



In Mexico, everyone calls thirteen-year-old *gringa* Hayley by the new name she has chosen: Margarita. Life includes endless fireworks, beautiful butterflies, colorful fiestas, a mysterious ghost, and even a glamorous part as a movie extra with her new friend, Lili. Hayley's having so much fun, she almost forgets about her parents' recent separation.

But there are also difficult lessons to be learned, as poverty forces Lili's father and other men from the village to work as migrant laborers in the United States. When they encounter hardship and prejudice, Hayley begins to understand the true meaning of family unity...

Awards and Praise for TRUTH AND SALSA

"Hayley is a **refreshing** heroine, warm and realistic... The writing is **engaging**, and Lowery has created a **strong** sense of place through **vivid** descriptions of local festivals, scenery, and day-to-day life in the town." —*School Library Journal*

- * 2007 Bank Street College of Education Best Children's Books of the Year
- * 2006 Society of School Librarians International Book Awards (honor book, Language Arts K-6)
- * 2007 Kansas State Reading Circle (Middle School) / Kansas National Education Association



LOWERY

Truth and Salsa



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For los niños who still wait for Dad...

—L. L.

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Adios, Kalamazoo!

I'd like to tell you I have silky caramel skin, my eyes are dark as the night sky, and my shiny raven hair touches my waist when I brush it out. But that would be a lie. And besides, would that make me sound cooler than I really am? Someday you might meet me and you'd be all disappointed, and you'd never believe another word that came out of my big mouth.

It's like what people do when they date on the Internet. They make stuff up, like they're tall and blonde and love to sail. Then they never want to meet the other person face-to-face because if they did, the truth would come out. My guess is that a lot of them miss hooking up with their soul mates because they're too chicken to be honest about who they are, warts and all.

So here's the truth: I have tons of freckles and my skin is so white it practically glows in the dark. My curly hair is a natural shade of squirrel—not really brown, not really red. My eyes are green. So I figure I won't exactly blend in when I get to Mexico.

My dad would probably be happy about that. He thinks I'm going from normal, respectable Michigan to a place so

backward they don't even speak English. So third-world they've probably never heard of e-mail or iPods or even vacuum cleaners.

Actually I don't really know what my dad would think, since he hardly ever calls anyway. I just remember what he said about Gran when she left for Mexico. I can still hear him now: "Mexico? You'll stick out like a red, white, and blue thumb."

I'm thinking of tweaking my name just a smidge to help me fit in a little better. How does this sound? "My name is..." Wait, excuse me, let's try this in Spanish. "*Me llamo* Margarita Flynn." Other than the Flynn, I'd say it works great.

My parents named me Hayley Margaret. My middle name is in honor of my dad's mom, who died before I was born. Frankly I'm liking the sound of Margarita. Worldly. Sophisticated. Romantic, don't you think? Margarita means "daisy." The name Hayley just does not translate, not even in Spanish class, which is where I got the idea to switch to Margarita in the first place.

Anyway, I'm sure if I tried my new name out on my dad, he'd give me one of his I'm-not-impressed grunts. But he doesn't get a say when he hasn't even offered for me to go live with him for a while. I'm baggage, and he wants to travel unencumbered, I guess.

Here's the deal: back in April, Dad split. Disappeared in our Lexus—oops, *his* Lexus—with nothing but his laptop and cell phone and the twenty-eight perfectly pressed suits from his closet. He left a message on the answering machine about how my mom had better figure out a serious

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way to get some help and how he had to go live his own life. And oh yeah: “Hayley, take care of your mother.”

I tried to do that. But I guess I’m not very good at it. Three months have passed since then, and things have not gotten better. Mom has a problem with me going to Mexico, too. She thinks it’s all her fault I have to go off to some faraway country where I can’t even drink the water.

The truth about my mom is hard to put into words. My stomach turns into a huge empty hole every time I start. I mean, I’m usually very open and talkative, but some things sit way down inside you and need time before they’re ready to come out as words. If you don’t mind, I’d rather not talk about the whole Mom thing right now.

Anyway, I’m secretly very excited about this Mexico adventure, except for one thing: I have no idea how I’m going to survive without my friends, especially Samantha. She’s the only one who knows me inside out and upside down. We’ve been seeing each other twelve hours every day to make up for the 4,383 hours I’ll be gone, which is the number of hours I figured out there are in six months.

Sam’s been helping me cram anything and everything I can fit into the two-suitcase maximum the airline allows. I’m bringing pictures of my friends, my favorite books, my Spanish dictionary, and Farley, my beat-up teddy frog. I packed my paints and brushes, too. Sam gave me some rolled-up canvases to take with me. That’s because Ms. Stucky, our art teacher, told us the art canvas in Mexico smells like horse glue. Nice.

But clothes? I have no idea.

“What do people wear down there?” I asked Gran on the

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phone. Gran's been living in Mexico for three years—she just upped and moved one September. We've never visited her there because my father thinks she's lost her marbles. She does come back to stay with us every Christmas, and I have to say, after careful consideration, I don't think she's at all crazy. Just...quirky.

"People wear whatever they want," Gran told me. That was not enough information. So I tried Sam, since she's Mexican American.

"Do you think the girls wear long skirts with lacy blouses?" I ask. That could be fun, with my freckly shoulders peeking out over frilly white lace.

"Probably," Sam says.

A big help she is.

Has she ever been to Mexico? No.

Does she speak Spanish? *No mucho*. She picked French even though I begged her to be in Spanish class with me.

