

**Francine Garcia
and the Recipe for Joy**

Beverley Brenna

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FRANCINE GARCIA & THE RECIPE FOR JOY

BEVERLEY BRENNAN





to the Rodriguez family





CHAPTER ONE

“It’s not forever,” Francine’s mother said. “It’s just for a month or so.”

“A month *is* forever,” said Francine.

“You and Alfond will have such a good time here at Auntie’s house,” her mother went on. “Your baby brother will have his surgery in Atlanta, and we’ll be back before you know it.” She gently tugged Francine’s long braid, but Francine jerked her head away.

“Ramón could get his operation in the Clayton hospital,” Francine said. “After all, that’s where he was born. Why can’t they fix Ramón’s heart right here?” She knew the answer, but she asked the question anyway.

“We’ve talked about this,” her mother said. “Honey, the big hospital in Atlanta has better doctors for the kind of problem Ramón has. And anyway, Florinda loves spending time

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with you and Alfond. You know Auntie Flora is looking forward to having you here.”

“Why?” asked Francine, reaching out her foot and giving her suitcase a kick. Then she nudged Ramón’s car seat, but the baby didn’t wake up.

“Why is Auntie Flora looking forward?” muttered Francine. “We come here all the time.”

“Francine, you are just trying to keep me talking,” said her mother. “Promise me you’ll be good.”

“*No hagas cosas buenas que parezcan malas,*” muttered Francine in Spanish. It was something her grandmother always said when they parted.

“Exactly. *Don’t even do good things that seem bad.*” Her mother knew the meaning of Abuela’s sayings, even though she didn’t always get the Spanish translations exactly right. “I’m counting on you,” Mama whispered, giving Francine’s shoulders a little squeeze. “Now... Papa is all ready to go. Be a good girl and help Auntie take care of Alfond. Remember that he’s only three. He might be homesick.”

Francine looked at Alfond, who was sitting hap-

pily at the dining room table with Auntie Flora. He had jam all over his face.

“I might be homesick,” muttered Francine, twisting away from her mother and going to stand beside the window. Tears filled her eyes and she rubbed at them angrily.

Across the street, a neighbour’s car pulled up, and a boy and a man started carrying grocery bags into a house. The boy was wearing a bright purple shirt and lime shorts. He looked like a kid she’d seen at school. The car was a Buick, Francine guessed. It had the kind of snub nose she’d always hated on cars.

“You’ll be a big help,” said Mama. “If you put your mind to it.”

“Why can’t I come with you and Papa?” Francine said, and her eyes felt hot. From where it sat on the driveway, their van looked blurry, but she saw her dad—from the driver’s seat—lift his hand and give her a wave. She’d probably left stuff she needed in the back seat of that van, but she wasn’t going to go and look for it now.

“We could leave Alfond with Auntie and—and

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I could come to Atlanta with Ramón,” Francine gulped. She took a deep breath. “I could go to school there and everything.”

“You’ll be a big help here,” her mother said firmly. “Papa and I will phone you tonight. And we will talk about all the fun you’ve had today.”

Francine’s mother picked up baby Ramón in his car seat and headed to the door. The boy and the man from across the street were still carrying grocery bags from their car. Suddenly, one of the paper bags ripped and a couple of red peppers dropped out.

At Francine’s house, Papa and Mama both liked to cook. Often the kitchen was filled with wonderful, spicy smells of things like enchiladas with fresh green salsa. Not like the smells at Auntie Flora’s house, thought Francine darkly. There weren’t any good smells here. Even though they’d visited Auntie Flora’s place lots of times, it wasn’t home.

Francine heard the door close behind her mother with a firm little click. She pushed herself away from the window and felt as if her lungs were falling into her feet. She wanted to scream and cry and

run after her mother. But she didn't. She glared at Alfond, who was poking another piece of corn tortilla into his mouth. Whoever heard of putting jam on corn tortillas? *Auntie Flora doesn't know how to make them properly*, Francine thought. *Everyone knows you're supposed to fill them with tomatoes and hot sauce.*

Auntie Flora smiled at her, but Francine couldn't make herself smile in return. Auntie Flora and her mother looked almost identical. Like big white doves. There was an empty space in Francine's chest where she thought her lungs used to be.

"Would you like anything more for breakfast?" asked Auntie Flora. "Your mama brought lots of tortillas, and I made some lemonade from my special recipe."

"Nobody wants lemonade in the morning," said Francine, giving her suitcase another kick.

Auntie Flora should know better than to give us lemonade for breakfast, she thought. *You're supposed to get rice milk at breakfast time.* Horchata, her grandmother called it. Not lemonade.

