

# 1

“I won’t be gone long.”

“How long?” I wanted to know. I needed to know.

“Not too long,” Mami replied, closing her suitcase. She was going to a place most parents never come back from, a place that had already taken my father, and was now taking my mother.

The United States.

My sister, Mago; my brother, Carlos; and I grabbed our bags of clothes and followed Mami out the door of the little house we’d been renting. Mami’s brothers were packing our belongings for storage. Just as we were about to step into the sunlight, I caught a glimpse of Papi. My uncle was putting a photo of my father into a box. I ran to take the photo from my uncle.

“Why are you taking that?” Mami said as we headed down the dirt road to Papi’s mother’s house, where we would be staying while Mami was gone.

“He’s my papi,” I said, and I clutched the frame tight against my chest.

“Your grandmother has pictures of him at her house,” Mami said. “You don’t need to take it with you.”

“But *this* is my papi!” I said. She didn’t understand that this paper face behind a wall of glass was the only father I knew.

Papi had left for the United States two years before. He wanted to build us a house—a real house made of brick and concrete. Even though he was a bricklayer and could build a house with his own hands, he couldn’t find work in Mexico because of the weak economy, so he’d left to go to the place everyone in my hometown calls El Otro Lado, “The Other Side.” Three weeks earlier he’d called Mami to tell her he needed her help. “If we’re both here making dollars, it will be faster to buy the materials for the house,” he’d said, then they would come back to Mexico to build our house.

But in the meantime he was leaving us without a mother.

Mago (short for Magloria) took my bag of clothes so I could hold Papi’s photo with both hands. The dirt road was full of rocks waiting to trip me, but that day I was extra careful because I carried my papi in my arms, and he could break easily.

My hometown of Iguala de la Independencia in the southern state of Guerrero is surrounded by mountains. My grandmother lived on the edge of the city, and as we walked to her house, I kept my eyes on the closest mountain. It was big and smooth, as if covered by green velvet.

During the rainy season a circle of fog wrapped around its peak, like the white handkerchief people tie around their heads when they have headaches. This was why the locals had named it the Mountain That Has a Headache. Back then I didn't know what was on the other side, and Mami didn't either. She'd never been anywhere outside of Iguala. Until that day.

We didn't live far from Papi's mother, and as we turned the corner, her house came into view. Abuela Evila's house sat at the bottom of the hill. It was a small adobe house painted white with a terra-cotta tile roof. Bougainvillea climbed up on one side. The vine, thick with red flowers, made the house look as if it were bleeding.

"Listen to your grandmother," Mami said, startling me. All four of us had been quiet during our walk. She stopped and stood before us. "Behave yourselves. Don't give her any reason to get angry."

"She was born angry," Mago said under her breath.

Carlos and I giggled. Mami giggled too, but stopped. "Hush, Mago. Don't talk like that. Your abuela is doing us a favor by taking you in. Listen to her and always do as she says."

"But why do we have to stay with her?" Carlos asked. He'd be seven years old the following month. Mago was eight and a half years old, four years older than me.

"Why can't we stay with Abuelita Chinta?" Mago asked. I thought about Mami's mother. Her voice was soft like the cooing of the doves in the cages around her

shack, and she smelled of almond oil and herbs. But as much as I loved my grandmother, I wanted my mother.

Mami sighed. “Your father wants you to stay with his mother. He thinks you’ll be better off there—”

“But—”

“Basta. He has made a decision, and we must do as he says,” Mami said.

We continued walking. Mago, Carlos, and I slowed down, and soon Mami was walking by herself. I looked at the photo in my arms, at Papi’s black wavy hair, full lips, wide nose, and dark brown eyes looking to the left. I wished he was looking *at* me, and not past me. I wished he could *see* me.

“Why are you taking her away?” I asked the Man Behind the Glass. As always, he didn’t answer me.

“Señora, we’re here!” Mami shouted from the gate of my grandmother’s house. From across the street the neighbor’s dog barked at us.

