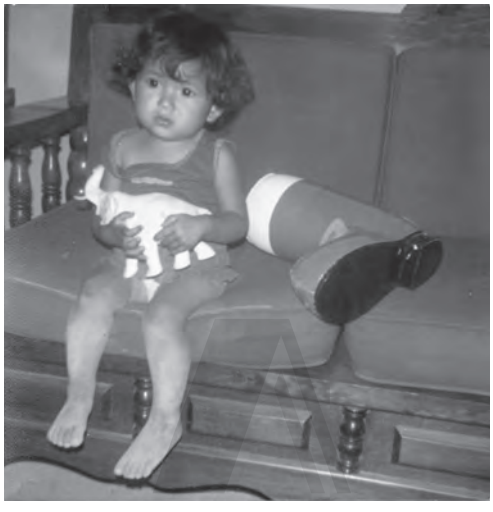
Prologue



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.

1

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.

2

Abuelo Augurio

Mago, Carlos, and I were given a corner of my grandfather's bedroom. Abuelo Augurio and Abuela Evila didn't sleep in the same room because when my cousin Élida came to live at their house my grandmother kicked him out of her bed to make space for her favorite grandchild. My grandfather's room smelled of sweat, beer, and cigarette smoke. His bed was in the farthest corner, next to some boxes, an old wardrobe, and his gardening tools. The light that streamed through the only window was too weak to make the room less somber.

Close to the door was a twin-size box spring raised on bricks and

covered with a straw mat. The "bed" was pushed up against the wall, underneath the tiny window that looked out onto an alley.

This is where Mago, Carlos, and I slept. I was in the middle, so I wouldn't fall off. Mago slept against the wall because if a scorpion crawled down and stung her, she would be okay. Scorpions couldn't do anything to my hot-blooded Scorpio sister. Carlos slept on the edge because a week after Mami left he began to wet the bed. We hoped that sleeping on the edge would make it easier for him to get up in the middle of the night to use the bucket by the door.

My grandfather's room was next to the alley. Since the window above our heads didn't have any glass to muffle the outside noises, we could hear everything that went on in that alley. Sometimes, we heard grunting noises coming from there. Mago and Carlos got up to look, and they giggled about what they saw, but they never picked me up so that I could see for myself. Other times we heard drunken men coming from the cantina down the road. They yelled obscenities that echoed against the brick walls of the nearby houses. Sometimes we could hear them urinating on the rock fence that surrounded Abuela Evila's property while singing borracho songs. *¡No vale nada la vida, la vida no vale nadaaaa!* I hated that song those drunks liked to sing. Life isn't worth anything?

One night, the noises we heard were a horse's hooves hitting the rocks on the ground. My skin prickled with goose bumps. I wondered who could be in the alley so late.

"What is that?" Carlos asked.

"I don't know," Mago said. "Get up and look." Just then, dogs started to bark.

"Nah," Carlos said.

"You're such a sissy," Mago said. She got up from the bed and stood over us as she looked out the window. With all the noise we were making, you would think Abuelo Augurio would wake up, but he didn't. I wished he would wake up. I wished he would be the one to look out the window and reassure us that everything was all right. I looked at the opposite side of the room and knew he was asleep. When he was awake, he would lie in bed for hours smoking cigarettes in the darkness, the red tip of the cigarette winking at me like an evil eye. His silence always made me uncomfortable. I didn't like my

grandmother constantly yelling at us, but my grandfather acted as if we weren't even there. Somehow, I felt that was worse. He made me feel invisible.

Mago gasped and quickly fell on top of us, crossing herself over and over again.

"What did you see?" I asked her. "Who was that in the alley?"

"It was a man, a man on a horse," Mago whispered. The clop-clopping of the hooves grew fainter and fainter.

"So?" Carlos said.

"But he was dragging something behind him in a sack!"

"You're lying," Carlos said.

"I'm not, I swear I'm not," Mago insisted. "I swear I saw him drag a person away."

"We don't believe you," Carlos said again. "Right, Reyna?"

I nodded, but none of us could fall back to sleep.

