



## Aracely Makes a Friend

During the winter holidays the quaint village of Kleinedorf filled with people, most of whom came from towns and cities far away. They visited the shops, bought handcrafted objects and holiday ornaments, and drank steaming cups of creamy hot chocolate with just a touch of mint. After the fireworks on New Year's Eve and the next day's celebration welcoming the new year, the town emptied of its temporary residents and returned to normal as a town of fewer than 200 people.

The night after the festivities ended, Aracely Gensler wiped the fog from her bedroom window and looked out onto the narrow street in front of her home. Lanterns created a golden glow on the snow that covered it and illuminated the front of the house across from hers. As the snow turned to ice, the starlight glittered on the surface of the road like sparkling images in glass.

After the bustling of the months of November and December, all was finally silent there in that cluster of shops and dwellings tucked in the mountainside. In those two months up to the night before, every room in her family's small inn had been filled with visitors. By that evening, all but two rooms were empty—that of her parents and her own, what had once been the bedroom of her two sisters until they both joined their older brother at the university a hundred miles away. Although Aracely had looked forward to moving into that room—larger than her previous one the size of a closet and with an actual window—she missed her siblings very much.

She heard two knocks. "Time for bed, munchkin. School tomorrow."

"Yes, mama." She let out a sigh. 'School' was only her, seated at the kitchen table or the small desk in the sitting room, learning and practicing science and math for several hours every day. She also read books of all types, especially history and literature, which she never found to

be a chore. All the children left in Kleinedorf were babies or toddlers, all too young to begin serious studies. The older children in all the families were off to school, just like her sisters and brother.

The next day in the kitchen, after the morning lesson, her mother stirred the soup for lunch and her father pulled a loaf of fresh baked bread from the oven. Aracely chewed on an apple while she studied the shelves in the pantry. They were filled with jars of pickled carrots, asparagus, and cucumbers, and krauts from dandelion leaves, nettles and cabbages of white and purple.

“I miss the holiday,” her mother said. “But I’m always glad when it’s over and quiet again.”

“I feel the same,” her father said. “Now I can get back to my woodworking.”

“And I’m looking forward to my painting and needlework. We don’t have a guest reserved for two more weeks. Time to get everything back in order.”

Aracely narrowed her eyes when she noticed something in one of the many jars on the shelf. She picked it up, slipped off her stool and brought it into the kitchen.

“Mother, why is this bubbling?”

Both of her parents looked over at her. “It’s alive, munchkin,” her father said.

“It bubbles up because it’s a living environment that creates the sauerkraut from the cabbage. Isn’t that wonderful?” Her mother sprinkled salt into the soup.

“Yes.” Aracely looked at the jar more closely. One tiny bubble rose up the side of the glass. “So the sauerkraut is alive. Will it grow out of the jar and sneak into my room at night?”

Her father let out a laugh. “No, Aracely. It will stay safely in its jar home. No need to worry.”

“I wasn’t worried. I thought I might finally have a pet.”

Her mother set the wooden spoon down. “You have a dog and a cat, dear.”

“Marcus and Fluffs belong the family, not just to me. And neither one of them is interested in playing with me. They’re too serious.”

“I know. Marcus enjoys running through the snow, but his favorite place is in front of the fire.” Her father took a seat at the table and sliced through the bread.

Right then Aracely could see brown and white Marcus curled up on the rug in front of the hearth.

“I know there aren’t any children your age in the village right now,” her mother said. “I have an idea. Why don’t you create an invisible friend?”

“An invisible friend? What’s that?”

“It’s a friend you make up all for yourself,” her father told her. “I used to have one when I was a little boy. I named him Hal.”

Aracely pondered the idea for a few moments as she felt confused. What would she use to build a friend? How would she make her talk and walk? And did she have to be invisible? “I’ll think about it. Can I go to the woods this afternoon?” she asked. “It’s hardly snowed at all today and there’s very little wind.”

“If you study the periodic table before you go so you can correctly recite it all the way through during tomorrow’s class.”

Her mother wiped her hands on a kitchen towel. “Are you sure it’s not too cold, Friedrich?”

Aracely answered for him. “It’s not at all too cold, mother. And I’ll wear my scarf and hat and mittens.”

“All right,” her mother said. “If you don’t stay out more than a half hour.”

“I won’t,” Aracely said, wondering if she stayed out longer if her mother would notice.

That afternoon, Aracely studied the periodic table, all the names and symbols of the elements. When she was satisfied that she knew most of them, she hurried outside to spend a few minutes in her favorite place before the sun set.

Her boots sank in the thick snow cover left over from the night before as she made her way down the hill. The sun for a few brief moments turned the icy glaze into slush which she knew would refreeze overnight. She stopped to take in a fresh, cold breath, looking down at the forest below the village that blanketed the mountain on either side of that main road up to the town. Once Aracely reached the forest boundary, she found her own secret path, a path like a hallway that ended at a circular room with walls of evergreens and a ceiling made up of sky. She reached the clearing after only a short walk, and saw the little house she’d constructed in the middle of it just large enough to provide shelter for a few stuffed bears. “I wish you could really be my friends,” she told them as she took them out to enjoy the strands of sunlight streaming down on them. “But I know you can’t exactly be real friends.”