“Señora, it’s me, Juana!” Mami yelled, louder this time. She didn’t open the gate to go in because my grandmother didn’t like Mami. And the truth was my abuela Evila didn’t like us, either, so I didn’t understand why Papi wanted us to stay there.

Finally Abuela Evila came out of the house. Her silver hair was up in a bun so tight that it pulled her scalp. She walked bent to the ground, as if she were carrying an invisible sack of corn. As she came to the gate, she dried her hands on her apron, stained with fresh red sauce.

“We’re here,” Mami said.

“I see,” my grandmother replied. She didn’t open the gate, and she didn’t ask us to come in and cool ourselves under the shade of the lemon tree in the patio. The bright noon sun burned my scalp. I got closer to Mami and hid in her shadow.

“Thank you for taking care of my children, señora,” Mami said. “Every week we’ll be sending you money for their upkeep.”

My grandmother looked at the three of us. I couldn’t tell if she was angry. She was always frowning, no matter what kind of mood she was in. “And how long will they be staying?”

“For as long as necessary,” Mami said. “Only God knows how long it’s going to take to build the house Natalio wants.”

“*Natalio* wants?” Abuela Evila asked, leaning against the gate. “Don’t you want it too?”

Mami looked at us and put her arms around us. We leaned against her. Tears stung my eyes, and I felt as if I’d swallowed one of Carlos’s marbles.

“Of course, señora. What woman wouldn’t want a nice brick house? But not at the price we must pay to have it,” Mami said.

“American dollars go a long way here,” Abuela Evila said, pointing at the brick house built on the far side of her property. “My daughter has built herself a very nice house with the money she’s made in El Otro Lado.”

We turned to look at the house. It was the biggest one on the block, but my aunt didn't live in it. She hadn't returned from the U.S. even though she'd left long before Papi had. She had left my cousin Élida behind, and my grandmother had been taking care of her since.

"I'm not talking about the money," Mami said to my grandmother. Then she turned to us and bent to be at eye level with us. She took a deep breath and said, "I'll work as hard as I can. Every dollar I earn will go to you and the house. We'll be back before you know it."

"Why did Papi only send for you and not me?" Mago asked. "I want to see him too." As the oldest, she remembered Papi better than I did. She longed for him more than I did.

"I told you why. Your father only had enough money for me. And I'm going there to work. To help him with the house."

"We don't need a house. We need Papi," Mago said.

"We need you," Carlos said.

Mami ran her fingers through Mago's hair. "I'll be gone a year. I promise by then I'll come back and bring your father with me. Do you promise to take care of Carlos and Reyna for me, be their little mother?"

Mago looked at Carlos, then at me. I didn't know what my sister saw in my eyes that made her face soften. Did she see how afraid I was? Did she see that my heart was breaking at losing my mother? "Sí, Mami. I promise. But you'll keep your promise, right? You will come back?"

“Of course,” Mami said. She opened her arms to us, and we fell into them.

“Don’t go, Mami. Stay with us. Stay with *me*. Please,” I pleaded, holding on to her.

She kissed the top of my head and pushed me toward the closed gate. “You need to get out of the sun before it gives you a headache.”

Abuela Evila finally opened the gate to allow us inside, but we didn’t move. We stood there holding our bags, and I wanted to throw Papi’s photo against the ground so it shattered into pieces. I hated him for taking my mother from me just because he wanted a house and a piece of land to call his own.

“Don’t go, Mami. Please!” I begged.

Mami gave us each a hug and kissed us good-bye. I pressed my cheek against her lips painted red with Avon lipstick.

Mago held me tightly as we watched Mami walk away. When she disappeared where the road curved, I tore my hand from my sister’s and took off running, yelling for my mother. Through my tears I watched a taxicab take her away. I felt a hand on my shoulder and turned to see Mago standing behind me.

“Come on, Nena,” she said. There were no tears in her eyes, and as we walked back to my grandmother’s house, I wondered if, when Mami had asked Mago to be our little mother, it had also meant she was not allowed to cry.

# 2

Every day, while Mago and Carlos were at school, I stood by the gate and looked down the dirt road where Mami had disappeared, hoping to see her return.

