

Prologue

IN 2010, TWENTY-FIVE years after my new life in the United States began, my father was diagnosed with liver cancer. By then, my siblings and I had little communication with him. By then, he'd managed to chase us away.

But as is often the case with terminal illnesses, broken families put themselves back together, and I began to find my way back to my father, although the journey—like the one I took across the U.S.-Mexico border—was not at all easy.

On Tuesday, September 6, 2011, the day before my thirty-sixth birthday, Mago, Carlos, and I found ourselves around my father's hospital bed listening to the doctor tell us he had done everything he could for our father.

The doctor said we should let our father go.

He didn't know about all the times I had lost my father. Back in Mexico, there was always the hope that he would return. But now there was no hope to cling to. If we let him go, he would not be coming back.

I turned to look at my father. He lay on his hospital bed, only 130 pounds of flesh and bones. His face was sunken in. His skin sagged from all the weight he'd lost. Once, his skin was the color of rain-soaked earth. Now, it was a dull grayish color—like in that black-and-white photograph of him I so cherished. I could tell that he was not here. His eyes were slightly open, and they were glazed over, looking into space, looking at nothing. I wanted him to *see* me. I had always wanted to be *seen* by him.

I couldn't follow all the cords and hoses that came in and out of him. I couldn't understand all the numbers on the monitors next to him. But the wavy lines that represented his heartbeat told me of the

conflict within him. His mind had already gone elsewhere. Yet, his heart struggled to hold on. It was fighting a losing battle. His blood pressure was now down to sixty.

The doctor waited for our decision.

I looked at Mago, then at Carlos. Betty lived in Watsonville, a six-hour drive from Los Angeles. But even if she lived here she would not have come. My mother knew what she was doing when she did not allow my father to take Betty. So now it was Mago, Carlos, and I who got to decide our father's fate. Were they thinking what I was thinking? How shocking it was to see him like that. I wanted to remember him how he once was. Robust. Strong. Proud. Cancer had taken so much from him already. It had humbled him in a way I never imagined him being humbled.

"Okay," we said. Mago, Carlos, and I looked at one another and nodded, reassuring ourselves of our mutual decision. "Okay," we said again.

"I'm sorry," the doctor said. "It'll be over quickly. He won't suffer."

We stood around our father. The machines were disconnected one by one from his body. During the interminable twenty minutes that it took for my father's heart to stop beating, the years I spent with him flashed through my mind, from the moment I first laid eyes on him after our eight-year separation, to the first day I came to live with him, to the day I left his house for the last time, to now.

I reached to grab his hand, that hand that was the exact shape of my own, and I held on tight.

1



*Mago, Reyna, and Carlos, recently
arrived in El Otro Lado*

IT WAS SEPTEMBER 1985. We had been in the United States for three months. The following day, I would be starting fifth grade, Carlos seventh grade, and Mago eighth grade. We didn't speak a word of English, and we were frightened. But Papi wasn't worried about our lack of English. He was worried about something else.

"Don't tell anyone you're here illegally," he warned us.

"We won't, Papi," we said.

"I'm serious," he said. "If you tell anyone anything about how you got to this country, you can kiss it goodbye. You understand?"

Papi said we had broken the law by coming to the United States, but back then I didn't understand much about laws. All I could think of was why there would be a law that would prevent children from

being with their father. That was the only reason I'd come to this country, after all.

"And you three better do well in your classes, because if you don't, I won't wait for la migra to deport you. I'll send you back to Mexico myself!"

"We won't disappoint you, Papi," my sister, my brother, and I promised while nodding our heads.

Papi leaned back on his chair and took a swallow of his Budweiser. He put it down on the kitchen table and looked at us. First at Mago, then at Carlos, and then at me. I leaned closer to my sister, cowering under my father's gaze.

"I brought you to this country to get an education and to take advantage of all the opportunities this country has to offer. The minute you walk through the door with anything less than As, I'm sending you straight back to my mother's house."

Oh, no, not to Abuela Evila! I clutched my sister tighter.

"Don't worry about us, Papi," Mago said. "We won't tell anyone we're illegals, and we'll get good grades. We promise."

Carlos and I only nodded, too frightened to say anything.

"Está bien," Papi said as he finished his beer. "Well, off to bed. You have to get up early tomorrow. And I wasn't kidding about what kind of grades I expect from you."

We left the kitchen and went into the living room, where my stepmother was watching TV. Seeing us come in, Mila got up and headed to the bedroom, the only one in the apartment. Mago, Carlos, and I had been sleeping in the living room since we arrived from Mexico.

Our new home in the U.S. was in Highland Park, a predominantly Latino neighborhood in northeast Los Angeles. Mila and my father owned a fourplex apartment building on the corner of Granada Street and Avenue 50. We lived in the one-bedroom unit because Papi said he needed the rent money from the bigger units. "The first thing I have to do is pay back all the money I borrowed for the smuggler," he'd said.

