

*The Distance  
Between Us*

A MEMOIR



ATRIA BOOKS

Reyna Grande

**ATRIA** BOOKS

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## Prologue

**I**N 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*

**I**T 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 starting 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.

“Sì, 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 awaken 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