“Go inside, Nena,” Mago said when she and Carlos arrived from school. She ushered me back into our grandmother’s house, where we spent the rest of the afternoon doing nothing but chores.

“You won’t stay here for free,” Abuela Evila had said as soon as the gate had closed behind us that morning when Mami had left. And by now I knew she meant it.

Two weeks had gone by, and everyone in the neighborhood now knew our mother had left. We couldn’t go anywhere without people looking at us with pity. One day Mago and I were passing by the baker’s house on our way to the tortilla mill, and the baker’s wife looked at us and said to her husband, “Look at them, poor little orphans.”

“We aren’t orphans!” I yelled. I grabbed a rock to throw at her, but I knew Mami would be disappointed in me if I threw it. So I let it fall to the ground.



Still, the baker's wife had seen the look in my eyes. She knew what I'd been about to do. "Shame on you, girl!" she scolded. "I would want the earth to swallow me whole if I had a daughter like you."

"Oh, don't be too harsh on the girl," the baker said. "It's a sad thing, not to have any parents." He got onto his bicycle to deliver his bread. I watched him until he turned the corner, mesmerized at how he wove his bike through the rocks on the dirt road without losing his balance and spilling all the bread in his giant hat basket.

"If your mother ever comes back, I'll be sure to tell her of your behavior," the baker's wife said, pointing a finger at me. She went into her house and slammed the door shut.

"I can't believe you," Mago said, whacking me with the straw tortilla basket.

My eyes stung with tears. "But we aren't orphans!"

She was too angry to speak to me. She held me tightly by the wrist and hurried me along to the tortilla mill. I stumbled on a rock and would have fallen if Mago hadn't been holding me. She slowed down and loosened her hold on my wrist.

"I don't want people feeling sorry for us," I told her.

She stopped walking then. She touched the scars on her face from an accident when she was little. There was a scar on her cheek, her eyelid, and on the bridge of her nose. People always felt sorry for Mago because of her scars, and she hated it.

“I’m sorry I hit you, Nena,” she said. At hearing her call me *baby*, I immediately forgave her.

When we got back from the tortilla mill, my cousin Élida was waiting by the gate, asking why we’d taken so long. “Can’t you see I’m hungry?” Élida, who was going on thirteen, had a round chubby face and big puffy eyes that looked like frog eyes. I thought that since we were all in the same situation—having been left behind by our parents—we would be friends. Élida wasn’t interested in being our friend. Like the neighbors, she called us the little orphans, even though her mother had left her too. The pretty dresses Abuela Evila made for her on her sewing machine, and the many gifts her mother sent her from El Otro Lado, helped Élida transform herself from the little orphan to a privileged granddaughter. She was everything we were not.

At seeing her, I got angry again at being called an orphan, at being hit by Mago, at my mother for leaving me, at my father for taking her away. “Your hair looks like a horse’s tail,” I said.

“Stupid orphan!” she said, yanking my pigtail. Abuela Evila took the tortillas from Mago and didn’t say anything to Élida for pulling my hair.

Carlos, Mago, and I sat on the two concrete steps leading from the kitchen to my grandmother’s bedroom, since the table was only big enough for four people, and those seats were already taken. Abuela Evila gave a pork

chop to my grandfather. Another to Élide. The third to my aunt, Tía Emperatriz, and the last pork chop she took for herself. By the time the frying pan came our way, there was nothing but oil left. Abuela Evila scooped up spoonfuls of oil and mixed it in with our beans. “For flavor,” she said.

*If Papi were here, if Mami were here, we wouldn't be eating oil, I thought.*

“Isn't there any meat left?” Tía Emperatriz asked.

Abuela Evila shook her head. “The money you left me this morning didn't go very far at el mercado,” she said. “And their parents haven't sent me anything this week.”

My aunt looked at our oily beans. She grabbed her purse and gave Mago a coin to buy us a soda. Mago came back from the store with a Fanta. We thanked our aunt and took turns sipping from the bottle, but the sweet taste of orange didn't wash away the oil in our mouths.