Mago and I pulled out the sofa bed and lay down. Carlos slept on the floor. That night, though, because he was also anxious about the next day, he snuck into our bed. We huddled together while we listened to a helicopter flying very close to the apartment. For a moment, I forgot we were at the fourplex in Highland Park. I thought I

was back at the border, running through the darkness, trying to hide from the helicopter flying above us. Once more, I felt frightened at the thought that if we didn't make it, we would lose our chance at having our father back in our lives.

"It's okay, Nena," Mago said, putting her arm around me. I snuggled against my sister, and thankfully the roaring of the helicopter faded away. "We're safe. Now go to sleep. It's a big day tomorrow."

I tried to do as I was told, but it was a restless night for me. I was not used to living in a noisy place. While living at Abuelita Chinta's shack, the nights had usually been quiet, except for the occasional barking of dogs and the passing of the evening train. But here, it seemed as if people never slept. Cars zoomed by on Avenue 50 at every hour of the day and night. Sirens echoed against the buildings. Police helicopters circled the neighborhood. Sometimes we even heard gunshots farther down the street from the gang members living nearby. The only familiar sound I heard at night was the lonely whistle of the midnight train, which made me yearn for my country and for those I'd left behind.

Since we had arrived three weeks before school ended, Papi didn't enroll us. He said to wait for the new school year, so we stayed home all summer. We didn't mind because mostly we just watched TV. Finally, we had unrestricted access to television, yet strangely enough, sometimes I would miss the radio and the fairy tales I'd liked to listen to. I didn't like that TV took away my ability to imagine what things looked like.

Mago, Carlos, and I would clean the apartment so that Papi and Mila wouldn't think we were lazy. We would sweep the carpet with the broom because the one time Mago had tried to use the vacuum cleaner it had swallowed up the bottom of the curtains, and we hadn't known what to do. The vacuum started smelling as if it were burning, and we pulled and pulled, but it wouldn't let go of the curtain. Finally Carlos rushed to yank the cord from the outlet, and we were able to get the curtain out of the vacuum. After that we decided it was safer to sweep. We knew how to use a broom. The vacuum cleaner was going to take some time.

But my favorite thing about that summer was that we got to see the ocean for the first time. One day in July, my brother, sister, and I had hurried into Papi's red Mustang, and we headed to Santa Monica.

When we arrived at the beach, Carlos, Mago, and I took off running to the shore and stared at the endless ocean before us. The few pictures I had seen in books or magazines couldn't capture its immensity. Miles and miles of water glittering under the summer sun. I had never imagined the ocean to be like that. I breathed in the salty scent and stood there as the wind blew my hair around my face.

"Well, what do you think, kids?" Papi had said as he came to stand behind us.

"It's beautiful," we said.

While Mila and Papi made sandwiches, Mago, Carlos, and I lay down on the blanket to get a tan. Papi said we were dark enough as it was, especially his "Negra," Mago. But it felt so nice to lie there under the sun, listening to the waves and the chatter of the families around us. For the first time, I felt as if we were a normal family, a family with two parents, as I had often dreamed about. If anybody had looked at us, they would have said, "Look at that happy family."

Mago, Carlos, and I dug a hole in the sand and filled it up with the water we carried in a bucket. The hole was only big enough to put our feet into. We looked for seashells along the shore, stood at the water's edge, and felt the sand give under us, but we didn't go in deeper. We didn't know how to swim. In Mexico we hadn't been afraid to splash around in the canal when it was waist deep, but there at the beach, with all those waves crashing down every few seconds, and the cur-



Reyna, Carlos, and Mago's first time at the beach

rent pulling us in, it was hard not to be terrified of drowning in that beautiful, endless water.

Papi said, "You all better get in, or I'm going to take you home."

Carlos and Mago walked farther into the water, but I stood by Papi's side thinking about the time I had almost drowned in the canal and about my cousin Catalina being carried away by the river.

"Come on, Chata, go in," Papi said.

"I'm afraid, Papi."

He grabbed my left hand and said, "Come on, I'll go in with you." Together we walked into the foamy water.

"Don't let go of me," I said to Papi as I clutched his hand, my toes digging into the sand eroding from under me. I tightened my grip on his hand, a hand that was a replica of my own with its long, long fingers. Piano hands, although back then neither of us had ever touched a piano. I still couldn't believe he was real, that he was no longer just a photograph hanging on the wall.

"I won't let go, Chata," he said. I held on to my father's callused hand and walked deeper into the water with him. I closed my eyes and thought about the saints I had prayed to. I thanked them for that day. That was the perfect way to see the ocean for the first time—holding on to my father's hand.

As he had promised, never once did he let me go.



Throughout the summer, I had been looking forward to the day when I would start school. I couldn't wait to meet my teacher, make friends, get my own books. Mila said that teachers here don't hit their students like they do in Mexico. And best of all, she said that my teacher would not yell at me for being left-handed. "That stuff your grandmother told you about the devil is pure nonsense." When she said that, I started liking my stepmother, and I stopped being so afraid of going to school. I hoped that one day I would be like her, fluently bilingual and a U.S. citizen.

