

*The Distance
Between Us*

A MEMOIR



ATRIA BOOKS

Reyna Grande

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NEW YORK LONDON TORONTO SYDNEY NEW DELHI

Prologue



Reyna, right before Papi left

MY FATHER'S MOTHER, Abuela Evila, liked to scare us with stories of La Llorona, the weeping woman who roams the canal and steals children away. She would say that if we didn't behave, La Llorona would take us far away where we would never see our parents again.

My other grandmother, Abuelita Chinta, would tell us not to be afraid of La Llorona; that if we prayed, God, La Virgen, and the saints would protect us from her.

Neither of my grandmothers told us that there is something more powerful than La Llorona—a power that takes away parents, not children.

It is called The United States.

In 1980, when I was four years old, I didn't know yet where the

United States was or why everyone in my hometown of Iguala, Guerrero, referred to it as El Otro Lado, the Other Side.

What I knew back then was that El Otro Lado had already taken my father away.

What I knew was that prayers didn't work, because if they did, El Otro Lado wouldn't be taking my mother away, too.



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Carlos, Reyna, and Mago with Mami

IT WAS JANUARY 1980. The following month, my mother would be turning thirty. But she wouldn't be celebrating her birthday with us. I clutched at my mother's dress and asked, "How long will you be gone?"

"Not too long," was her response. She closed the latch on the small suitcase she had bought secondhand for her trip to El Otro Lado, and I knew the hour had come for her to leave.

Sometimes, if I promised to be good, my mother would take me along with her as she went out into the neighborhood to sell Avon

products. Other times she would leave me at Abuelita Chinta's house. "I won't be gone for long," she would promise as she pried my fingers from hers. But this time, when my mother said she wouldn't be gone long, I knew it would be different. Yet I never imagined that "not too long" would turn out to be never, because, if truth be told, I never really got my mother back.

"It's time to go," Mami said as she picked up her suitcase.

My sister Mago, my brother Carlos, and I grabbed the plastic bags filled with our clothes. We stood at the threshold of the little house we had been renting from a man named Don Rubén and looked around us one last time. Mami's brothers were packing our belongings to be stored at Abuelita Chinta's house: a refrigerator that didn't work but that Mami hoped to fix one day, the bed Mago and I had shared with Mami ever since Papi left, the wardrobe we'd decorated with *El Chavo del Ocho* stickers to hide the places where the paint had peeled off. The house was almost empty now. Later that day, Mami would be handing the key back to Don Rubén, and this would no longer be our home, but someone else's.

As we were about to step into the sunlight, I caught a glimpse of Papi. Tío Gary was putting a photo of him 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 living from then on.

"He's my papi," I said, and I clutched the frame tight against my chest.

"I know that," Mami said. "Your grandmother has pictures of your father at her house. You don't need to take it with you."

"But *this* is my papi," I told her again. She didn't understand that this paper face behind a wall of glass was the only father I'd ever known.

I was two years old when my father left. The year before, the peso was devalued 45 percent to the US dollar. It was the beginning of the worst recession Mexico had seen in fifty years. My father left to pursue a dream—to build us a house. Although he was a bricklayer and had built many houses, with Mexico's unstable economy he would never earn the money he needed to make his dream a reality.

Like most immigrants, my father had left his native country with high expectations of what life in El Otro Lado would be like. Once reality set in, and he realized that dollars weren't as easy to make as the stories people told made it seem, he had been faced with two choices: return to Mexico empty-handed and with his head held low, or send for my mother. He decided on the latter, hoping that between the two of them, they could earn the money needed to build the house he dreamed of. Then he would finally be able to return to the country of his birth with his head held high, proud of what he had accomplished.

In the meantime, he was leaving us without a mother.

Mago, whose real name is Magloria, though no one called her that, took my bag of clothes from me so that I could hold Papi's photo with both hands. It was hard to keep my balance on a dirt road littered with rocks just waiting to trip me and make me fall, but that January morning I was extra careful because I carried my papi in my arms, and he could break easily, like the bottle of Coca-Cola Mago was carrying the day she tripped. The bottle broke into pieces, the sweet brown liquid washing away the blood oozing from the cut on her wrist. She had to have three stitches. But that wasn't her first scar, and it wouldn't be her last.

"¿Juana, ya te vas?" Doña María said. She was one of Mami's Avon clients. She ran down the dirt road with an empty shopping bag on her way to el mercado. Her lips were painted hot pink with the Avon lipstick she had bought on credit from Mami.

"Ya me voy, amiga," Mami said. "My husband needs me at his side." I'd lost track of how many times Mami had said that since my father's telephone call three weeks before. It hadn't taken long for the whole colonia of La Guadalupe to learn that Mami was going to El Otro Lado. It made me angry to hear her say those words: *My husband needs me*. As if my father were not a grown man. As if her children didn't need her as well.

"My mother will be collecting the money you owe me," Mami told Doña María. "I hope you don't mind."