"That's the devil making his rounds," Abuela Evila said the next morning when we told her what Mago had seen. "He's looking for all the naughty children to take back to Hell with him. So you three better behave, or the devil is going to take you away."

Mago told us not to believe anything Abuela Evila said. But at night, we huddled together even closer when we heard a horse pass by our window, the sound of its hooves sending chills up our spines. *Who would protect us if the devil came to steal us and take us far away where we would never see our parents again?* I wondered. Every night, I would bury my face in my pillow and hold on tight to my sister.

My mother had asked Mago to be our little mother, and she and my father would have been proud to see how bravely their older daughter had taken on that role. Sometimes she took it a little too far for my taste, but Mago was there when my father and my mother were not.

One day, about a month after Mami left, Mago and I were passing by the baker's house on our way to the tortilla mill when he came out wearing a big basket that looked like a giant straw hat filled with sweet bread. My mouth watered at the thought of sinking my teeth into a sweet, fluffy concha de chocolate.

The baker's wife looked at us and said to her husband, "Mirálas, pobrecitas huerfanitas."

"We aren't orphans!" I yelled at her, forgetting all about the sweet bread. 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 was about to do. "Shame on you, girl!" she scolded.

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

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

"I can't believe you," Mago said angrily. She hit me hard with the straw tortilla basket.

My eyes stung with tears. "But we aren't orphans!" I said to Mago. She was too angry to speak to me, so she held me tightly by the wrist and hurried me along to the mill to buy tortillas for the midday meal. I stumbled on a rock and I would have fallen if Mago hadn't been holding me. She slowed her pace and loosened her hold on my wrist.

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

She stopped walking then. She touched her cheek and ran her finger over the scar she had there. When she was three, she had almost lost her eye while playing hide-and-seek. She'd hidden underneath an old bed that had metal springs sticking from it like spiky fingers. One of them dug into Mago's eyelid, another into her cheek, another on the bridge of her nose. The scars the stitches left on her eyelid looked like miniature train tracks. Ever since then, whenever anyone noticed her scars, they would look at her with pity.

After a brief silence she said, "I'm sorry I hit you, Nena." Then she took my hand, and we continued our walk.

When we got back from the tortilla mill, Élida was waiting by the gate asking why we took so long with the tortillas, and couldn't we see she was hungry? Élida had a round chubby face and big puffy eyes

that Mago teased her about, calling them frog eyes. At first, we had tried to be friends with Élida. We thought that since we were in the same situation—having been left behind by our parents—we would be friends. Élida wasn't interested in being our friend, and, like the neighbors, called us the little orphans. Technically, she was a little orphan, too. But the fashionable clothes 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.

Seeing her, I was angry again at being called an orphan, at being hit by Mago, at my mother leaving, at my father for taking her away. I wanted to yank Élida's braid, but at the sight of Abuela Evila hovering nearby, I knew it wise not to. Instead I said, "Your hair looks like a horse's tail."

"¡Pinche huérfana!" she said, and yanked my pigtail. Abuelia Evila took the tortillas from Mago but didn't say anything to Élida for pulling my hair.

My grandfather and my aunt, Tía Emperatriz, were sitting at

Mago, before the scars

the table in the kitchen. My grandfather worked in the fields nearby and was only there for lunch. My aunt worked at a photo studio. She was twenty-five years old and was still single. The youngest of my grandmother's five living children, she had yet to find someone who my grandmother felt was good enough to marry her prettiest daughter. Any man that came knocking would be scared off by my grandmother.

Carlos, Mago, and I sat on the two concrete steps leading from the kitchen to my grandmother's room since the table was only big enough for four people, and those seats were already taken. Abuela Evila gave a pork chop to Abuelo Augurio, another to Élida, the third went to Tía Emperatriz, and the last pork chop she took for herself. By the time the frying pan came our way, there was nothing left. Abuela Evila scooped up spoonfuls of oil in which she had fried the meat 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 the money their parents sent is gone."

Tía Emperatriz looked at our oily beans and then got up and grabbed her purse. She gave Mago a coin and sent her to buy a soda for us. Mago came back with a Fanta. We thanked our aunt for the soda and took turns sipping from the bottle, but the sweet, orangey taste didn't wash away the oil in our mouths.