But early the next day, when Mago, Carlos, and I stopped at the corner to say goodbye, my apprehension returned. Aldama Elementary was up the street. Mago and Carlos had to take a bus to get to Burbank Junior High School.

"Walk me there," I pleaded. "I don't want to go alone."

“It’s only four blocks away, Nena,” Mago said. “And Carlos and I are late enough as it is. We’ll miss our bus.”

“Don’t be scared,” Carlos said.

“Everything will be fine. We’ll see you when we get home,” Mago said, waving goodbye.

I watched Mago and Carlos rush down Avenue 50 to catch the bus on Monte Vista Street. I wished I weren’t ten. I wished I were old enough to go to junior high with them.

I made my way to Aldama Elementary. Since Papi was here illegally, he’d said he couldn’t risk losing his job by taking days off or arriving late to work just to walk me to my school. I stood outside for a long time and watched children walk in. Some of them came in with their parents. All of them were strangers to me, and I thought about Iguala. Back there I had known, by sight if not by name, almost every parent and kid that came to my little school.

Aldama was three times as big as my school in Iguala. I had no idea where to go. I was so used to being with my sister, having her show me what to do, that now I was completely lost. I couldn’t go through this by myself. I couldn’t walk into that big school all alone.

What if I went home? Would Papi know I hadn’t gone to school? Would he spank me?

I didn’t know what it was about Papi that sometimes he could be nice, and other times, like when he was drinking, he would become a different person, one who yelled and hit. That father scared me. That father reminded me of Abuela Evila, although she didn’t need alcohol to bring about that crazed look in her eyes.

A bell rang, and soon everyone was inside. I peeked inside the main doors, and I was overwhelmed by all the doors, the hallway that seemed to never end. I felt as if I were looking at a repeating image in a distorted mirror. My school in Mexico didn’t have hallways. It didn’t have so many doors. Tears started to well up, and I was angry at myself for being such a useless coward. A mother walked by and asked, “¿Estás perdida?” At hearing the familiar Spanish words, I immediately confessed that I didn’t know where to go.

She took me to the main office and there, the receptionist asked my name and called my classroom. A few minutes later, a boy my age

came in. The receptionist said something to him and motioned for me to follow him.

The boy didn't say anything to me as we made our way down a long hallway. We entered our classroom and the teacher, a tall, pudgy woman with short blond hair, looked me up and down and asked me something in English. I wanted to kick myself for coming late. Now, I had to stand in front of the whole class and have everyone watch me while the teacher spoke to me in a language I didn't understand. I looked at my feet. My toes wiggled in the new tennis shoes Papi bought me from a place called Payless. I didn't like wearing tennis shoes. After ten years of walking around barefoot or in plastic sandals, my feet felt trapped inside the thick material.

"¿Sólo español?" she said. I looked into her eyes the color of the sea. I thought about our trip to Santa Monica, of Papi holding my hand. *Please, don't let go of me, Papi.*

"¿Español?" she asked again. At first I didn't realize that she had spoken to me in Spanish.

"Sí," I said, feeling relieved she spoke Spanish. The knot in my stomach began to loosen. "Me llamo Reyna Grande Rodríguez. Disculpeme, maestra, por llegar tarde."

She shrugged and smiled. "No entender mucho," she said.

"Oh," I said, disappointed that she didn't speak that much Spanish. She pointed to a table in the corner and gently pushed me forward. There were four students there and a man with black hair which was spiked with so much hairspray it looked as if he were wearing a push broom on his head. He had a very skinny neck and a big Adam's apple that went up and down like a yo-yo when he swallowed.

"I'm Mr. López," he said in Spanish. "I'm Mrs. Anderson's assistant."

He had us introduce ourselves and asked me to go first. "Me llamo Reyna Grande Rodríguez," I said.

He glanced at his roster and then looked at me. "Here in this country, we only use one last name. See here," he said, showing me the roster. "You're enrolled as Reyna Grande."

"But I'm Rodríguez, too," I said. "It's my mami's last name."

He asked me to keep my voice down so that I wouldn't interrupt

Mrs. Anderson, who was speaking to a class of about twenty students. I wanted to tell him that I had already lost my mother by coming to this country. It wasn't easy having to also erase her from my name. *Who am I now, then?*

"I'm sorry," Mr. López said. "That is the way things are done in this country. From now on you are Reyna Grande."

The students at my table laughed. One of them said in Spanish, "But she's so little, how can she be a queen, and a big one at that?"

Mr. López told them not to tease. He asked them to introduce themselves next. There was Gil, María, Cecilia, and Blanca. They were from Mexico, like me, except for Gil who was from someplace called El Salvador. I didn't know where that was, but he spoke Spanish, too.

