked myself in the bathroom for a long time. I was angry with grandfather even though I know he was right; and I was angry with the Board, whoever they were. Why did they have to change the rules just when it was my turn to win the jacket?

It was a very sad and withdrawn girl who dragged into the principal’s office the next day. This time he did look me in the eyes.

“What did your grandfather say?” I sat very straight in my chair. “He said to tell you he won’t pay the fifteen dollars.”

The principal muttered something I couldn’t understand under his breath, and walked over to the window. He stood looking out at something outside. He looked bigger than usual when he stood up; he was a tall gaunt man with gray hair, and I watched the back of his head while I waited for him to speak.

“Why?” he finally asked. “Your grandfather has the money. Doesn’t he own a small bean farm?”

I looked at him, forcing my eyes to stay dry. “He said if I had to pay for it, then it wouldn’t be a scholarship jacket,” I said and stood up to leave. “I guess you’ll just have to give it to Joann.” I hadn’t meant to say that; it had just slipped out. I was almost to the door when he stopped me.

“Martha—wait.”

I turned and looked at him, waiting. What did he want now? I could feel my heart pounding. Something bitter and vile tasting was coming up in my mouth; I was afraid I was going to be sick. I didn’t need and sympathy speeches. He sighed loudly at me, biting his lip, as if thinking.

“Okay, damn it. We’ll make an exception in your case. I’ll tell the Board, you’ll get your jacket.”

I could hardly believe it. I spoke in a trembling rush. “Oh, thank you sir!” Suddenly I felt great. I didn’t know about adrenalin in those days, but I knew something was pumping through me, making me feel as tall as the sky. I wanted to yell, jump, run the mile, do something. I ran out so I could cry in the hall where there was no one to see me. At the end of the day, Mr. Schmidt winked at me and said, “I hear you’re getting a scholarship jacket this year. His face looked as happy and innocent as a baby’s but I knew better. Without answering I gave him a quick hug and ran to the bus. I cried on the walk home again, but this time because I was so happy. I couldn’t wait to tell Grandpa and ran straight to the field. I joined him in row where he was working and without saying anything I crouched down and started pulling up the weeds with my hands. Grandpa worked alongside me for a few minutes, but he didn’t ask what had happened. After I had a little pile of weeds between the rows, I stood up and faced him.

“The principal said he’s making an exception for me, Grandpa, and I’m getting the jacket after all. That’s after I told him what you said.”

Grandpa didn’t say anything; he just gave me a pat on the shoulder and a smile. He pulled out the crumpled red handkerchief that he always carried in his back pocket and wiped the sweat off his forehead.

“Better go see if your grandmother needs any help with supper.”

I gave him a big grin. He didn’t fool me. I skipped and ran back to the house whistling some silly tune.