"Maybe you want to unpack your things," said

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Auntie Flora. “I’ve emptied all the drawers in the spare room and if you leave the bottom two for Alfond then you can use the rest. And there’s lots of space in the closet, too.”

“I’m leaving all my things in my suitcase,” said Francine. “So it’ll be easier when Mama and Papa come back for me.”

There was a little pause. Then her aunt said, “Well...your things will get pretty wrinkled...”

“I like wrinkled clothes,” Francine said, jumping up and grabbing the suitcase. She hauled it into the spare room and slammed the door. This was her room, now. Hers and Alfond’s. Auntie Flora had put his mattress on the floor beside her bed and covered both with bright patchwork quilts.

Francine flung herself onto her quilt, but the bed didn’t bounce at all. *What is this bed made of?* she thought. *Cement? Rocks? Diamond, the hardest natural material on earth?*

Maybe she’d better unpack the new dress so she could wear it to church on Sunday. And she wanted to wear it to school, too, after the long weekend was over. She imagined all the girls and even

some of the boys laughing if the dress was very wrinkled. Elephants, they had learned just the other day, were wrinkled because the extra skin kept them cool. And the last thing Francine wanted to be called was an elephant. Even if they did have the largest brains of any land animal.

Everything else could stay in the suitcase, but that dress would have to go into the closet. Francine yanked it out and spread it on top of her quilt. The dress was made of brightly flowered cotton, and the skirt had swished elegantly around Francine's legs when she'd tried it on at the store.

Not only was the dress pretty, but it was practical. There were two front pockets on the skirt that Francine imagined could hold all sorts of things. Her magnifying glass. A little empty pill bottle she kept for catching insects. And an eye dropper, once she got a new one.

After she spent a few minutes admiring the dress as it lay on her bed, Francine closed the suitcase and shoved it out of sight under the bed. She pushed so hard that a little china dog fell off the bedside table and onto the carpet.

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“Francine, would you like to make paper snowflakes?” called Auntie Flora from the other side of the door. “I bought sparkly paper in case you’d like to use it. Or we could make paper airplanes? And then later we’ll go to the park!”

“SNOWFLAKES!” Francine could hear Alfond yelling. “AIRPLANES!”

Who wanted to make paper snowflakes in a place that barely ever had snow? They should make raindrops, because Rabun county was one of the rainiest places in Georgia. And who wanted to make paper airplanes instead of real ones? Especially when there were over seventy-three manufacturers of real planes right around here.

Francine reached down to pick up the china dog. Luckily it wasn’t broken. It was a brown and white collie, and it was hollow with a small hole on the bottom. Francine pushed one finger into the hole, just to see, but when she tried to pull her finger out, she couldn’t. It was stuck.

“Francine!” Her aunt was calling again from the hallway. “Want to join us?”

“No!” Francine answered. “No, I don’t want to

do any of that.”

Her aunt opened the door.

“Everything all right in here?” Auntie Flora was carrying Alfond on one hip. “Francine...what *would* you like to do today?”

“You’re supposed to knock before you come in!” cried Francine. “That’s the rules!” She thrust her hand behind her back, and the china dog went with it.

“Giddy-up, Auntie!” shrieked Alfond.

“I suppose I have a lot to learn,” said Auntie Flora and Francine thought she saw a twinkle in her eye. “I never was exactly good at following rules!” her aunt went on.

Francine rolled her eyes up at the ceiling the way her mother hated, but Auntie Flora just kept on smiling. *I bet her house could fold up in an earthquake and that grin wouldn’t come off*, thought Francine. The risk of an earthquake in Georgia was lower than the national average, so it probably wouldn’t happen. But if it did, Francine was sure Auntie Flora would still be smiling.

“So...what would you like to do today?” her aunt repeated.

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“Uh, I’m not feeling too good,” lied Francine, flopping awkwardly onto her back with the china dog pressed up against her spine. “I think I’m gonna go to sleep.”

“To sleep!” said her aunt. “When there’s all sorts of fun to be had on a nice, bright Saturday?”

“Fun!” hollered Alfond, squirming out of Auntie’s arms and sliding down onto the floor.

“There’s nothing fun to do around here,” muttered Francine, but she didn’t think Auntie Flora heard her. Then she squeezed her eyes shut and hoped everyone would go away.



CHAPTER TWO

But everyone didn't go away. Francine lay still with her eyes shut for about four seconds and then something crashed on top of her.

"Alfond!" she cried, opening her eyes. "Get off!"