For the rest of the day, I stayed at the table in the corner. Mr. López taught us the English alphabet. It was difficult to pay attention to him when Mrs. Anderson was speaking loudly to her students. Most of those kids looked just like me. They had brown skin, black hair, and brown eyes. They had last names like González and García, Hernández and Martínez, and yet they could speak a language I could not. Mrs. Anderson didn't tell them to keep their voice down. Sometimes it was hard to hear what Mr. López was telling us. Then he couldn't hear what we told him because we had to whisper.

Whatever Mrs. Anderson was teaching the other students, it wasn't the alphabet. She wrote words on the board. Although I could recognize each letter in those words, I couldn't understand what they spelled. I watched her mouth open and close, open and close as she talked. I wished I could understand what she was saying. I wished I didn't have to sit here in a corner and feel like an outsider in my own classroom. I wished I weren't being taught something kids learn in kindergarten.

"Reyna, pay attention," Mr. López said. "Now, repeat after me, ABCDEFG . . ."



By the end of the day, I still hadn't fully memorized the alphabet and the numbers in English. I walked back home feeling scared. I thought about the trip to the beach, of Papi holding my hand. I wished things

would always be like that for me. But they wouldn't be like that if I didn't do well in school. Papi had said so.

I wanted to make my father proud. It still bothered me—as it would for many years—that my father had not wanted to bring me at first, and because of that I had a desperate desire for him to one day say, “Chata, you’ve made me a proud father. I’m so glad I didn’t leave you in Mexico and instead brought you here.”

I felt as if I owed him something, as if there was a debt that needed to be repaid. The way I could pay it back was to make him proud of my accomplishments, because they would be *his* accomplishments, too. Even now, there are times when I think back on that moment when I begged my father to bring me to this country, and the knowledge that he *could* have said no still haunts me. What would my life have been like then? I know the answer all too well.

Since I got out of school before Carlos and Mago, Papi told me to go to the neighbor’s house and stay there until Mago arrived to pick me up. I told him I had stayed alone before. He said in this country he could get in trouble if the police found out I was all by myself. Mrs. Giuliano lived right across the street from us. She was an old lady with hair like cotton and eyes the color of my birthstone, sapphire. Her sweet smile reminded me of Abuelita Chinta, although she had a row of perfect teeth, unlike my grandmother’s gap-toothed smile. She didn’t speak much Spanish, but she spoke Italian and English. She was the first Italian I’d ever met.

When she opened the door she said, “Buon giorno, bambina!” She smiled and pulled me into her house. It smelled of bread and garlic. “Hai fame?” Mrs. Giuliano asked. She pointed to the stove where she was making minestrone.

“Si, tengo hambre,” I said.

I sat on the stool and she gave me a bowl of the soup. She asked me a question in both Italian and English, but I only understood the words *scuola* and school.

“No good,” I said, shaking my head. “No pude aprender inglés.”

“No capisci?” she asked. “Dare il tempo, bambina.”

Tiempo? She was right, time is what I needed, but back then I’d thought that I would never be able to stop feeling as if I didn’t belong in that classroom.

I wished I could tell Mrs. Giuliano that school wasn't the only place that was difficult to get used to. Although there were many good things we now had, there were also things we had in Mexico that we no longer had here. Mago, Carlos, and I missed our freedom. We missed being able to go outside to walk around the neighborhood and feel safe because everyone knew us. The only person we knew in Highland Park was Mrs. Giuliano. We didn't know anyone else, and because of the gang members in the area, Papi wouldn't allow us to go too far. Unlike in Iguala, kids here wouldn't go outside to play in the afternoons. Women wouldn't come out to embroider cloth napkins and talk to their comadres. Men wouldn't come out to have a beer with their friends and play a game of poker or dominoes. The streets here were empty except for the endless procession of cars on Avenue 50. There was no one to play with except one another.

But I didn't have the words to tell this to Mrs. Giuliano, and I was afraid their meaning would get lost in the translation, no matter how similar Italian and Spanish were. But she seemed to understand my unspoken words because she squeezed my hand.

After my meal, Mrs. Giuliano took me to her backyard where she kept chickens in a coop. As I helped her clean it, the smell of chicken poop and feathers reminded me of Abuelita Chinta's doves. The smell made me even more nostalgic for Iguala. I touched my belly button, and I remembered the bond that tied me to my mother and to my country.

Would it be so terrible to be sent back? Even though I liked this beautiful place, I still missed my home. It still called to me in different ways. A pigeon resting on the roof of the house, its coos traveling down the vent of the heater in the living room. I'd stop and listen, letting my mind travel back to Abuelita Chinta's shack, and I'd remember waking up to the cooing of her doves.

Mexico was also in a cup of hot chocolate, the steam curling up into the air. I would inhale Mexico through my nostrils. While at the supermarket with Mila, picking out vegetables and herbs, crushing cilantro leaves with my fingers, bringing a bunch of epazote up to my nose, I'd think of meals in Mexico, of a pot of beans boiling, of my grandmother adding epazote leaves for flavor.