“What's the point of them being in El Otro Lado if we're going to be eating like beggars?” Mago said after our meal. We took the dirty dishes out to the washing stone. Then we cleaned the table and swept the dirt floor. Carlos took the trash can out to the backyard to burn the pile of garbage.

“Regina!” Abuela Evila called out from her bedroom, where she was mending her dresses. “Regina, come here!” she said. It took me a moment to realize she was calling me, since Regina isn't my name. But I was born on September 7, the day of Saint Regina, and my grandmother chose that

name for me at my birth. Mami disobeyed her and named me Reyna instead.

“Yes, Abuela?” I said as I came to the door.

“Go to Don Bartolo’s store to buy me a needle,” she said, handing me a coin. “And hurry back.”

Don Bartolo’s two daughters were playing hopscotch outside his store. When they saw me walking past them, they pointed at me and said, “Look, there goes the little orphan.” This time I didn’t think twice. I didn’t care if the whole neighborhood thought I was wild and a disgrace to my family. I threw the coin as hard as I could. It hit the taller girl above her right eye. She screamed and ran into the store, calling to her father. I ran home as fast as I could, leaving the coin on the ground. When Abuela Evila asked me for her needle, I had no choice but to tell her the truth.

She called Mago over and said, “Take your sister to apologize to Don Bartolo, and don’t come back without my needle.”

Mago grabbed my hand and pulled me along. “Now you’ve done it,” she said.

“She shouldn’t have called me an orphan!” I yanked my hand from Mago’s and stopped walking. She looked at me for a long time. I thought she was going to hit me, but instead she took my hand and pulled me along in the other direction.

“Where are we going?” I asked. She didn’t tell me

where she was taking me, but as soon as we turned the corner, the little house we had once rented came into view. We stopped in front of it. The window was open, and I could smell beans boiling on the stove. I heard the sound of a woman singing along to the radio. Mago said she didn't know who the new tenants were, but it'd always be the house where we'd lived with our parents. "No one can take that away," she said. "I know you don't remember Papi at all, but whatever you remember about Mami and this house is yours to keep forever."

I followed her down to the canal at the bottom of the hill. Mami would do the washing here. "This is where Mami saved your life, Nena. Remember?" Mago said.

I nodded, feeling a lump in my throat. The year before, I'd almost drowned in the canal. The rainy season had turned it into a gushing river, and the current had been swift and strong. Mami had told me to sit on the washing stones and stay by her side, but she'd let Mago and Carlos get into the water and play with the other kids. I wanted to get in, and when Mami was busy rinsing our clothes and looking the other way, I jumped in. The current pulled me down the canal. I couldn't touch the bottom. Mami got to me just in time.

Now we went back to Abuela Evila's house, not knowing what we were going to tell her. Before we went into the house itself, Mago took me into the small shack of bamboo sticks and cardboard near the patio. Inside were large clay pots, a big griddle, and other pots and pans. I'd

been born in this shack. This was where Mami and Papi had first lived when they'd gotten married.

Mago and I sat on the dirt floor, and she told me about the day I was born, exactly the way Mami used to tell it. She pointed to the circle of rocks and a pile of ash and told me that during my birth a fire had been burning. When I was born, the midwife put me into my mother's arms, and Mami turned to face the fire to keep me warm. As I listened to Mago now, I closed my eyes and felt the heat of the flames and heard Mami's heart beating against my ear.

Mago pointed to a spot on the dirt floor and reminded me that my umbilical cord was buried there. *That way, Mami had told the midwife, no matter where life takes her, she won't ever forget where she came from.*

But then Mago touched my belly button and said something my mother had never said. She said my umbilical cord was like a ribbon that connected me to Mami. She said, "It doesn't matter that there's a distance between us now. That cord is there forever." I touched my belly button, and I thought about what my sister had said. I had Papi's photo to keep me connected to him. I had no photo of my mother, but now my sister had given me something to remember her by.

"We still have a mother and a father," Mago said. "We aren't orphans, Nena. Just because they aren't with us doesn't mean we don't have parents anymore. Now come on. Let's go tell our grandmother we have no need for her."

