



## CHAPTER 1

### My Mother the Slave

"Want some more café?"

Oh, for heaven's sake. Why did Mami always have to be so beggy? I hated that *beggy*voice of hers. She sounded like a slave. I just wanted to go to the bathroom and then back to my room like I did on any other normal morning, not hear her pitiful *beggy*voice offering me more coffee. Besides, I knew she was mad at me. *She* knew she was mad at me -- as mad as she ever had the nerve to get. Why couldn't she act mad if she felt mad? She could at least not speak to me, or shoot me a dirty look. Instead she wanted to give me more coffee.

"No, thanks, Mami. I don't want any more coffee. One cup is enough."

"¿Avena?"

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"I don't want oatmeal, either."

"You have to eat something before you go to your first day at work."

I couldn't believe it. Going to work at the five-and-dime was exactly what she was mad at me about. *She* had wanted me to work in the *bodega* for the whole summer -- but it wasn't *my* grocery store. It was hers and my stepfather's. Working all of July in that store that smelled like bacalao, the world's smelliest fish even when it was fresh, and listening to old people talk about Puerto Rico as they watched Telemundo on television, was enough, thank you!

*Please* -- this was 1969, and who cared about Puerto Rico in the old days anyway? Not me.

Mami went into her room and came out with a freshly ironed blue-checked sleeveless shirt. "Here is your shirt, nice and planchada."

Only my mother would iron in weather like this. Who irons in July? And when did she iron it, in the middle of the night?

"Mami, you didn't have to press it. The shirt looked okay the way it was."

"Are you kidding?"

*Fine.*

"Thanks, Mami." I grabbed the shirt and tried to go into

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my room before she could say another word. But I wasn't fast enough.

"¿Huevos?"

"No eggs!"

Thank God I had my own bedroom, where I could be all by myself in this tiny apartment of ours. There were only two other rooms in our home, not counting the kitchen and the bathroom -- the living room and my mother and stepfather's bedroom. This morning I was glad to duck into my own space.

I had fixed up my room all by myself without my mother's help. That's why it wasn't decorated in late 1960s Puerto Rican décor -- plastic covering all the furniture and fake roses everywhere. Which was Mami's way of making our home look pretty.

She'd put a vase of plastic roses on top of the television set, and there were even plastic roses poking out from behind picture frames on the wall. What was it with Puerto Ricans and plastic roses anyway? Did my mother really think those tacky flowers looked good against her greasy turquoise walls?

Then there were the plastic covers on the armchairs. I always tell people you haven't lived until you've sat on plastic-covered furniture while wearing shorts in the

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middle of summer and had your thighs stick to the seat when you tried to stand up.

At least the sofa didn't have plastic on it -- but that was only because it was a pullout, and it would've been too hard to take the covers off every time we were going to use it. Not that that happened very often. But we never knew when some starving somebody from Puerto Rico was going to come over, asking to sleep on our sofa for the night, which always turned into having a houseguest for a month.

Mami's yellow kitchen didn't escape plastic and roses, either. She'd even found a plastic flowered tablecloth in La Marqueta, where you could buy anything from a crucifix to a freshly killed chicken.

Mami's other "decorating" was done with tapetes. My mother spent hours crocheting those lacy table coverings. Some were as big as pizzas, others as dainty as daffodils. Mami puttapetes under vases, beneath picture frames, and on all the tables. She even draped them on the armchairs and the back of the sofa.

What did Mami think? That nobody would notice the dirty walls because they would be too busy drooling over her tapetes?

There's a Puerto Rican expression that says some people try to "tapar el cielo con la mano" -- to cover the sky with their hand.

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That was Mami. She was always covering up what she didn't want to see, or putting something pretty on top of something ugly.

The picture of her father on the dresser in her bedroom was another good example of Mami's bad decorating skills. That thing had both roses *and* a tapete. The fakeness of the plastic roses matched the fakeness of the photo. Like in all the old-fashioned pictures I had seen from Puerto Rico, the photographer had decided to make it better by coloring it in and putting lipstick and blush on Abuelo, whose thin black moustache looked super stupid with all that makeup.