Mexico was in the whistle of the midnight train traveling on the tracks that run parallel to Figueroa Street. I'd awoken to the sound of the train's whistle, and my body would fill with longing. When Mago and I cleaned the beans before putting them on to boil, we'd pick out the clumps of dirt and moisten them with our tongues to smell the scent of wet earth. I thought about the dirt floor of Abuelita Chinta's shack, of how we would sprinkle water on it before sweeping it, so as not to unsettle the dirt. If I returned to Mexico, then I could see my little sister, my mother, and my sweet grandmother again. I would also get to keep my two last names. I would be in a classroom where I understood what my teacher said.

But what about my dream of one day making Papi proud?

I stood there in Mrs. Giuliano's backyard feeling as if I were tearing in half. *Where do I belong?* I wondered. *Do I belong here? Do I belong there? Do I belong anywhere?*

I didn't know the answers to my questions, but I sat on the bench in Mrs. Giuliano's backyard and I took out my notebook. I traced the letters of the alphabet as I began to say them aloud, my determined tongue stumbling over the right pronunciation.

ATRIA BOOKS

2



Mago on Halloween

THE DAY BEFORE my first Halloween in this country, Mila came home with a costume she had picked up at the store for me. The plastic mask had a string on it, and the eyes were cut out so that I could see through the holes. The costume was of a girl with reddish hair and a purple star on the upper part of her left cheek. The dress was made of plastic, and it had sleeves in the colors of the rainbow.

“Who is it?” I asked my stepmother.

“It’s Rainbow Brite,” she said.

“Who?” I asked.

Mila shrugged her shoulders and handed me the costume.

“And what exactly is Halloween?” Mago asked.

“It’s just a day when kids get to dress up and go from house to house to get candy,” Mila said.

“You mean people give out candy for free?” Carlos asked, looking up from the minicars he’d been racing on the floor.

Incredible.

I no longer had any reservations about putting on the costume of that girl named Rainbow Brite. Whoever she was, all I cared about was getting my free candy.

Mila had only bought a costume for me because she said Halloween was for little kids. But at hearing about the free candy, Mago and Carlos wanted a costume, too, never mind that she had just turned fourteen a week before, and he was almost thirteen.

“We don’t have money for any more costumes,” Mila said. “You can share your sister’s candy tomorrow.”

Mago and Carlos went to bed disappointed about not getting a costume. I hung mine on the door so I wouldn’t forget it for school the next day.

When October began, Mrs. Anderson started giving us art projects to do, things like witches and black cats, ghosts and pumpkins made from poster and tissue paper. In Mexico, we would have been preparing for the Day of the Dead celebrations, and I would have been looking forward to eating Day of the Dead bread and visiting the graves of my grandfather and my little cousin Catalina. We would have been decorating our altar with candles and marigolds and plates of food for our dead relatives to enjoy. But here, there was nothing like that to be done. We cut out skeletons, connected the bones with clips, and hung them on our door to announce the arrival of this holiday called Halloween.



In the morning, I was awakened by Papi yelling. In the dim morning light streaming through the window, I saw Papi hovering over Carlos. The living room smelled of Old Spice, Papi’s favorite cologne, and something else, like the smell of vinegar and rust.

“I told you to stop doing that!” Papi said. Carlos was sitting on the floor, where he slept. He pulled his covers up to his neck as he looked at Papi.

“I’m sorry, Papá. I won’t do it again,” Carlos said, cowering beneath his blankets. Now I knew what the smell was. Mago and I had

been taking turns waking Carlos up at night so he could use the bathroom. Papi would spank Carlos when he had his little accidents, and because we didn't want our brother to get spanked, Mago and I would try to help him. But the previous night, neither of us had awakened him, and the inevitable had happened.

Papi went to the bathroom and turned on the water in the bathtub. He came back for Carlos. "I told you not to wet yourself again, and now you're going to pay for it."

"No, Papi!" Mago yelled.

Carlos didn't say anything. Papi whisked him up on his feet and dragged him to the bathroom. Mago and I rushed behind them. The next thing we knew, Papi was picking Carlos up as if he were a doll and tossing him into the bathtub, pajamas and all. Water splashed onto the floor and the walls and on Papi's blue work uniform.

"Wash yourself up!" Papi yelled. He picked up his car keys and headed to the door. Mila looked at us. Her mouth opened, as if she wanted to say something, but then she shook her head and followed Papi out the door. They left for the retirement home where she and Papi worked, he as a maintenance worker and she as a nurse's assistant. It had a fancy name—Kingsley Manor, which made me think of princesses and lords, not old people. But I guess that was the point.

Mago and I rushed to pull our brother out of the bathtub, where he was crying. Papi had only turned on the cold water, and Carlos shivered while we dried his hair and helped him out of his wet pajamas. He didn't stop shivering even after he was in dry clothes.

"He didn't have to do that," Mago said.

"He left me for years. How can he treat me like this now?" Carlos said between tears. Mago and I left the soiled covers soaking in the bathtub. We sat on the couch, not knowing what to do. I thought getting dumped into a bathtub full of cold water was worse than getting a spanking from Papi, even though his spankings hurt more than Abuela Evila's, not because he was a man and could hit harder, but because he was our father, our hero. Like Mago had once said he would be.