"She's going to beat me," I said as we headed to the

house. “And she’s going to beat you, too, even though you didn’t do anything.”

“I know,” she said.

“Wait,” I said. I ran out of the gate before I lost my nerve. I ran down the street as fast as I could. Outside the store Don Bartolo’s daughters were playing again. They glared at me the moment they saw me. Suddenly my feet didn’t want to keep walking. I put a finger on my belly button.

“I’m sorry I hit you with the coin,” I told the girl.

She turned to look at her father, who came out to stand by the door. She said, “My papi says we’re lucky he has the store. If he didn’t, he would have to leave for El Otro Lado. I wouldn’t want him to go.”

“I didn’t want Mami to go either,” I said. “But she’ll be back soon. And so will my papi.”

Don Bartolo took my grandmother’s coin from his pocket and handed it to me. “Don’t ever think that your parents don’t love you,” he said. “It is because they love you very much that they have left.”

I bought the needle for Abuela Evila, and as I walked home, I told myself maybe Don Bartolo was right. I had to keep on believing that my parents had left me because they loved me too much, and not because they didn’t love me enough.

# 3

It didn't take long for Élida and us to become bitter enemies. She was the favored grandchild, and she always made sure we didn't forget it. When she had arrived at Abuela Evila's house six years before, when she was seven, my grandmother had kicked my grandfather out of her bed to make space for Élida in her bedroom. Anything Élida wanted, she would get—a new dress, a new pair of shoes, treats, and unlimited time watching television. At my grandmother's insistence Élida's mother would send her presents too. Once, she got a Walkman from El Otro Lado, and she was the envy of the whole neighborhood. At home she would spend hours lying on the hammock listening to Michael Jackson songs on her Walkman while we three cleaned the house from top to bottom.

Another time my grandmother thought Élida should learn how to type so she could be the best secretary Iguala had ever had, and soon after a typewriter arrived from El Otro Lado. Élida would spend hours tap-tap-tapping away while we three did nothing but



chores and longed for our own presents from El Otro Lado.

She hardly ever shared her stuff with us, and whenever she allowed us to play with her dolls, we had to play the role of the maids and she was always the rich woman. She was even bossier than my grandmother! Then we didn't want to play anymore because it was bad enough being bossed around in real life, let alone when we were supposed to be playing.

But the worst thing about Élida was the nicknames she had given us. She called me Chueca, "crooked," because I am left-handed, so she said I was deformed. Carlos she called Calaca, "skeleton," because he was extremely skinny, except for his big belly full of tapeworm. And Mago's nickname was Piojosa, because of all the lice she had on her head. Carlos and I tolerated the nicknames as much as we could, but not Mago. She and Élida were constantly fighting like old ladies, and things went from bad to worse the day Mago threatened to infest Élida's hair with lice.

Élida's hair was her most prized possession. It was so long that it tumbled down her back like a sparkling black waterfall. Every few days Abuela Evila washed Élida's hair with lemon water to keep it shiny and healthy. In the afternoons Abuela Evila would fill up a bucket from the water tank, cut lemons off the tree, and squeeze the juice into the water.

Mago, Carlos, and I would hide behind a bush and watch through the leaves. Abuela Evila washed Élide's hair as if it were an expensive and delicate silk shawl. Afterward Élide would sit under the sun to dry her hair. My grandmother then brushed it in small strokes, beginning with the tips and working her way up. She spent half an hour running the comb through Élide's long, long hair while we watched.

Our hair was full of lice, our bellies swollen with tapeworm, but my grandmother didn't care. She said, "Maybe you aren't even my grandchildren."

Sometimes I wished she was right. I didn't want her to be my grandmother either.

"Your mother is not coming back for you," Élide said to us one afternoon while lying in the sun to let her hair dry. "Now that she's got a job and is making dollars, she won't want to come back, believe me."

