

## The Reluctant Partner

Amber loved her fifth grade's Spanish class. Mrs. Rogers didn't just teach Spanish grammar and vocabulary. She introduced customs and culture of Spanish speaking countries. The class had made a piñata two weeks ago.

"We're going to learn to *rumba*," announced Mrs. Rogers. "Some of you know what the *rumba* is, but for those who don't, it's a dance popular in Latin American countries. I'm going to show you on YouTube what the dance looks like."

The class gathered around Mrs. Rogers' laptop.

"The music makes you want to dance, doesn't it? For two days, we'll use half of the class time to learn to rumba in the gym," said Mrs. Rogers.

"I hope Brandon will be my partner," Amber said to Nita. "He's cute."

"I don't care who my partner is, as long as he doesn't step on my toes," Nita said.

In the gym, Mrs. Rogers assigned partners. Amber's shoulders stooped when Mrs. Rogers assigned Miguel to be her partner. They stooped some more when Nita and Brandon became partners.

Before Mrs. Rogers turned on the music on her iPhone, Amber gathered the courage to speak up.

"Mrs. Rogers," Amber asked. "Can I have a different partner? Miguel is new this year, and he doesn't speak much English."

Amber stole a glance at Miguel. He was looking at his shoes and didn't look happy either.

"Nita didn't speak much English when she came last year and now you're good friends. The two of you will be fine."

Without looking at each other, Amber and Miguel followed Mrs. Rogers' instructions. She put her left hand on his right shoulder. He placed his right hand on her waist. They held their other hands together at shoulder height.

"Vincente and I are going to demonstrate," said Mrs. Rogers as the music played. "He knows how to rumba. Watch us. Slow, quick, quick. Slow, quick, quick."

There were giggles and confusion when the students first tried. Most of them struggled to move with

the beat, sometimes tripping over the partner's toes. Amber and Miguel avoided each other's eyes and looked into the distance.

"Sway your hips a little more. Imagine you're dancing on a beach. Don't be too stiff. Follow the rhythm. One, two, three. One, two, three."

Amber closed her eyes to concentrate. Her hands were sweating. Suddenly, she heard Miguel's voice.

"Do like me. Look at me," Miguel said softly. Amber was surprised to hear him speak. He had never spoken to her before.

Miguel had a natural rhythm. He had told the class he was from the Dominican Republic. He must have watched people dancing the rumba or had learned how to. His hips swayed gently and he made it look so easy.

"Move like small wind blows you," Miguel explained. Amber imagined a breeze blowing her hips from side to side. It worked, she was swaying more smoothly and easily.

"That's good, Amber and Miguel!" Mrs. Rogers noticed the improvement.

Amber was sorry the class was over. Miguel smiled at her when the class was dismissed for lunch. She had not decided whether she would smile back when Miguel had already turned to leave the gym.

"Nita," Amber said at the lunch table. "That wasn't as bad as I thought."

"My toes are sore," Nita grumbled. "Brandon stepped all over them. Maybe Miguel will teach you something else tomorrow."

Miguel did just that at the next practice.

"Move this," said Miguel, touching Amber's shoulders.

Amber wiggled hers shoulders up and down. "They're called shoulders."

"Shoulders," he repeated.

He moved their held hands gently up and down, their shoulders rolling with the music.

"I can't do this and move my hips at the same time," said Amber, giggling.

"You O. K. Listen to music, easy, easy."

"You mean relax shoulders like this?" (contd. on p. 15)

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"Yes, relax, relax." Miguel repeated the new English word.

Amber was feeling more and more comfortable with the *rumba*. The music was infectious and made her want to keep dancing, with Miguel.

The class was having fun. Faces beamed and hips swayed.

"Nice work, boys and girls." Mrs. Rogers said, "Next week, we'll make guacamole. Class dismissed."

"Thank you for showing me the moves," Amber said to Miguel.

"You do good." Miguel smiled as he left for the lunchroom. "Thank you for teaching English words."

Nita and Amber carried their lunch trays, scanning for an empty table.

"Miguel's there by himself," Nita said.

The girls walked over to him,

"Would you like us to sit with you?" Amber asked.

He looked surprised and nodded with a grin.

"Lunch tastes better when you eat with friends." Amber said.

—*Fanny Wong, Chinese American author, New York.*