"What's the point of our parents being in El Otro Lado, if we're going to be eating like beggars?" Mago said after our meal, once we were out of earshot. I had no answer to give my sister, so I said nothing. Tía Emperatriz and Abuelo Augurio went back to work. Élida went to watch TV. Carlos took the trash can out to the backyard to burn the pile of garbage, and I helped Mago take all the dirty dishes out to the stone lavadero. Then we cleaned the table and swept the dirt floor.

"¡Regina!" Abuela Evila called out from her bedroom, where she was mending her dresses. "¡Regina, ven acá!" It took me a moment to realize she was calling *me*, since Regina isn't my name. My grandmother thought it should have been because I was born on Septem-

ber 7, the day of Santa Regina. When my mother went to city hall to obtain my birth certificate, she had been angry at my grandmother for constantly criticizing her cooking or the way she cleaned, so in an act of small defiance, my mother registered me as Reyna. My grandmother never called me by my given name.

"¡Regina!" Abuela Evila called again.

"¿Sí, Abuelita?" I said as I stood at the threshold of her room.

"Go buy me a needle," she said, handing me the money she took out of the coin bag she kept in her brassiere. "And hurry back," she said. I glanced at the living room where Élida was watching *El Chavo del Ocho* while eating a bag of chicharrones sprinkled with red sauce.

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 about it. This time, I didn't care if the whole colonia thought I was wild and a disgrace to my family. I threw the coin as hard as I could. It hit one of the girls above her right eye. She screamed and called to her father. I ran home, forgetting to pick up 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. Mago looked at me for a long time. I thought she was going to hit me. Instead she took my hand again but pulled me in the opposite direction of Don Bartolo's store.

"Where are we going?" I asked. She didn't tell me where she was taking me, but as soon as we turned the corner, our little house came into view. We stopped in front of it. The window was open, and I could smell beans cooking. I heard a woman singing along to the radio. Mago said she didn't know who Don Rubén's new tenants were, but that this house would always be where we had 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 on the opposite side of the hill from Abuela Evila's house. Mami would come to do the washing here when we lived in Don Rubén's house. Mago said, "This is where Mami saved your life, Nena. Remember?"

When I was three, I had almost drowned in that canal. The rainy season had turned it into a gushing river, and the current was swift and strong. Mami told me to sit on the washing stones and stay by her side, but she let Mago and Carlos get in 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. My feet couldn't touch the bottom and I got pulled under. Mami got to me just in time.

We went back to Abuela Evila's house, not knowing what we were going to tell her. But before we went into the house itself, Mago took me into the shack made of bamboo sticks and cardboard near the patio. Inside were large clay pots, a griddle, and other things my grandmother didn't have space for in her kitchen. This is where Mami and Papi had first lived when they were 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 on while Mami had squatted on the ground, over a straw mat, grabbing the rope hanging from the ceiling. When I was born, the midwife put me into my mother's arms. She turned to face the fire so that the heat would keep me warm. As I listened to Mago, I closed my eyes and felt the heat of the flames, and I 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 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 added something to the story my mother had never told me. She said that my umbilical cord was like a ribbon that connected me to Mami. She said, "It doesn't matter she's not here now. That cord is there forever." I touched my belly button and 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 needle for her."

I took Mago's hand and together we left the shack. "She's going to beat me," I told her 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, and I thought about Mami, and about everything my sister had just said. It gave me courage.

"I'm sorry I hit you with the coin," I told the older girl.

She turned to look at her father, who had just come out of the store to stand by the door. She said, "My papi says that we're lucky he has the store because 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 I know 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."

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

3

Carlos, Reyna, Mago

Élida's hair was so long, it tumbled down her back like a sparkling black waterfall. Every few days, Abuela Evila washed Élida's hair with lemon water because, according to her, lemon juice cleans the impurities of the hair and makes it shiny and healthy. In the afternoons, she would fill up a bucket from the water tank, pick a few lemons from the tree, and squeeze the juice into the water.