Little did I know that Abuelo's life was my mother's ultimate act of -- "tapando el cielo con la mano."

I wish Mami would have just demanded that the landlord paint our apartment. Whenever I asked her about calling the landlord, she said, "We don't have to paint. We're not going to live here forever. Someday we'll buy

a house in the Bronx." Yeah, she did want to buy a house in the Bronx, but really Mami was too afraid of the landlord to complain. When it came to standing up for herself, she was as frail and delicate as one of her tapetes. Since my room was off-limits to Mami's decorating -- and plastic roses and anything lacey -- the walls were creamy beige. I had a corduroy bedspread that was once yellow but had been washed so many times, it was faded

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to almost white -- just the way I liked it. My bare dresser, without a *tapete* on it, stood in the corner, and a table I found on 110th Street served as a desk. I'd painted the dresser and the table white.

With Mami still in the kitchen holding her egg pan in one hand and her iron in the other, I got dressed. I was tucking my shirt into my A-line skirt, when Pops busted into my room.

"What are you doing?" he shouted. "You should be helping your mother."

My stepfather had been acting super parental lately. I just looked at him.

"I want you to take out the garbage. If you can't help in the bodega, you can help more in the house! In Puerto Rico, a young girl knows her place.

Knows that she should help her mother. What are you, a hippie?"

Pops had an issue with hippies.

"*¡Malcriados sinvergüenzas!* Shameless spoiled kids," he called them.

Before I could answer, my mother stepped in behind Pops, saying, "That's okay. I'll take out the garbage."

*My mother the slave* was all I could think.

I had to be at the five-and-dime, six blocks away, by ten thirty. I looked at myself in the mirror over my dresser. I still had a small pink hair curler in my bangs. The curler

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helped my bangs be a little smoother. I hated my hair because I never knew what it was going to do. If the weather was sticky, my hair got frizzy and stuck out like a triangle. I took out the hair curler and combed my bangs with my finger. In the top drawer of my desk, I found a thick rubber band. I snapped it around my wrist, brushed my hair into a ponytail, and slipped the rubber band over to hold it in place.

Trying to see myself from the side was hard, but I could tell I had an ugly profile. I looked better from the front.

I shoved my feet into my white tennis shoes that made my size eights look even bigger. I didn't even care that the sneakers hurt. I just wanted to get going.

My mother the slave was back, calling from the living room.

"Rosa, do you --"

"Evelyn, Mami, remember?" I yelled, correcting her. Ever since my fourteenth birthday last month, I told everybody I wanted to be called Evelyn. My full name is Rosa María Evelyn del Carmen Serrano. But I shortened it. El Barrio, Spanish Harlem, U.S.A., did not need another Rosa, María, or Carmen.

The boys in our neighborhood always joked by calling out "Hey, María" every time they saw a group of girls together. They were sure *one* of us would look their way.

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They were right. That's why I cut off half my name and chose Evelyn -- it was the least Puerto Rican-sounding name I could have.

Mami said, "Oh, *sí* ... Evelyn ... do you need money?"

When I came out of my bedroom, Mami was dusting the furniture and shaking out all the tapetes.

"I'm okay, Mami. I don't need any money."

I had saved up what Mami and Pops had given me for the time I worked in their bodega.

Mami kissed me.

"Good luck, mija."

"Bye, Mami."

I ran out the door.

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## CHAPTER 2

### *El Barrio*

*Bang.*

The heat of the sun smacked my face the second I stepped out onto the street. I untucked my shirt and rolled up my skirt at least an inch. Mami thought I was too young to wear miniskirts, and Pops didn't think it was right for any girl to wear them. Who cared what they thought.

The daily sweats were about to begin. But the heat wasn't as bad as what hit my senses next -- the *El Barrio* fart smell of garbage. With the hot sun beating down, food rotted even faster. The smells of spoiled fish, melons, and beans blended together into one big, funky mess that stunk like everybody had decided to cut loose some gas at the same

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time. I tried to walk with my nose up in the air so I wouldn't have to smell the *El Barrio* fart. But the only way to avoid it would've been to fly.