While Aracely played with them for a while, acting out stories of bears who performed in plays or wrote poems or trapped nosy little girls inside their houses, she realized she’d left behind one of her Christmas gifts: a rag doll her mother had made for her. “I forgot to bring Annika to meet you,” she said to the bears as she slipped them all back inside. “Maybe we can come back tomorrow.” As she stood to leave, she suddenly got an idea, a way to resolve the problem of the invisible friend.

The next afternoon, Aracely dangled her head over the side of the couch, her dark braids almost reaching the rug below it, as she recited the periodic table. “LR. Lawrencium. Number 103.”

“Perfect!” Her mother closed the science book with a snap. “Well, not perfect, but close to it. You only missed seven. We’ll go over this again tomorrow and I’m sure you’ll get those, too.”

“I will.” Aracely pulled herself up. “You’re going to the market?”

Her mother looked at the clock over the fireplace. “Yes. And I better hurry. Your father will be home from his workshop in a little while and I have a painting class this evening.” She slipped on her jacket. “So will you promise me that you will stay put until he gets home?”

“I will.” Aracely’s parents rarely left her unattended but when they did, she occasionally slipped out to visit her place in the forest, a place she considered just another room in her extended house. That day, though, she had other plans.

“All right, then.” Her mother gave her a peck on her forehead. “Be a good girl and I’ll see you soon.”

Once her mother had left, Aracely slipped into her bedroom and pulled the new doll off the shelf. She studied the doll’s face, with its eyes painted black under the curls of yarn that made up her hair and her mouth drawn in bright red. “Your life must be very boring, Annika. So I have an idea. I want to make you a real girl.”

The expression on the doll did not change and the mouth in a slight grin did not move.

“Let’s go into the kitchen and get something to eat.” Aracely carried the doll to the kitchen table and laid it on the table top. She opened the buttons on the front of the dress and found the hidden button underneath it. When Aracely unfastened that button a heart behind the cloth flap was painted on the doll’s otherwise blank chest. She then went to the pantry and took down the same jar she’d shown to her parents the day before. “I know this is not your stomach



where these things should normally go, but this will probably work, too.” She opened the jar and took out a bit of the sauerkraut, just a pinch really, and placed it over the heart before securing the little flap once again by slipping the button through the buttonhole and buttoning up the doll’s embroidered blouse.

Aracely then placed the doll in one of the chairs of the sitting room and waited for it to come to life. She waited and waited. Nothing happened.

Aracely read a book. Then she studied the elements she’d gotten wrong, She made herself a snack of cheese and bread and even straightened up her room again after already doing it once that morning. She checked under the dress and saw a trickle of purple from the cabbage dribble down the doll’s front almost to the place where a belly button would be if she were a real girl.

That evening, Aracely and her father ate leftover soup, read by the fire, and had an evening snack of hot caramel cocoa. Every once in a while, Aracely would glance over at the doll, still sitting in the chair in the corner, to see if it had changed at all. But not even the smile had tilted one way or the other. Because her mother had told her that the kraut liked the warmth, she left the doll in the chair as she got up to go to bed at her father’s urging.

“Wait, Aracely,” he said before she left the room. “Aren’t you forgetting something?”

“I just thought she’d find it warmer here by the fire.”

“It’s warm enough in your room, I suspect.” He handed the doll to her. Not a bit of her face had changed.

Aracely brought Annika back into her bedroom and set her by the vent where the warmth from the wood stove drifted into her room. She then climbed into bed next to her biggest stuffed bear and settled in to sleep.

Sometime around midnight, Aracely felt very, very cold and realized that the window was ajar. After she closed it, she pulled the cover up over her even more to keep warm. A squeal sounded very loudly. A whoosh of wind passed by. Something knocked against the glass. With the last noise, Aracely’s eyes flew open and she realized all the sounds were coming from just beyond her window. Aracely sat up just as something darted from side to side in the snow. She rubbed her eyes. Could that be a child out at this time of night?

Aracely snuggled back down into her bed to try to get back to the warmth of earlier when she heard a ‘whap’ against the window. She rolled back over, opened her eyes, and saw Annika plastered against the pane..

“What are you doing out there?” Aracely whispered, pulling her blanket up over her face

The doll didn’t respond, but her smile, much broader than before, began to sink into a frown and the tiny lines of brows moved on her forehead to meet in an upside-down ‘v’.

“Oh, all right.” Aracely opened the window. the doll jumped inside and began to run about the room. Her squeals sounded like wind pressing through wood reeds and the air filled with the odor of sauerkraut. “Go to sleep, Annika,” she whispered. “Right this minute.”