"Come on, Carlos, we're going to miss our bus," Mago said as she got up to get ready.

"I'm not going to school," Carlos said, his bottom lip quivering, tears threatening to come out again.

"Come on," Mago insisted. "You'll only make it worse. You know how Papi feels about school."

She and Carlos left to catch the bus, and I was left there with my costume in my hands, the excitement of Halloween gone. I put Rainbow Brite back on the hook on the door, and then I left for school.



When Mila and Papi came home, he didn't say anything about what had happened that morning. I wanted him to say he was sorry, but we'd lived there long enough to know that Papi never apologized for anything. He still hadn't said he was sorry for leaving us in Mexico for eight years. Instead, he just walked past us and headed to his bedroom to change out of his work uniform, which was dark-blue pants and a light-blue short-sleeve shirt that had the word "Grande" embroidered over the left pocket. His hair had streaks of white in it, and I wondered what he had painted at Kingsley Manor that day. He never told us much about his job, but I knew a few details, such as that the name of the paint he used there was *Navajo White*. I knew that because Papi painted the interior walls of the fourplex units that color, which he brought from work in buckets. Sometimes, I would hear Mila and him talk about their coworkers, or the old patients, and I wished I knew those people, too, so that I could feel included in their conversations.

"Why aren't you ready, yet?" Mila asked me. I'd been sitting on the couch with Mago and Carlos for most of the afternoon. None of us could enjoy the cartoons on TV, so we had turned it off.

"Trick-or-treating will be starting soon," Mila said. "And it only happens once a year."

"We aren't going," I said.

Mila stood there and shook her head. "I know what your father did was wrong, but try to understand him. It's been a long time since he has had to be a father. Give him time to adjust."

Mila handed Carlos a plastic bag. From it, he took out a white sheet which Mila got at Kingsley Manor. "We already washed the sheets, Mila," Mago said. "They're drying on the clothesline outside."

“Oh, that isn’t why I brought this,” Mila said, grabbing a pair of scissors. She told Carlos to stand up and put the sheet over him.

“What are you doing?” Carlos asked. Mila cut out holes over the area where Carlos’s eyes would be.

“I’m making you a Halloween costume,” she said. A costume? Out of a sheet? She walked him over to the closet door so Carlos could see it for himself. He turned to look at us. Mago and I giggled. My brother was now a ghost. It was amazing. From that year on, Mila always brought us white sheets for Halloween, and she never bought me a costume again. If I had known she would do that, I wouldn’t have praised Carlos’s ghost costume so much.

“Let me see what I can come up with for you, Mago,” Mila said. We looked out the window and saw that kids were starting to come out of their houses with their costumes on.

Mila came out of her room with the wedding dress she had worn when she married her first husband. The satin had yellowed by then and most of the sequins had fallen off. Mila’s older son was about seventeen years old, so the dress had to be older than that.

“I can’t wear that,” Mago said. “I’ll ruin it.”

“It’s already ruined,” Mila said. But the way she said it made me think she wasn’t just talking about the dress.

It would take us years to piece together the story of Mila and my father. They met at Kingsley Manor. Mila was already married and had three children—two boys and a girl. Mila left her husband and children for my father. She wasn’t planning on leaving her kids forever, just until she and Papi got settled into a bigger place. Mila’s whole family shunned her for breaking up her marriage and leaving her children. Her husband wasn’t able to take care of them by himself, so he dumped them at Mila’s mother’s house. Her mother took Mila to court and fought her for custody of her grandchildren, claiming abandonment. The judge asked the older son—who was in his teens—whom he wanted to live with. He chose his grandmother. So the judge gave Mila’s mother full custody of all three kids, and Mila only got visitation rights. She also had to pay child support.

Back then we hadn’t known all of the details, but the way Mila was handing off her wedding dress to Mago, knowing that she would have to throw it away once we got back, hinted at her dark secret.

“Try on the dress, Mago,” I said. “If we don’t leave soon, all the candy will be gone.”

Mago went into the bathroom and came out looking like a bride, and blushing like one, too. After a good laugh at her expense, and taking pictures with Papi’s Polaroid camera to send to Mexico, we got ready to go. Mila made us practice the words “Trick or treat. Trick or treat.” The words were hard to pronounce, and we stumbled on the harsh sounds.

“Well, it will have to do,” Mila said. She gave each of us a large plastic bag and told us to be careful. “Don’t eat the candy until you get home. Your father and I need to make sure it’s safe.”

The holiday reminded me of las posadas in Mexico, except there we would only get a small goodie bag and only one house would give them out, but here the offerings were endless! My brother, my sister, and I walked from street to street, venturing into neighborhoods we had never been to. “*Treecotree! Treecotree!*” we yelled as we knocked on the doors of the Victorian and Craftsman homes scattered throughout Highland Park, and the doors of the apartment buildings where immigrant families lived. By the time we returned home, it was past nine and our bags were bursting with candy. We had to carry them in our arms because the plastic handles had long broken from all the weight, from the abundance only found in El Otro Lado.