Mago, Carlos, and I would hide behind a pink oleander bush and watch their ritual through the narrow leaves. Abuela Evila washed Élida's hair as if she were washing an expensive silk rebozo. Afterwards, Élida would sit under the sun to dry her hair. My grandmother

would come out to brush it in small strokes, beginning with the tips and working her way up. She spent half an hour running the comb through Élida's long hair while we watched.

Our hair was louse-ridden, our abdomens swelled with roundworms, but my grandmother didn't care. "I can be sure that my daughters' children are really my grandchildren," Abuela Evila often said to us. "But one can't trust a daughter-in-law. Who knows what your mother did when no one was looking."

It was my mother's bad luck to have been the only daughter-in-law. My father had a brother who died at seven years old. His name was Carlos, and my brother inherited his name. My grandfather would take Tío Carlos to the fields to work, and since they left very early in the morning, Tío Carlos would be too sleepy to stay awake during the ride to the fields. My grandfather would tie him to the horse to keep him from falling. One day, the horse lost its footing and fell, crushing my uncle beneath it.

But my uncle's death didn't save my father from the fields. When he was in third grade, he left school to harvest crops alongside my grandfather. If only Tío Carlos had lived and married, my mother would have had an ally, and we would have had cousins to share the burden of my grandmother's mistrust.

"Your mother is not coming back for you," Élida said to us one afternoon while lying in the sun to let her hair dry after Abuela Evila's lemon treatment. Mago and I were scrubbing our dirty clothes on the washing stone. "Now that she's got a job and is making dollars, she won't want to come back, believe me."

Three weeks before, Mami told us she got a job at a garment factory where she worked all day trimming loose threads off clothes. She said she was finally going to help Papi save money for the house and promised to send us money for Abuela Evila to buy us 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 hovered above us while we talked on the phone, and if we said anything bad about her, she would spank us afterward.

"She'll be back. I know she will," Mago told Élida. In the two and a half months we'd been there, my parents had called us every other weekend, but Mami had yet to send us the letters she promised she would write. But every time she called, Mago would be sure to remind her of her promise—that she would return within the year.

"Don't lie to yourself," Élida said. "They're going to forget all about you, you'll see. You and your brother and sister are always going to be Los Huerfanitos."

"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 into shiny black silk 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 in the patio. She lay down on the hammock and watched us do our chores. Mago swept the ground, and I watered Abuela Evila's pots of vinca and geranium on the edges of the water tank. Carlos was in the backyard clearing the brush, a chore my grandfather had given him. As always, Élida didn't have to do any work.

She rocked herself on the hammock eating a mango on a stick she had bought at Don Bartolo's store. It was a beautiful mango cut to look like a flower. Its yellow flesh was sprinkled with red chili powder. My mouth watered at seeing her take a big bite. Élida was always eating goodies she would buy with the money our grandmother gave her, and she never shared them with us. But when our other grandmother, Abuelita Chinta, would visit, bringing us oranges, cajeta, or lollipops, we had to share them with Élida or Abuela Evila would take them away.

"My mother loves me," Élida said. "That's why she sends me everything I ask her for. That's why she writes to me."

"¡Ya cállate, marrana!" Mago said. She turned the broom to face Élida and started to sweep toward her.

"¡Pinche huérfana!" Élida yelled, scrambling to get away from the cloud of dust Mago had just sent her way. "¡Pinche 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 hair of yours." Mago pulled me to her and started parting my hair. "¡Mira, mira, un piojo!" she said, holding an imaginary louse toward Élida.

"¡Abuelita! ¡Abuelita!" Élida yelled, her eyes opened wide with fear. She ran into the house clutching 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 Tía Emperatriz came home from work, Abuela Evila told her to take care of our lice problem.

"Can't it wait for the weekend?" Tía Emperatriz asked. "It's been a long day for me."

"They're going to pass their lice on to me, Abuelita," Élida said, still clutching her braid. "Please, Abuelita."

"Do as I say," Abuela Evila said to my aunt.

Tía Emperatriz glanced at Élida, who was smirking behind Abuela Evila's hunched figure, and I caught a glimpse of anger, a hint of jealousy in my aunt's eyes. She gave Mago some pesos and sent her down to Don Bartolo's store to buy lice shampoo and a fine-tooth comb.

