

Cynthia's Story

Toddler daughter presents new set of challenges

By Jennifer Torres

EDITOR'S NOTE: *After a childhood scarred by abuse, and an adolescence fraught with gangs, drugs and pregnancy, Cynthia Rosas, 21, believes she is about to begin a new kind of life. It starts with her boyfriend, Chris Jaramillo, their baby, Chiyalia, and her older daughter, Harmony, whom she has just reclaimed after leaving her with another woman to be cared for by her for almost two years ago.*

STOCKTON - It is a late summer evening in 2008 when Cynthia Rosas gets home with Harmony. She borrows three diapers from a downstairs neighbor and puts the child to bed. She has a crib for her, but no mattress, so Harmony sleeps on top of some stuffed animals, covered with a blanket.

The next morning, Harmony is wandering the apartment with wild curls and a heavy diaper.

"C'mon, Mama, let's change your Pamper." Cynthia isn't dressed herself. It's just before 8 a.m., and she had wanted to be on the bus by now to make it to the welfare office early.

Harmony won't follow her to the bedroom for a diaper change. She digs her bare toes into the hallway carpet and stares up at her mom. She was a month old when Cynthia left her in Livingston with a boyfriend's mother. Now, she's about to turn 2, and after spending her first night in Cynthia's apartment, she is quietly, confusedly, asking for "Papi" and "Mami."

Cynthia is frustrated. She should be Mami to Harmony. "They never corrected her."

Cynthia's younger sister, Trinidad, and Trinidad's boyfriend, Steve, are staying at the apartment for a few days. They are on the couch, under a blanket, with Cynthia's 5-month-old baby, Chiyalia, between them. Chris Jaramillo, Cynthia's boyfriend, is already at work in a Stockton warehouse.

Cynthia goes to the bathroom, comes back with a hairbrush. Harmony walks away from her, into the kitchen.

"Where you going, Kid? I gotta brush your hair."

"What?"

"You're coming with me today."

Harmony will not come to her. Cynthia hands the brush to Steve. "Here you go, Kid. You're good at stuff like this."

Steve hands the brush back. "What I am gonna do with this?"

Trinidad gets up from the couch, takes the brush, takes Harmony's hand. "Come 'ere," she says. "You want to get pretty? Let's do you sexy." She walks the child to the bathroom, sits her up on the sink and runs some water.

Cynthia calls after them, "Mama, you need to get your hair combed, OK?" Then she turns to Steve.

"Steve, can I wear your shorts if it's OK with my sister?" She doesn't have her own, and she has heard it could be 109 degrees today.

Trinidad yells out from the bathroom. "No, that's the only ones I have to wear." She looks back down at Harmony. "Is your hair going into a ponytail, or what?"

When Trinidad is finished, Harmony's hair is slick with gel, and pulled into a tight ponytail at the top of her head. Cynthia asks if she wants some milk.

"Juice."

"OK, I'll get you some juice. You gotta come with me though."

Cynthia collapses onto the couch. There is a cartoon on television. Finally, Harmony runs to her mother, points to the TV, and says, "Sponge Bob."

"I see him," Cynthia says. Harmony crawls onto her lap.

Later, on the bus ride from north Stockton into downtown, apartment complexes blur into duplexes blur into single-family homes, and Cynthia starts to daydream.

"We'll have our own stuff, our own washer-dryer."

Harmony, standing up on the seat, points at dogs, and claps and laughs.

The bus continues south into neighborhoods where Cynthia used to be known as "Princess." Where she once judged a fight between two gang members. Where, even though she never had any money, she never had any trouble getting meth. Where, she says, she was the "fastest little girl you could ever meet."

Being back here still makes her mouth water. She avoids it as much as she can.

They are downtown. Cynthia carries Harmony off the bus and stops to buy her some sandals - she was barefoot when Cynthia picked her up in Livingston - before walking to the welfare office.

She needs to add Harmony to her case file and has some questions about a letter she recently received. It's 9:35 a.m. when she signs up to talk to a supervisor.

She takes her numbered ticket, sits down on a green plastic chair and fans herself with a folder. The lobby is full of women rocking babies and handing juice boxes and little bags of Cheerios to impatient toddlers.

There are girls Cynthia knows from shelters, from treatment programs, from other lines at other government offices.

"I didn't know you had a kid," she says to one of them. "Can I see her?"

It is after 11 a.m. when her number appears in red lights on one of the lobby's monitors. She goes to a window where she is told she must wait for her caseworker to call her on the phone and set up another appointment on another day.

By now, Harmony is tired and fussy. She is dragging her feet and crying as Cynthia leaves the office and tries to walk her back to the bus stop.

On the way, she runs into a woman she met while in jail. The woman, pushing her own child in a stroller, looks at Harmony, raises an eyebrow and says, "Oh, Girl, you need a spanking."

She picks her up and tells Cynthia she also needs a diaper change.

"She won't even stay still long enough for me to do that."

The woman pulls a diaper from her backpack, lays Harmony down and changes her.

"You need to give her ass a time out," she says, as she fastens the adhesive tabs deftly, confidently. "Make her have a certain place where she has to go if she's bad."

Cynthia says, "Thank you," takes her daughter, calm again, and walks to the bus. On the way home, she starts planning Harmony's second birthday party. It has to be special, she says, because she missed her first.

She thinks she'll have enough money left on her welfare card to order a cake from WalMart. "I want a piñata, but I don't know."

She will ask Chris' mom to make enchiladas and will ask other guests to bring sodas and side dishes. She will handwrite invitations on pink stationery.

The party is held a few weeks later on the lawn outside Cynthia's apartment. Harmony and Chiyalia are wearing new summer dresses and matching sneakers that Chris bought.

He chases Harmony, and she giggles.

Her mouth is stained red with strawberry soda, and her fingers are caked with Doritos crumbs.

Cynthia laughs and picks her up. "See, I want to kiss you, but right now, you're not that kissable."