The stench didn't seem to bother two little kids who were doing a good job cooling off by throwing water balloons at each other. The fire hydrants weren't open all the way like they would be later in the day, but they trickled enough water so that the kids could fill up their balloons. I couldn't blame them. Water-balloon fights were as close as those kids were going to get to water sports this summer.

Almost holding my breath, I walked around the corner to Lexington and looked around at the usual scene of old men playing dominos; the guy who sold *bacalaítos fritos* -- codfish fritters -- from his pushcart; old ladies who spent the day leaning on windowsill pillows, looking out the windows onto

bunches of kids whose only way of enjoying the great outdoors was to hang out on the fire escapes and stoops.

At the end of the day when I got home from work, I was going to see the same people doing the same things. Nothing changes in El Barrio.

As I walked down Lexington, there was that kid Angel Santiago -- the biggest pain in the world -- coming up the street. I pretended not to see him, but he saw me.

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"Well, whaddaya know. If it isn't Rosa María Evelyn del Carmen Serrano." He should talk about names. He had the stupidest name of all time. Angel. What was he, a spirit? Besides, there was nothing angelic about him. He ran up alongside me.

I kept walking.

"Hey." He was trying to keep up with my steps.

"I'm busy, Angel. I'm going to work."

"Well, *excuse* me."

I kept moving.

He looked a little desperate. "Can I walk you?"

"No, I can walk myself, and another thing -- my name is Evelyn."

"That's right, I forgot. It's just that I been calling you Rosa for the longest time."

That was true. Angel and I have known each other forever. I lived on 110th Street, near Lexington. He lived on 107th, near Park. I couldn't remember a time Angel wasn't around. Just like I couldn't remember a time he wasn't skinny and annoying.

Sometimes my mother let Angel come upstairs to our apartment to eat. That's why he thought he was my friend.

Angel lived alone with his father, who sold frozen ices, piraguas, from a pushcart. There was something funny

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about Angel's father. Not "funny ha-ha" but "funny weird." Sometimes he acted like he knew you and sometimes he acted like he didn't. And he could be really mean. Like last month he punished Angel for going on the

roof to try and watch the Fourth of July fireworks. To discipline Angel, his father made him kneel on raw rice while holding a pot of boiling water over his head. It was stuff like that that made Angel always look like somebody was going to hit him between the eyes. He wore such a pained expression all the time. The only thing that helped Angel not look so sad was his long eyelashes. At least they gave him a cute face.

But that kid still had hurt going on. He always bit his nails and chewed on the skin around them until they turned all red and raggedy.

Angel had been left back one year at school. And when he *came* to school, he was in what they called the "remedial class."

Now he was working extra hard to keep with my steps.

"Angel, I have to go, so see you." I kept walking toward Third Avenue to the five-and-dime, leaving him behind.

Like always, I counted my steps in my head -- *one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight.*

On eight, a water balloon smacked me in the back. I was

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going to start my first day of work with a wet blouse. When I turned around to see who'd thrown the balloon, another one came at my face.

"I'm gonna get you for that, Angel!" Now my bangs were dripping wet. He ran up to me, all grinning and silly looking.

"Got you!" He was laughing.

I pushed him as hard as I could. He fell back, hit the ground, and stayed there with a hurt look on his face.

"Hey, it was just a joke. You gonna get dry in a minute, it's so hot out here."

Angel was right. But now my bangs were frizzy, and I was mad. People started slowing down as they passed Angel on the ground and me standing over him. Then they looked at me like *I* was the one who'd done something wrong.

I left Angel where he was and started to walk off how mad I felt. Counting while walking always calmed me down.

*One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight ...*

I made my way toward Third Avenue.



*One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight ...* I could've made a left on up to 116th Street but decided to take a longer way over to First Avenue.

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*One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight ...* I finally took a left and walked past Thomas Jefferson Park up to 116th, where the five-and-dime was between First and Second.

I must've counted to eight about a million times between Angel and the store where I was going to be working. That's how many steps it took me to get un-mad.