"That's not going to work," Abuela Evila said. "Get kerosene."

"But Amá, that's dangerous," Tía Emperatriz said.

"Nonsense," Abuela Evila said. "In my day, there was no better remedy than kerosene."

The last rays of the sun were gone, and the world became wrapped in darkness. My grandmother turned on the light in the patio, but it didn't work. There was no electricity that night, so she brought out her candles and set them on the water tank.

When Mago came back with the kerosene, my aunt had us sit 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. 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. My aunt gently tilted my head all the way back and in the dim candlelight combed my hair with the fine-tooth comb for five minutes. The comb kept getting caught in my curls, and I felt as if needles were digging into my scalp. Tía Emperatriz soaked a towel in kerosene and then wrapped it around my head, making sure every strand of hair was tucked in before tying a plastic bag over my head to keep the towel in place. The smell was overpowering, and I had to struggle not to scratch my scalp, which was throbbing from the sting of the kerosene.

"Now off to bed," Tía Emperatriz said when she was done, "and stay away from the lit candles in the house."

That night was long and restless. I wanted to scratch, scratch, scratch. But could not. The overwhelming smell of the kerosene made it almost impossible to breathe. I reached for my towel and pulled on it, not able to bear the pain and the dizziness 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.

Shortly thereafter, when I reached my limit, 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 didn't put up much of a fuss because he was always trying to please my grandfather. His hair was completely

shaved off. We ran our hands over his bald head, feeling the stubble tickle our palms. When she saw him, Élida said, "You look like a skeleton." She was always making fun of him because Carlos was really skinny, except for his bloated abdomen, and now with his head completely bald, he did look like a skeleton. Élida 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 a 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.

"Allá tú si te quieres mover," he said when I wouldn't stop. I jerked around, crying and yelling for Mami to come. I hated myself for being so weak the night before when I tore the towel off. My scalp still burned and my head hurt, but it had all been for nothing. I cried for my hair. It was the only beautiful thing I had. Curls so thick, women in the street would stop and touch it and tell Mami, "Qué bonito pelo tiene su hija. She looks like a doll." 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 land on the ground and on my lap, falling one by one like the petals of a flower. Then my grandmother's chickens came clucking to see what was happening, and they picked up my curls and shook them around, and when they realized they weren't food, 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 my aunt's dresser mirror and gasped. My hair was as short as a boy's, and it was so uneven it looked as if one of the cows from the dairy farm down the road had nibbled on it. I looked at Papi's photo hanging on the wall, right below the small window. I'd seen 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.

I wished we had a picture of Mami. I wanted to tell her that I missed being with her. I missed watching her getting the dirty clothes

ready, putting them inside a blanket and tying the corners to make a sack, then throwing the sack on her head. "Vámonos," she would say, and I walked alongside her to the canal. There I would sit on the washing stone while she scrubbed the clothes and told me stories. If the water was low, she would let me get in. I would chase after the soap bubbles as she dunked the clothes into the water to rinse.

I missed watching her go through her pretty Avon merchandise—smelling the perfumes, trying on the lotions that smelled of springtime—and seeing her face glow with pride after each sale.

I missed going with her to visit Abuelita Chinta, and taking a nap on Abuelita's bed while they talked. I would fall asleep listening to Mami's voice and the cooing of Abuelita Chinta's doves. And at night, I missed snuggling with her on the bed she had slept in with Papi before he left. Mago and I had tried to keep Mami warm so she wouldn't miss him so much.

Mago came in to tell me it was dinnertime, and I looked at her and hated her because she didn't get her hair chopped off. She dealt with the stupid itching all night long. Even though her scalp was irritated and blistered, the lice were all dead. She washed her hair twenty times with Tía Emperatriz's shampoo that smelled of roses, but 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 got 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 was at work when the hair cutting took 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 hair with lemon water and scrubbing it so gently my body shuddered with pleasure. I awoke with such longing that I felt like weeping. And then I realized that Carlos had wet the bed.