Three weeks before, Mami had called us on the phone and told us she'd gotten a job at a garment factory. She'd said she was finally helping Papi save money for the house, and had promised to send us money for shoes and clothes. We couldn't tell Mami not to bother, that the money they sent disappeared by the time my grandmother made it home from the bank. My grandmother would stand next to us while we talked on the phone, and if we said anything bad about her, she would spank us.

"She'll be back. I know she will," Mago told Élide. In the two and a half months we'd been there, my parents

had called us every other weekend. Mago would remind Mami of her promise—that she would return in a year.

“Don’t lie to yourself,” Élida said. “They’re going to forget all about you, you’ll see. You’re always going to be the little orphans.”

“Speak for yourself. It’s your mother who’s not coming back,” Mago said. “Doesn’t she have another child over there in El Otro Lado?”

At being reminded of her American brother, Élida looked away. Abuela Evila came out of the house carrying a large plastic comb. She sat behind Élida and combed her long hair that smelled of lemonade. Élida was quiet, and she didn’t answer Abuela Evila when she asked her what was wrong.

An hour later Élida was back on the patio. She lay down on the hammock and watched us do our chores. Mago swept while I watered Abuela Evila’s pots of vinca and geraniums. Carlos was in the backyard helping my grandfather clear the brush.

Élida rocked herself in the hammock, eating a mango-on-a-stick that she’d bought at Don Bartolo’s store. It was a beautiful mango cut to look like a rose, its yellow flesh sprinkled with red chili powder. My mouth watered at seeing her take a bite.

“My mother loves me,” she said.

“Oh, shut up already,” Mago said. She turned the broom to face Élida and swept toward her.

“Stupid orphan!” Élida yelled, scrambling to get away from the cloud of dust Mago had sent her way. “Piojosa!”

“So what if I have lice?” Mago said. “And if you aren’t careful, I’ll give them to you, and we’ll see what happens to all that pretty hair of yours.” Mago pulled me to her and started parting my hair. “Look, look, a louse!” she said, holding it out to Élida.

“Abuelita! Abuelita!” Élida yelled, her eyes opened wide with fear. She ran into the house holding on to her thick long braid. Mago and I looked at each other.

“Look what you’ve done. We’re really going to get it now,” I said to Mago.

I thought we were going to get a beating with my grandmother’s wooden spoon, or a branch or a sandal, the usual choices. I would have preferred a beating to what we got.

In the evening, when my aunt came home from work, Abuela Evila told her to take care of our lice problem. My aunt gave Mago money and sent her to buy kerosene, a really smelly oil used to light lamps—and kill lice. The last rays of the sun were gone, and darkness fell around us. My grandmother turned on the light on the patio, but it didn’t work. There was no power that night. She brought out her candles and set them on the water tank.

When Mago returned with the kerosene, my aunt sat us down one by one.

“What if that doesn’t work?” Élida asked.

“If the kerosene doesn’t work, I’m shaving off their hair!” Abuela Evila said.

At hearing my grandmother’s words, I stopped squirming. Tía Emperatriz ran through my hair with a lice comb. She made me tilt my head all the way back and poured kerosene onto my hair. The smell made my head spin. She made sure every strand of hair was covered before wrapping my head with a towel and tying a plastic bag over it to keep it in place. I sat so still, I could hear the mosquitoes buzzing around. They bit my legs and arms, but the thought of getting my head shaved kept me from moving.

“Now off to bed,” my aunt said when she was done, “but stay away from the lit candles.”

My grandmother had given us a twin-size bed for the three of us to share. It was tucked into a corner of my grandfather’s room. I slept in the middle between Mago and Carlos so that I wouldn’t fall off. We would huddle together at night, clinging to each other, even though Carlos had started wetting the bed soon after Mami had left.

But that night I wasn’t worried about being peed on. It was a long, restless night, and we couldn’t sleep! I wanted to scratch, scratch, scratch, but I couldn’t. The overwhelming smell of the kerosene made me dizzy. I tried to hold my breath for as long as I could, and when my lungs were bursting, I would take in a big gulp of

air and feel my head spinning like a top. I reached for my towel and pulled on it, not able to bear the pain any longer.

“Leave it alone,” Mago said.