I tried to pat my bangs. They felt like a bush. I looked in the side-view mirror of a parked car to check them out. It was what I'd expected -- they were all frizzy. Finger combing them to the side didn't help. Stupid Angel. I tried to be calm when I got to the store and found Mr. Simpson, the manager, in the back office.

Mr. Simpson was chubby, with dark hair that came to below his ears. He was trying to wear his hair as long as he dared, but knew that he couldn't be too way out or he wouldn't have a job. My boss was trying to be a hippie. Sort of. Someday I'd tell Pops that the man I worked for had hippie hair.

"Evelyn," he said.

"Hi."

"Let's go right out and I'll show you what you have to do."

He came from behind his desk, and I noticed the buttons on his shirt were almost popping.

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"First thing you do when you come to work is punch in," he explained, leading me to a big clock. "You take this card with your name on it and push it down this slot when you get here and then again when you leave. That way we can keep track of exactly how many hours you work every day. Since you're just starting, your hours will change on a daily basis, but by punching in, we'll be able to keep track."

I took the card and slipped it in the slot. It made a *ching-bang* sound and marked the time on the card. I liked this way of keeping track of things. Mr.

Simpson and I walked out into the store and past the lunch counter, which had a row of saggy balloons hanging over it. I read the sign stuck onto the mirror behind the counter:

*TAKE A CHANCE ON A BANANA SPLIT.*

*ONE CENT TO SEVENTY-NINE CENTS.*

The balloons were stuffed with price tags ranging from a penny to seventy-nine cents, and depending on which balloon you picked, you paid from one penny to seventy-nine cents. This was the store's tricky way of selling banana splits.

We walked toward the candy counter, and I kind of hoped Mr. Simpson would put me there, with the cases of

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lollipops, licorice twists, peppermints, Raisinets, chocolate-covered marshmallows, and my favorite, French creams.

I never stole, but if Mr. Simpson had put me on the candy counter, I'd steal a French cream or two. Or maybe not steal, but "liberate" as I'd heard some older boys in my neighborhood call it.

We walked right past the candy counter and the hardware counter, and went up to the makeup counter. No "liberating" French creams for me.

I guess Mr. Simpson figured that since I didn't wear a ton of Cleopatra eyeliner like everybody else in El Barrio, I wouldn't steal any. A lady stood behind the counter.

Mr. Simpson introduced us. "Lydia, this is Evelyn Serrano. I'm going to start Evelyn on this counter first."

I was surprised he called the makeup lady Lydia. I mean -- she was as old as my mother. I had to call people *that* old *don* or *doña* -- or risk getting a dirty look from my mother for showing disrespect.

"Now, Evelyn, it'll be your job to stock the shelves when they start to get empty. You don't have to go to the stock room -- one of the guys will bring the stuff up -- you just have to refill the counters with the items."

I looked around. There were counters with eye shadows, lipsticks, and makeup pencils of all colors. I liked the way the eye shadows went from dull to bright, and the lipsticks

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from beige to purple-black. There was even a variety of black pencils with names like midnight, coal, and ebony. They looked like little soldiers standing at attention.

"Evelyn, let me see how you do at the cash register," said Mr. Simpson. I already knew how the cash register worked from spending time in my parents' bodega, but I guess Mr. Simpson wanted to make sure. An old lady came up with a bottle of wrinkle cream she wanted to pay for. Lydia and Mr. Simpson watched me ring up the cream. At that same moment, I noticed three girls I knew from the neighborhood, Awilda, Dora, and Migdalia, come in and sit at the lunch counter. Migdalia used to be my best friend but was starting to hang out with Awilda and Dora.

I missed visiting Migdalia, her mother, and her older brother, Wilfredo. They lived on welfare, and if that wasn't embarrassing enough for Migdalia, they hardly had any furniture. I mean -- they had a sofa, and beds, and chairs. But Migdalia's family didn't have any little stuff, like a toaster, or a coffeemaker, or a TV, thanks to Wilfredo, who sold the stuff the minute their mother bought it.

Their place always looked like they had just moved in or were getting ready to move out.