Doña María didn't look at her. She nodded and wished my mother a safe trip. "I'll pray for a successful crossing for you, Juana," she said.

“Don’t worry, Doña María, I won’t be running across the border. My husband has paid someone to drive me across with borrowed papers. It was expensive, but he didn’t want to put me in any danger.”

“Of course, how could he do otherwise?” Doña María murmured as she walked away.

Back then, I was too young to realize that unlike me, Mami didn’t walk with her eyes to the ground because she was afraid of the rocks tripping her. I was too young to know about the men who leave for El Otro Lado and never return. Some of them find new wives, start a new family. Others disappear completely, reinventing themselves as soon as they arrive, forgetting about those they’ve left behind.

It was a worry that kept my mother up at night, although I didn’t know it back then. But in the weeks since my father’s phone call, she walked differently. She didn’t look down at the ground anymore. *My husband has sent for me. He needs me*, she said to everyone, and the women, like Doña María, whose husband left long ago, would lower their eyes.

We didn’t live far from my grandmother’s adobe house, and as soon as we rounded the corner, it came into view. Abuela Evila’s house sat at the bottom of the hill. It was shaped like a box, and it had once been painted white, but by the time we came to live there the adobe peeked through where the plaster had cracked like the shell of a hard-boiled egg. It had a terra-cotta tile roof, and bougainvillea climbed up one side. The bougainvillea was in full bloom, and the vine, thick with red flowers, looked like a spreading bloodstain over the white wall of the house.

My grandmother’s property was the length of four houses and was surrounded by a corral. To the east of the house was an unpaved street that led to the church, the school, and the tortilla mill. To the west was a dirt road that led past Don Rubén’s house and curved east to the dairy farm, the canal, the highway, the cemetery, the train station, and el centro. Her house sat on the north side of the lot, my aunt’s brick house sat on the south side, and the rest of the property was a big yard with several fruit trees.

Aside from being one of the poorest states in Mexico, Guerrero is also one of the most mountainous. My hometown of Iguala de la Independencia is located in a valley. My grandmother lived on

the edge of the city, and that morning, as we walked to her house, I kept my eyes on the closest mountain. It was big and smooth, and it looked as if it were covered with a green velvety cloth. Because during the rainy season it had a ring of clouds on its peak and looked as if it had tied a white handkerchief around its head, the locals named it the Mountain That Has a Headache. Back then, I didn't know what was on the other side of the mountain, and when I had asked Mami she said she didn't know either. "Another town, I suppose," she said. She pointed in one direction and said Acapulco was somewhere over there, about three hours away by bus. She pointed in the opposite direction and said Mexico City was over there—again, a three-hour bus ride.

But when you're poor, no matter how close things are, everything is far away. And so, until that day, my twenty-nine-year-old mother had never been on the other side of the mountains.

"Listen to your grandmother," Mami said, startling me. I hadn't noticed how quiet we'd all been during our walk. I took my eyes off the Mountain That Has a Headache and looked at Mami as she 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 she caught herself. "Hush, Mago. Don't talk like that. Your abuela is doing your father and me 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 was about to turn seven years old. Mago, at eight and a half, was four years older than me. Both of them had to miss school that day, but of course they didn't mind. How could they think of numbers and letters when our mother was leaving us and going to a place most parents never return from?

"Why can't we stay with Abuelita Chinta?" Mago asked.

I thought about Mami's mother. I loved my grandmother's gap-toothed smile and the way she smelled of almond oil. Her voice was soft like the cooing of the doves she had in cages around her shack. But even as much as I loved Abuelita Chinta, I didn't want to stay with her or with anyone else. I wanted my mother.

Mami sighed. “Your father wants you to stay with your abuela Evila. He thinks you will be better off there—”

“But why do you have to leave, Mami?” I asked again.

“I already told you why, *mija*. I’m doing this for you. For all of you.”

“But why can’t I go with you?” I insisted, tears burning my eyes. “I’ll be good, I promise.”

“I can’t take you with me, Reyna. Not this time.”

“But—”

“Basta. Your father has made a decision, and we must do as he says.”

Mago, Carlos, and I slowed down our pace, and soon Mami was walking by herself while we trailed behind her. I looked at the photo in my arms and took in Papi’s black wavy hair, full lips, wide nose, and slanted eyes shifted slightly to the left. I wished, as I always did back then—as I still do now—that he were looking *at* me, and not past me. But his eyes were frozen in that position, and there was nothing I could do about it. “Why are you taking her away?” I asked the Man Behind the Glass. As always, there was no answer.

“¡Señora, ya llegamos!” Mami shouted from the gate. From across the street, the neighbor’s dog barked at us. I knew Abuela Evila was home because my eyes burned from the pungent scent of roasting guajillo chiles drifting from the kitchen.

“¡Señora, ya llegamos!” Mami called again. She put a hand on the latch of the gate but didn’t pull it open. From the start, my grandmother hadn’t liked my mother, and ten years—and three grandchildren—later, she still disapproved of my father’s choice for a wife, a woman who came from a family poorer than his own. So Mami didn’t feel comfortable walking into my grandmother’s house without permission. Instead, we waited at the gate under the scorching heat of the noon sun.