Papi and Mila were sitting in the kitchen when we got home. We put our bags on the table and she and Papi looked through our candy, throwing away the ones that seemed as if they’d been opened before. Papi found a tamarind candy coated with chili powder in Carlos’s bag. “I used to like these when I was your age,” Papi said.

“Here is another one, Papi. You can keep that one,” Carlos said.

“Thanks, Carnal.” Papi gently slapped Carlos on the back as they ate their tamarind candy.

3



Mila and Papi

“REYNA, YOUR MOTHER is here to pick you up,” Mr. López said, handing me a slip from the main office. I gathered my things and left. I ran down the hallway. *Is Mami really waiting for me? Has she come all the way from Mexico to find me? Does she miss me?*

When I entered the main office, Mila stood up.

“Ready?” she said, grabbing her purse. I followed my stepmother out the door, feeling stupid. I’d forgotten Mila was going to pick me up to take me to my dentist appointment.

For the past few months, I had been suffering from toothaches. They had become so painful, Papi finally had no choice but to deal with the problem. We didn’t have dental insurance, and Papi said he

and Mila didn't have money to pay dental fees, so Mila figured out a way around that. We would use her daughter's insurance.

As we drove, I looked out the window and wished it were Papi who was taking me to my appointment, but I understood that he didn't want to risk losing his job by taking days off, although that wasn't the only reason. Since he didn't speak much English, he felt uncomfortable going places. As a handyman, he was comfortable with a drill, paint brush, or wrench, and he could work in silence while his expert hands did the work. But outside of home and work, it was Mila who had to take care of everything that needed to be done.

As we neared the dentist's office, Mila reminded me of what to say. "Answer to the name Cindy," she said. "And remember that you're nine, not ten."

Cindy was ten months younger than I was. She was a lot prettier too, with long glossy black hair and beautiful eyes framed by thick eyelashes. She didn't come to the house very often, and when she came, she would stay by Mila's side and wouldn't talk to us or play with us. She wouldn't talk to Papi either and would pretend not to hear him when he said hello to her. At first I would get angry at Cindy for giving my father the cold shoulder, but then I would think about Rey, at how I had hated him on the spot for the simple fact that my mother had chosen him over me, and I could understand Cindy's behavior. After all hadn't it been the same for her?

The only difference was that Mila, unlike my mother, never gave up on her kids. I imagine now how it must have hurt her, to be standing there in the courtroom, fighting to get her children back, and that her older son had had it in his power to choose. And he had chosen not to go with her. But just because she had lost them that day didn't mean she had given up the fight. And she never did.

But Mila's conflicted relationship with her children would affect the way she treated us. She had been living with my father for three years when one day my siblings and I had ended up at her doorstep, three children she hadn't been expecting. Although she and my father had not legally married yet, she had become our new mother, whether she wanted to be or not. She was nice enough to us, although sometimes, especially when her own kids were around, she would go out of her way to treat her children a lot better. Now that

I'm a mother, I can understand the predicament she found herself in back then—leaving her own children, only to have to raise another woman's offspring. And yet, the sting of her indifference still hurts. She wasn't an evil stepmother, not like in the fairy tales I loved to listen to. But she also wasn't the mother I so desperately wanted to have. How could she be? I understand it now, but back then, I could not see past my need.



I had never been to the dentist in my life, and luckily we hadn't really had tooth problems. In Mexico we never had money for candy, but we also hadn't had money for things such as toothbrushes. We would have to scrub our teeth with our fingers coated with baking soda.

I couldn't help feeling a little afraid about going to the dentist. In Mexico, Abuelita Chinta had given me mint leaves to chew on when my molar started to bother me. I didn't think I was going to get mint leaves this time.

Mila and I sat in the reception area to wait. I glanced at the pictures of a turkey, a pumpkin, and a pilgrim's hat taped on the door. There were similar decorations in my classroom. Mila fidgeted in her seat. Once in a while she would pat her wavy black hair. I found myself admiring her skin, as I'd done many times. It was two shades lighter than my own, and it looked good in soft pinks and peaches. Her makeup, as always, was perfect. She had roses blooming on her cheeks and her lips were glossy. She had a faint scar from her nose to her upper lip because she was born with a cleft lip, but that didn't take away from her looks. Mila wasn't beautiful, but she was pretty and she was classy.

The dentist's assistant came out and called out a name. When I didn't answer, Mila nudged me and stood up. I went into the dentist's room, and he asked me to lie down on a big leather chair. I jumped off as soon as it started reclining. The dentist laughed and said something in English, while pointing to the chair. All I understood was the word "Cindy."

I sat there wondering how Mila felt about the dentist calling me by her daughter's name. The few times Cindy had come to the house, I had noticed how uncomfortable she seemed around Mila. She didn't

come very often, and when she did come, it was because Mila had practically forced her to. Mila's older son didn't visit often either. Her second son had never come over, not even once.

