

Paula the Ugly

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Things have not changed much in the village of Santa Maria in the last hundred years, or in the last two hundred. The men bring home the fish, that the women salt and wrap in leaves to take to market at Ciudad del Oro. They bring home the money and place it on the table. It is never enough.

Everybody has something else they sell; vegetables from the garden, hand-sewn lace, chickens, but Juan Miguel sells puppies. Every year, his dog Flora makes soft, fluffy puppies that the rich families of Ciudad del Oro buy for pets.

Juan's daughter, Christina, takes the 10-week old puppies to market in her wheel barrow. Buy my puppies, buy these soft, friendly puppies. They will be loyal to you more than your friends. That's a joke her father makes; she doesn't know what it means.

Juan and Christina examine the puppies in Flora's litter. Juan picks up a previously unnoticed ball of puppy fluff. "What will you do with her, Papa?" Juan displays the pup to Christina. The poor, happy, puppy has a misshapen leg, a misshapen foot, a floppy ear, a straight ear, and furless patches on her face. "This puppy will not sell, Christina. We can't afford to keep her. Better to send her away now." Christina runs beside Juan Miguel. "But Papa, the people of Ciudad del Oro, they like things that are different. They'll buy her because she's different." "They like things that are different, if they are different and beautiful. Nobody buys an ugly difference." "But she's just a week. Maybe everything will clear up. Just give her a little more time." Juan Miguel, not a cruel man, regrets sharing this grownup task with Christina, who is clearly not ready to condemn an ugly puppy to life as a work dog. "All right, Christina, we'll give the little dog some time."

As the days pass, Christina watches the little pup, who she secretly names Paula the Ugly after an old legend. Paula's looks do not improve; she is no doubt, a grotesque little dog. But she doesn't seem to mind hopping instead of walking, she springs into place as readily as the other pups walk. "Look, papa she can do what other pups do." No matter, no one will buy her. By the time the pups are four weeks old, Paula is clearly the leader. She leads her brothers and sisters a merry chase around their nest, and is the first to attack Christina's shoe in the morning.

"Oh Paula, you're ugly and bad." Christina laughs at her ugly pet. "Sit, girl." And Paula does at four weeks. "Bark, girl." And she learns. "Come, girl, stay, girl, roll over girl. Dance on your back legs girl." As the weeks pass, Paula is always at Christina's side. Mother Dog Flora favors ugly Paula, too. "Don't worry, Flora, we'll find Paula a home. When people see her tricks, surely they'll buy her."

Christina wheels the wheelbarrow full of pups to market, Flora runs along side. Christina brings a hoop; when puppy Paula jumps through the hoop as she has so many times before, surely someone will buy her.

It isn't long before a rich woman picks up one of the splendid pups. "But Senora, look at this one This one is so smart. Surely there is room in your heart for one who is best, is funny and loyal, though not like the rest. Watch this." Christina leads ugly Paula, but the puppy refuses to sit or bark or jump through the hoop; indeed seems to make herself more goofy, one ear up, one ear flopped, and tongue hanging out. As soon as the lady leaves with one of the pretty pups, Paula leaps through the hoop as if to say, I'll do it for you but don't send me away.

All the puppies are sold but one; ugly, happy, Paula, yaps and leaps around her beloved Christina. Juan Miguel comes from the dock. Christina hands him the money, and Juan slips a rope around Paula's neck. "But Poppa, she can earn her keep by doing tricks for strangers. They'll give her coins like at a circus." I've seen no tricks, Christina, child don't make up tales. Christina grabs the rope and gives Ugly Paula commands: sit girl. But she doesn't. Bark Paula, but she won't. Roll over girl. Just a wag of her pitiful tail. Juan gently takes the rope from his daughter and leads the dog away, Flora nipping at his heels. Christina runs along side. She tries to be brave but the deepest saddest wail comes from her young throat. Juan turns in surprise to stare at his anguished daughter. Paula the Ugly can't stand to see her mistress in agony. She runs and licks away Christina's tears, barks, and sits, and rolls over, and does back flips in the air. Christina holds out her hoop, and Paula jumps through and through and back again. Flora barks loudly, saying see, see what my ugly little doggy can do. Juan didn't know there was so much devotion grown between the two dogs and his daughter. He hands the rope to Christina. "I guess she'll bring in a penny or two." He walks quickly away so Christina does not see that his eyes are damp. Christina squeezes her dogs; Paula you are ugly, you are surely grotesque, who could have guessed that you'd turn out the best. the end.