The doll stopped, let out another unpleasant sound, and dropped its doll arms to its side.

“Now’s the time that all children sleep. There’s your bed...” Aracely pointed to the doll bed her father made her. “...and when I wake up, we’ll have breakfast. You can then be my friend.” When the doll didn’t move, Aracely got out of the bed, grabbed her by one arm and placed her in the doll bed, covering her with the doll blanket. “Good night, Annika Gensler,” she said firmly.

Aracely got back into bed and turned back over. For a time the quiet in the room made her think that the doll had finally fallen to sleep. That didn’t last long. In a few minutes, the doll

tumbled about the room for a while more before finally settling back into the miniature bed in the corner. By then, Aracely was completely and totally awake.

At 7am, a sleepy Aracely finally crawled out of bed, long after she smelled fresh coffee and cinnamon buns baking in the oven. She got dressed, washed her face and brushed her teeth. When she finally made her way into the kitchen, she was surprised to see a third person at the table.

“There’s the sleepy head!” Her father said.

A strange looking little girl sat between her mother placing jam on a slice of bread and her father blowing on his coffee.

“Annika?”

“Is this your friend’s name? The only word she seems to be able to say is yours.” Her mother lifted one of Annika’s locks of hair, still looking very much like curled brown yarn.

“Celery!” The girl jumped from the chair and ran on unsteady feet toward her. “Celery! Celery! Celery!” She jumped into Aracely’s arms.

“Look at how much she likes you, munchkin.” Her father said. “Would she like to stay for lesson this morning?”

“No.” Aracely put her down. “Annika is too distracting for me to learn anything.”

Her mother picked up the empty cups and dishes. “I’m sure she’ll settle down in time. Just like you do.”

“She doesn’t smell very good either.” Aracely wrinkled her nose.

“Now, Aracely Gensler. That’s not a very nice thing to say.” Her father came over to Annika and knelt down to her level. “You’re always welcome here, little Annika. What did you say her last name was?”

“I didn’t. It’s the same as ours.”

“So we could be related? How wonderful!”

“Remember today’s assignment, Aracely? You need to memorize all the queens and kings of the world and the names of their children, too.”

Aracely looked over at the book she’d never noticed before, a book so large that one of the shelves of the bookcase sagged with its weight. “I don’t remember your telling me about that assignment. Why don’t I just read *The Toad’s New Hat*? And I can make you a list of five words for each of the letters in the alphabet.”

Both of her parents started putting on their coats and scarves.

“Where are you going?” Aracely ignored the small hand slipping into hers and grasping it very hard.

“Your father is going to his workshop and I’m going to my new studio just above it.”

“Now that Annika’s here, I’m sure she can help you with your memorization.”

The doll at the other end of the hand that grasped hers began to wiggle. Aracely realized then that her parents had disappeared and she’d been left alone with Annika. “But, mama and papa...”

“Come on!” the doll said.

“I didn’t think you could...”

“Follow me!” Annika pulled Aracely into the living room dragging Aracely behind her as she ran in circles, reciting names: “Queen Marigold, King Adolfo, Princess Carolyn, and Prince Percival the first!” She ran and jumped and leapt from one piece of furniture to another, all the while not letting Aracely’s hand go.

“Stop! Stop! Stop!” Aracely shouted until her voice became so hoarse she couldn’t continue.

“Empress Mai! His Royal Highness Juan Diego!”

Finally Aracely stopped and planted her feet in the middle of the sitting room so that Annika couldn’t do any more than rotate around her as if she were a maypole.

“Why friend? Why did you stop friend? There are hundreds and hundreds more. Queens, kings, princesses...”

“I have to. I’m too tired.” Aracely dragged a fidgety Annika into her bedroom, dropped down on the bed and immediately went to sleep, in spite of the fact that the doll, her new friend, still moved at the other end of her arm.

Aracely finally woke to the pungent smell of sauerkraut and her mother’s voice.

“Aracely! What’s this?”

Aracely sat up and saw the doll slumped near the vent that warmed her room.

Her mother went over, picked the doll up and wrinkled her nose. “This doll is ruined. And was that you or the animals who made such a mess in the sitting room last night?”

“It wasn’t me, mama. I promise.”

“Well, no matter. Please get dressed as quickly as possible so you can help your father pick it up.” She turned toward the door. “And I’ll dispose of the doll. I don’t know what caused this awful smell.”

“Wait, mama?”

“Yes.”

“What are we studying today?”

“Nothing today. Remember, it’s Saturday. Monday we’ll start with the constellations.”

“The constellations. I can’t wait.”

From that moment on, until her sisters and brother returned at spring break, Aracely was perfectly happy not to need a friend. She played on her own with her stuffed animals, creating adventure stories of being the knight for Queen Marigold or sometimes Isabela or Empress Mai. Her mother made a smaller doll from a flour sack. The doll stayed on a shelf, looking out at Aracely day and night, always wearing a very nice smile that Aracely had no interest in seeing grow broader.