Mila said my molar had a huge cavity and would have to come out to let the new tooth grow in. For the rest of the hour, Mila had to translate for me what the dentist said.

"Open your mouth, Cindy.

"That's a good girl, Cindy.

"We're almost done, Cindy."

Mila didn't look at me when she translated. She looked at the wall.

While the dentist worked on my mouth, I began to fantasize about what it would be like to be the real Cindy. To be Mila's daughter. Would Mila not have fidgeted the way she was doing now while she stood nearby? Would she have allowed me—just as she allowed the real Cindy when she visited—to go into her and Papi's bedroom without knocking, to lie down on their bed and watch TV? Would she have brushed my hair up in pigtails in the mornings? Let me sit in the kitchen and help her make dinner?

"We're almost done, Cindy," the dentist said, and maybe it was the grogginess from the anesthesia, but I really liked the sound of that name. I began wishing I could stay in the dentist's office forever, because as soon as we walked out that door, I would once again be Reyna.

"Your daughter was very good," the receptionist said as Mila and I went out the door. Mila held me by the shoulders because I was feeling a bit dizzy and my mouth was numb and my lips felt three times their usual size. My lips throbbed as if they'd been stung by a scorpion.

"Thank you," Mila said. I waved goodbye to the receptionist and gave her a groggy smile.

On the way home, Mila was very quiet. I wondered if she was thinking about her daughter.

"Are you in pain yet?" she asked as we pulled into the driveway.

"No, Mamá Mila," I said. Maybe it was the anesthesia that had made me say that.

Mila took a deep breath and then looked at me. "Just call me Mila. I'm not your mom so you can't call me Mamá. Just Mila, okay?" She

said it gently, and yet I felt as if she had yelled at me. The harshness in her voice was very subtle, but I could hear it clearly.

With tears in my eyes, I said, “I’m sorry, Mila. I won’t do it again.” Then I got out of the car and went into the house, where I saw that my brother and sister were back from school.



“That’s what you get for being a traitor,” Mago said when I told her what I’d done. “She’s right. She’s not our mom. Why are you always trying to find mothers everywhere you go?”

“I don’t know,” I said.

“Besides, she broke up our parents’ marriage,” Mago continued. “And now you want to call her Mamá?”

I lowered my head in shame.

When we first arrived in the U.S., Mago and I went into Mila’s and Papi’s bedroom to look at her pretty clothes in the closet and to smell her perfumes. I knew Mila had noticed we did because a few days later Papi installed a new doorknob that locked, and from that moment on they would lock their door every time they left the house. But Mago and I were intrigued by Mila, the woman who, in part, was responsible for breaking up my parents’ twelve-year marriage. We wanted to know what it was that had made Papi prefer her over Mami. We thought that by looking at her clothes, or going through her toiletries, we would find the answer.

Maybe it was the pretty clothes she wore. During the day she wore her white nurse’s uniform because it was required at work, but on the weekends she wore capri pants and pretty blouses, leather sandals with delicate straps. For going out she had nice sets of skirt suits and silk blouses. Her jewelry box had faux pearl necklaces, pearl earrings, gold chains, fancy watches. She had different-colored high heels to match her outfits. Her perfumes were beautiful high-quality scents, not like the perfumes Mami used.

But beside her pretty looks and taste in clothes, Mila had other advantages Mami did not. Mila spoke English, which meant that Papi relied on her for nearly everything because he spoke only Spanish. Mila was a U.S. citizen. She wasn’t invisible in this country, as Papi was back then, and as Mami was while she was living here. Also, even though

Mila was born in Mexico, she had been in this country since she was thirteen years old. She was forty years old when we came to live with her and Papi, and by living in the U.S. for most of her life, Mila wasn't the typical Mexican woman. She wasn't afraid of Papi. She didn't cater to his every whim as women in Mexico are taught to do, as Mami had done while living with him. She also had an education and knew her way around this American society in a way Papi did not.

While in Mexico, Mami was so worried Papi would leave her for a gringa. Instead, he found Mila.

I told my sister that she was right. I was being a traitor to my own mother. But how could I make myself stop yearning for a mother when, ever since I was four years old, that is what I had done? And even to this day, I sometimes find myself yearning for her still.

"We have a father," Carlos said. "That's good enough for me."

"You're right," I said, glancing at the kitchen where Mila was chopping vegetables. She didn't like us to be in the kitchen with her. As a matter of fact, she didn't really like us to be in any room with her. It wasn't something that she would say to us, but it was the way she would tense up the moment we walked into the room. It was the way she would look at us, as if wishing it weren't us, but her own children.

Papi came home and asked about my tooth. I took the blood-stained cotton out of my mouth so that he could see the gap where my molar used to be.

"I'm glad everything worked out," Papi said. Then he walked into the kitchen and sat at the table to keep Mila company while she cooked.

"I'm not doing that again, you understand?" I heard Mila say. Papi opened a can of Budweiser and didn't answer.