Does she want to come with me to keep her best friend company? She does, but she can't.

¡Qué lástima! What a shame!

It's not that I don't want to go. I do. I'm excited that *me llamo* Margarita, and I can't wait to be with Gran in Mexico.

But once in a while when I'm lying in bed alone, that big empty black hole starts opening up inside me again. Which means I'm already missing Mom.

Moose Tracks

It all started with a letter from Gran telling me how beautiful Mexico is. Inside the envelope was a little silvery heart, like a charm for a bracelet. I didn't know it meant anything until she called a few weeks later. It was exactly June 19, as a matter of fact. Just after school got out. I was heading to the Dairy Berry for a Moose Tracks sundae with Sam.

“How about you come live with me for a while, so your mom can take a bit of time to deal with her problems?” asked Gran.

What? In Mexico?

“Thanks, Gran, but I don't think so,” I told her. “I have a lot going on.” Actually I didn't have much at all going on besides having a lazy and wonderful summer. But my mom needed me. Since Dad left, she'd been having a hard time getting on with her life.

Sorry...that's not the whole truth.

The real truth? My mother is broken. She's like a house whose windows got shattered by flying bricks. Now cold air whips right through, freezing the warm corners inside.

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Then Gran explained that my mom needed to go away for a while, like for *six months*, to a depression treatment center in Chicago. I felt the phone freeze in my hand. I looked across the table at my mom, who was sitting there clutching her fingers tight, gazing at me wide-eyed like a deer stunned by headlights. She's going into some loony bin? *My mom*? I wanted to hang up, but I couldn't move.

"It'll be very good for your mom," Gran chirped. "And for you, too, Hayley Cakes."

She went on about how hard it'd been for Mom and me, and how healing this place was supposed to be, that Mom'd be fit as a fiddle before too long. I held the phone away from my ear and stared at my mom.

"Why didn't you tell me?" I asked her. I could tell that my voice sounded hurt and scared and mad all at the same time. What I really wanted to say was: "How come you're sitting right here and somebody needs to call from *Mexico* to tell me what's going on?" But Mom is so fragile, I have to be careful about words that just pop out.

"So we think it's a good idea for you to stay with me for a while. We'll get to know each other in a whole new way," I heard Gran saying. "It'll be fun."

Stop! I wanted to shout. First of all, I felt like a Ping-Pong ball. Gran on the phone. Mom at the table. Me bouncing from one to the other in the middle.

Second, I had a bunch of questions.

Why was I the one who had to turn my whole life topsy-turvy when none of this was my fault? How did all this happen without anybody asking me?

I could *not* go to Mexico. I had to change their minds. I

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tried the only leverage I could think of at the moment:

“Can’t I stay with Dad?” I asked, even though I already knew the answer. No. I’m part of all the stuff he left behind so he wouldn’t be encumbered, remember? There was a weird silence and then Gran sighed a deep sigh.

“I’m afraid not, sugar. Your dad’s not exactly acting like Father of the Year these days. To tell you the truth, I’d like to march into his fancy-pants office and wring his darn neck.”

I tried another tactic.

“What about school?” I asked.

“They have schools in Mexico, for heaven’s sake,” said Gran. “You can really work on your art here. You can study Spanish, or guitar, or whatever else floats your boat.”

“It will give me time to get my act together, sweetie,” whispered my mom. She had a tremble in her voice.

I couldn’t believe this was really going to happen. Obviously everyone had talked this whole plan over and it was already carved in stone. There was nothing I could do about it.

“Fine,” I said. “Whatever.” It wasn’t really fine at all. “I’ll talk to you tomorrow, Gran.”

I hung up. I had to get out of there. Get some air. Get some ice cream.

“Sam’s waiting for me,” I told my mom. “I’ve got to go.”

When I got back, I was feeling a little calmer since I’d gotten a chance to cry into my sundae about leaving for six months. Sam cried, too. A best friend is somebody you can sob into your Moose Tracks with.

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Mom was still at the table, but now she had the atlas open to Mexico.

“You might really like Mexico, honey,” she said. “It’s sunny.”

Hmmm...I tried to switch gears for Mom’s sake, like I learned when Mom and I went to therapy together so I could understand what was happening with her and me when Dad left us. There are at least two truths to every situation. Sometimes you have to force yourself to look at the positive side, no matter how hard that might be.

It took a minute, but soon I conjured up a rosy picture of me in Mexico: My toes were wiggling at the edge of the ocean, a gauzy white top floating over my teeny tropical bikini.

“Gran lives here, in a town called San Miguel de Allende,” Mom told me, pointing on the map. She was pointing far from the ocean, to the very middle of Mexico. “It’s in the Sierra Madre Mountains.”

Huh? Wait just a sec here. I was moving to a dot in the middle of a foreign country, where we’d already established that they speak a different language, and now it’s *hundreds of miles* from a beach?

My dreamy bikini scene came crashing down around me, and reality thunked like a boulder into the pit of my stomach. My image switched to what was probably closer to the truth about San Miguel: There was one dusty road down the middle of a town lined with those Mexican bars they call *cantinas*. And burros delivered the mail. Several days late.

“It will be an adventure, honey,” said Mom. Her eyes were pleading, *forgive me*. “It’s just for six months.”

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Six months! Didn't she know that six months away from Kalamazoo, from my friends, from my school, was f...o...r...e...v...e...r?

But I made myself get up and give Mom the biggest hug I could muster. Her body felt as fragile as a fawn's. I just wished I could make her happy.