“It hurts so much,” I said. “I need to scratch. I really need to.”

“My scalp feels as if it’s on fire!” Carlos said. “I can’t take it anymore.”

“Don’t do it,” Mago said. “We’ll get our hair chopped off if you ruin it now.”

“I don’t care!” With one swoop of his hand, Carlos pulled off the towel.

A half hour later I did the same.

Abuela Evila was true to her word. The next afternoon, when my grandfather came home from work, she had him take out his razor blade and scissors. Carlos’s hair was completely shaved off. We ran our hands over his bald head, feeling the stubble tickle our palms. When she saw him, Élida burst out laughing. “Now you really do look like a skeleton.” She started to sing a song. “*La calaca, tilica y flaca. La calaca, tilica y flaca.*” I laughed because it was a funny song and I could picture the lank and skinny skeleton dancing along to it.

“Regina, it’s your turn,” Abuela Evila said.

“Please, Abuelita, no!” I yelled as my grandmother dragged me to the chair. My grandfather hit me on the head with his hand and ordered me to sit still.

“It’s up to you if you want to move,” he said when I wouldn’t stop. “Just don’t blame me for how the haircut turns out.”

I jerked around, crying and yelling for Mami to come. I hated myself for being so weak the night before, when I’d torn the towel off. Tears rolled down my face, and I cried for my hair, because I loved my hair. It was the only beautiful thing I had, curls so thick that women in the street would stop and touch them and tell Mami “What lovely hair your daughter has. She looks like a doll,” and Mami would smile with pride.

“Don’t move, Nena. He’s doing a really bad job!” Mago said. But I didn’t listen, and the scissors hissed near my ear. I squirmed even more at watching my curls spill onto the ground and onto my lap, falling one by one like flower petals. Then my grandmother’s chickens came clucking to see what was happening. They picked up my curls and shook them around. They stepped all over them and dragged them with their feet across the dirt.

In the end, when Abuelo Augurio was done, I ran to the mirror. My hair was as short as a boy’s, and it was so uneven, it looked as if a cow had nibbled on it! I hid under my covers and didn’t come out. I looked at Papi’s photo hanging on the wall. I’d looked at myself in the mirror enough times to know that his slanted eyes were just like mine. We both had small foreheads, wide cheeks, and a wide nose. And now we both had short, black hair.

“When are you coming back?” I asked the Man Behind the Glass. “Do you love me?”

I wished I had a picture of Mami. I wanted to tell her I missed being with her. I missed going to the canal and sitting on the washing stone while she scrubbed our clothes and told me stories. If the water was low, she would let me get in and chase after the soap bubbles as she dunked the clothes into the water to rinse.

I missed going with her to visit Abuelita Chinta and taking a nap on my grandmother’s bed while they talked. I would fall asleep listening to Mami’s voice and the cooing of my grandmother’s doves. And at night I missed snuggling with her on the bed she’d shared with Papi. Mago and I would try to keep Mami warm so she wouldn’t miss him so much.

Mago came in to tell me it was dinnertime. I looked at her and hated her because she hadn’t gotten her hair chopped off. She’d dealt with the stupid scratching all night long, and in the morning she’d woken up and the lice had all been dead. Even though she’d washed her hair twenty times with Tía Emperatriz’s shampoo that smelled of roses, it still reeked of kerosene. But at least she didn’t look like a boy.

“Leave me alone,” I said.

“Come on, Nena. Come and eat.”

My stomach didn’t care that my hair had been butchered. It groaned with hunger, and I had no choice but to go out into the kitchen, where everyone could see me. Tía



Emperatriz, who'd been at work when the hair cutting had taken place, gasped at seeing me and said, "Ay, Amá, what did you do to this poor girl?"

Élida said, "What girl? Isn't that Carlos?" When I glared at her, she laughed and said, "Oops, I thought you were your brother."

That night I had a dream about Mami. In my dream she was washing my still-long black hair with lemon water and scrubbing it so gently that I sighed with pleasure. I woke up with a pain in my heart, and I felt like crying. Then I realized that Carlos had wet our bed and I was soaked.