“¡Señora, soy yo, Juana!” Mami yelled, much louder this time. My grandmother was born in 1911, during the Mexican Revolution. When we came to her house, she was about to turn sixty-nine. Her long hair was silver, and she often wore it in a tight bun. She had a small hump on her back that made her body bend to the ground. As a child, she had suffered from a severe case of measles, and what re-

mained of her illness was a left arm that hung at an angle and a limp that made her walk as if she were drunk.

Finally, she came out of the house through the kitchen door. As she headed to the gate, she dried her hands on her apron, which was streaked with fresh red sauce.

"Ya llegamos," Mami said.

"Ya veo," my grandmother replied. She didn't open the gate, and she didn't ask us to come inside to cool ourselves under the shade of the lemon tree in the patio. The bright sun burned my scalp. I got closer to Mami and hid in the shadow of her dress.

"Thank you for letting me leave my children here under your care, señora," Mami said. "Every week my husband and I will be sending you money for their upkeep."

My grandmother looked at the three of us. I couldn't tell if she was angry. Her face was in a constant frown, no matter what kind of mood she was in. "And how long will they be staying?" she asked. I waited for Mami's answer, hoping to hear something more definite than "not too long."

"I don't know, señora," Mami said. I pressed Papi's photo against my chest because that answer was worse. "For as long as necessary," Mami continued. "God only knows how long it's going to take Natalio and me to earn the money for the house he wants."

"He wants?" Abuela Evila asked, leaning against the gate. "Don't you want it, too?"

Mami put her arms around us. We leaned against her. Fresh tears came out of my eyes, and I felt as if I'd swallowed one of Carlos's marbles. I clutched at the thin material of Mami's flowery dress and wished I could stay there forever, tucked into its folds, wrapped in the safety of my mother's shadow.

"Of course, señora. What woman wouldn't want a nice brick house? But the price will be great," Mami said.

"American dollars go a long way here," Abuela Evila said, pointing at the brick house built on the opposite side of her property. "Look at my daughter María Félix. She's built herself a very nice house with the money she's made in El Otro Lado."

My aunt's house was one of the biggest on the block. But she didn't live in it. She hadn't returned from El Otro Lado even though

she went there long before Papi did. She had left her six-year-old daughter behind, my cousin Élida, who—when we came to Abuela Evila's house—was already going on fourteen and had been living with our grandmother ever since El Otro Lado had taken her mother away.

"I wasn't referring to the money," Mami said. She got choked up and wiped the moisture from her eyes. Abuela Evila looked away, as if embarrassed by Mami's tears. Perhaps because she lived through the Revolution, when over a million people died and the ones who lived had to toughen up to survive, my grandmother was not prone to being emotional.

Mami turned to us and bent down to be at eye level with us. She said, "I'll work as hard as I can. Every dollar that we earn will go to you and the house. Your father and I will both be back before you know it."

"Why did he only send for you and not me?" Mago asked Mami, as she'd done several times already. "I want to see Papi, too."

As the oldest, Mago was the one who remembered my father most clearly. When Mami gave us the news that she was leaving to join him in El Otro Lado, Mago had cried because Papi hadn't sent for her as well.

"Your father couldn't afford to send for us all. I'm only going there to help him earn money for the house," Mami said again.

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

"We need you," Carlos said.

Mami ran her fingers through Mago's hair. "Your father says a man must have his own house, his own land to pass down to his children," she said. "I'll be gone a year. I promise that by the end of the year, I will bring your father back with me whether we have enough money for a house or not. Do you promise to take care of your hermanos for me, be their little mother?"

Mago looked at Carlos, then at me. I don't know what my sister saw in my eyes that made her face soften. Had she realized then how much I would need her? Had she known that without her strength and unwavering love, I would not have survived what was to come? Her face was full of determination when she looked at Mami and said, "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*," I said as I held 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," she said.

Abuela Evila finally opened the gate, and we were allowed inside, but we didn't move. We stood there holding our bags, and I suddenly wanted to throw Papi's photo against the ground so that it shattered into pieces because 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 leave me, Mami. Please!" I begged.

Mami gave us each a hug and kissed us goodbye. When she kissed me, I pressed my cheek against her lips painted red with Avon lipstick.

Mago held me tightly while we watched Mami walk away, pebbles dancing in and out of her sandals, her hair burning black under the sun. When I saw her blurry figure disappear where the road curved, I escaped Mago's grip on my hand and took off running, yelling for my mother.

Through my tears, I watched a taxicab take her away, leaving a cloud of dust in its wake. 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 asked Mago to be our little mother, it had also meant she was not allowed to cry.

Carlos was still standing by the gate, waiting for us so that we could go in together. I looked at the empty dirt road once more, realizing that there was nothing left of my mother. As we walked into my grandmother's house, I touched my cheek and told myself there was something I still had left. The feel of her red lips.