"¡Hola!" he said. "Be a airplane, Frannie!"

Francine tried to roll over but her right hand was still behind her back with the china dog stuck on it. The dog's hard surface dug into her skin.

"Get off!" she yelled at him. "Get off, Alfond!"

"FRANNIE BE A AIRPLANE!" he hollered, grabbing at her arms.

"Okay, okay," Auntie Flora was saying nervously. "Time to stop playing and come on out for...for... something to eat. It's probably snack time, right? Francine?"

"Yeah, snack time," Francine panted, pushing

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at Alfond with her free hand. “You like snack time, right?”

“SNACK TIME!” he bellowed, tumbling off Francine and racing into the hall.

“My goodness, he has a lot of energy today,” said Auntie Flora, running after him.

“He has a lot of energy every day,” said Francine. Now that she was alone in the room, she tugged and tugged at the china dog, but it wouldn’t come off. She twisted until her finger started to swell up. But the dog wouldn’t budge. She could hear her aunt in the kitchen opening drawers and banging cupboards. It wouldn’t be long until Auntie Flora came back to see what was going on.

In sudden desperation, Francine whacked the china dog against the bedside table until it broke in two. She pulled the pieces off her hand and shoved them under the bed beside her suitcase. She pushed them right up against a cardboard box that was back there taking up most of the space. *Later I’ll hide them somewhere else, she thought, rubbing her finger. I’ll hide them where nobody will ever find them.*

Maybe her finger was broken and she'd have to go to the hospital in Atlanta! But she knew it wasn't broken. The sad truth was that her finger was already feeling better.

"Is he allowed pickles?" Auntie Flora was calling. "Francine? Is Alfond allowed to eat pickles?"

"Sometimes," said Francine, going out to the kitchen. "But when he eats pickles he..." She stopped. Alfond was standing on a chair, and he already had a half-eaten pickle in each hand.

"You're supposed to sit down when you eat," Francine told Alfond. "Otherwise you might choke and die."

"Well, I hope that won't happen!" laughed Auntie Flora. "But your sister's right. Sit down, honey-bee!"

But Alfond had already gobbled up both pickles and now he was back at the dining room table.

"I do snowflakes!" he said, picking up a piece of sparkly paper. Francine went and perched on a chair beside him.

"Like this, Alfond," she told him, folding the paper in half, and then in half again. "Where's the

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scissors?”

“Oh, I thought I’d do the cutting...” started Auntie Flora.

“We’re allowed to cut at home,” Francine said. “We use scissors all the time.”

“Well, all right...” said their aunt, putting a pair of sewing shears on the table.

“Ooh, these are sharp ones,” said Francine, feeling a bit happy in spite of herself. “Look, Alfond! Look at our snowflake.”

With a few careful snips, Francine made a sparkly pink snowflake full of tiny hearts. She went over and pressed it up against the window.

“This would be a good one for Valentine’s Day!” she said. “Too bad Valentine’s Day is already over.”

As she looked out the window, she saw a big, white delivery van park across the street. Then its driver hauled a couple of men’s suits into the same house she’d seen the boy enter earlier. *There was a fancy name for those suits*, she thought. *Tuxedos*. Francine wondered what was going on over there.

Suddenly her aunt shrieked. “Oh no, Alfond!”

Alfond had picked up the scissors and snipped

a big hole in the front of his shirt.

“Bad boy!” yelled Francine. “That was really bad, Alfond!”

“Well, I’m sure he didn’t mean...” began Auntie Flora, but she was drowned out by Alfond’s howls.

“I not a bad boy!” he yelled through his tears. “I not one!”

Francine grabbed the scissors and began studiously cutting another snowflake.

“I’m gonna make tons of ‘em,” she said.

“I do it!” wailed Alfond. “I do snowflakes!”

“Let’s get you another shirt,” said Auntie Flora. “I’ll have to put a patch on this one.”

Alfond took two steps toward the hallway and stopped.

“Ma-ma,” he said uncertainly. “Where’s Mama?”

“Your Mama and Papa have taken Ramón to Atlanta, remember?” said Auntie Flora.

“Mama!” he yelled, charging down the hall and into the spare room. “Mama?”

Then Francine heard a sound she wished she hadn’t. Sometimes when Alfond ate pickles, he...

“Alfond!” she yelled, running after him. “Don’t

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throw up in the bedroom! Go to the bathroom! Don't you dare throw up on—"

But it was too late. Her brother had thrown up the pickles, the tortillas, the jam, and a number of other unidentifiable things. All down the skirt of Francine's new dress.

"—MY DRESS!" bellowed Francine.