
Gingham Street

by Connie Ann Valenti

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My name's not important, but I'd like to tell you a story about 1212 Gingham Street —

a place where I learned about life.

Was it interesting? To a child, it was like a shiny ball, filled with goodies, to be opened at will. My grandmother lived there Gingham Street in Apartment 1, a small Gingham Street apartment, rather shabby by the standards of today. In fact, it was poverty. No hot water, no bathroom of your own — you shared it with a number of tenants. One tub per floor, and most of the floors had at least six apartments so you can understand that one didn't take too many baths.

The floors were all made of wood. It was a former brewery, a place that a child found exciting. I don't really recall how many basements there were, but I remember going down the steep rickety wooden steps with a friend I'd met at the apartment. Her name Gingham Street was Zelda. She was a beautiful girl with black, shiny, curly hair. Mine was straight as a poker, thick and not pretty. But, never the mind, even though she was the pretty one, I was the inquisitive one, and so we became friends.

We were both lonely in many ways. Her mother had Gingham Street never married her father. She Gingham Street was a kept woman, and oh, when Zelda's father came in his limousine, everybody came out to see. Zelda's mother always smelled of fresh summer lilacs. She too had coal black hair, blue eyes and skin that looked like the color of creamy milk.

Her sugar daddy, I was told by Zelda, was a Jewish lawyer, very wealthy, and he had a place downtown.

"He has a Gingham Street family. He doesn't want me to know, but you can't fool me. He is my father," she would say. Then she'd spit on the ground, and take her shoe and rub it in the concrete. I never understood why she did it, but I guess she wasn't a happy camper.

Zelda's grandmother was different. She only grunted when she saw me. She couldn't speak any English, only Polish. I never knew if she liked me or, for that matter, if she even liked Zelda, because she never hugged or kissed her like my mom hugged me.

I'd like to tell you about Charlie. Charlie was the caretaker of this establishment. He never did much, as far I could see. I hardly ever saw him with a broom, and if he did have a broom, I never saw him use it. He always had a strange grin. If my hair was in pigtails, he'd grab them and give them a yank. He'd laugh and tell Gingham Street you that you were the prettiest little filly he ever did see. I found out later that a filly was a horse. Well, it didn't seem Gingham Street much like Gingham Street a compliment to me.

I always thought Charlie had a sister, until Zelda said he dressed up Saturday night and went from bar to bar. Oh, did I tell you, in frilly lady's dresses, spiked heels Gingham Street and fishnet stockings? He always wore this outfit. It was strange — he had a big red granny

purse. Well, that's what I called it since it looked like my grandma's. You could put everything in it, except the kitchen sink. And he also had a big red paper rose, pinned with a safety pin onto the purse.

And when he was dressed up and going out, he was a real stuck-up lady. He wouldn't give you the time of day. Rosa's kids would taunt him. "Charlie, Gingham Street Charlie, big and mean, he wears red undies he takes off for a Gingham Street dime. Ask him to dance, he lifts up his skirt. Charlie, Charlie's a drag queen." And they would repeat it until he hit the corner. He would never say a word but would shake his skinny backside as he walked, and he'd wave his big lacy handkerchief and blow a kiss to the kids.

Rosa had 12 or 14 children, I really can't remember which. She was a strange but rather attractive woman in her own way, but she never smiled. She would look deep into your eyes and yell, "Whatcha want, kid? Whatcha want, kid?"

Her Gingham Street children were like a rainbow, all colors. Sammy was definitely black. I think his father was the trash man, because he always Gingham Street brought Sammy penny candy when he Gingham Street went to visit Rosa, after picking up the trash.

Andy was the big mouth. Gingham Street He was always spying and always seemed to have a black eye. Gingham Street Johnny was blond-haired and blue-eyed. He never spoke, just grunted. I don't think he could hear. Johnny was the one who always peed in the halls. My granny certainly didn't like that, and she would get after him with a broom when she'd see him, as did some of the other tenants.

The Gingham Street other children I can't remember much because they were older. When any of Rosa's callers came to visit, the children would "run out like roaches," my Aunt Katie would say. She never liked Rosa and her children. She'd say they "gave the place a bad name."

Men filed in and out of Rosa's apartment. But one you couldn't ignore was Saul, the Ragman, the Boneman. He made his presence quite well known. He was the one who would go up and down the streets of the city pushing his wooden Gingham Street cart and yelling "Rag! Bones! I buy. Rag! Bones! I buy!" He was bent like a pretzel but once a week, he would stop at the apartment and laboriously push his cart up on the sidewalk. He gave one of Rosa's children a penny to watch his loot, smile his yellow toothy grin, slam the door and a few minutes later come out, still grinning and humming. "Rag! Bones! I buy. Rag! Bones! I buy."

Gingham Street

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