Migdalia's father wasn't around. She and her mother were always worried sick about Wilfredo, like he was the

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most important person in the world. It made me happy I was an only child. Still, I have to admit Wilfredo was gorgeous looking -- even with his troubles and all.

Migdalia thought we should hang out more with Awilda and Dora. She said she wanted to have more friends. What was wrong with having just one friend? I didn't need any more. Besides, Awilda was a bigmouth. Always talking louder than she really had to so that people would notice her.

From all the way over by the lunch counter, I heard her say, "Let's try for a cheap banana split." Then she picked a red balloon.

Meanwhile, Wrinkle Face gave me a five-dollar bill for the cream that cost one dollar and eighty-nine cents, plus tax. I figured out the change in my head even before the cash register told me what to give her back, so I was able to keep track of what was happening at the lunch counter.

The waitress popped the balloon and gave Awilda the bad news. She had picked a balloon with a seventy-nine-cent price tag in it.

"I can't believe it," said Dora. "How come we never get the thirty-nine-cent, or the forty-five-cent, or even the fifty-cent banana split?"

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I gave Wrinkle Face her change and put her cream in a bag. I couldn't believe how dumb Awilda and Dora were. It didn't take a genius to figure out that all those balloons had prices of seventy-nine cents in them. Migdalia should've known better. But Awilda and Dora wouldn't have listened to her. She was the new friend, the one always going along. Mr. Simpson and Lydia were so busy watching me they didn't notice what was happening at the lunch counter.

"Very good, Evelyn," said Mr. Simpson. "You stay here. Lydia will help you if you run into any trouble. I'll be in my office if you need me."

Dora and Migdalia came over to the makeup counter. Dora started looking at the nail polish.

Lydia said, "I'm going to the bathroom."

And just as Lydia stepped down from behind the counter I saw Dora slip a bottle of polish into her bag. Migdalia made believe she didn't see it. I didn't say anything.

"Hey, Evelyn," Migdalia said.

"Hey, Migdalia."

That was as far as our conversation went.

Mr. Simpson came over. Awilda, Dora, and Migdalia knew enough to disappear.

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"Where's Lydia?"

"Bathroom."

"Evelyn, the store's going to get really busy with people who shop on their lunch hour, and I want to move all this old Fourth of July merchandise. As soon as Lydia gets back, go over to the paper goods counter and help Dolores."

Dolores was black. Ever since Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated last year, I seemed to notice black people more. Especially darker-skinned people like Dolores. When Lydia came back, I went to paper goods.

Dolores looked older than me. Maybe she was sixteen.

"Hi, I'm Evelyn. Mr. Simpson wants me to help you."

A line was beginning to form at the paper goods register, getting longer and longer.

"I'm Dolores, and I can sure use help."

Dolores's skin was the color of Hershey's chocolate. She had two-tone lips. Her upper lip was darker than her lower one, and her teeth were as white as the inside of a coconut. Dolores had pretty eyes that slanted up at the corners. The only thing that messed up her style was her hair. It was straightened into a flip, but because it was stiff, one side flipped out more than the other.

I looked at her lopsided hair, while she stared at my bushed-out bangs. I tried to push my bangs to the side, but they were still frizzy.

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Dolores said, "Here's what we'll do. I'll ring 'em up, and you bag 'em."

It's a good thing Dolores had a plan. The place was overrun by people coming in to buy Fourth of July plates, cups, and napkins. We had to work fast.

Dolores said, "People around here love America -- when the price is right."

"I guess everybody is patriotic at half price."

When a customer spoke fast Spanish that sounded like a machine gun -- "*Avemaría Purísima Me Encantan Todos Estos Platos De Cartón Porque No Se Tienen Que Lavar Los Platos*" -- Dolores looked at me, hoping to get a translation.

The woman was going on and on about how much she loved paper plates because she didn't have to wash them, but I didn't feel like going into all that, so I just whispered, "Let's just say she is super patriotic!"

Dolores and I cracked up, and kept ringing and bagging.

We worked fast. When I looked up, the long line was gone.

Dolores let out a breath. "*Whew!*"

The paper goods department began to empty out.

"I guess I'll go back to the makeup counter," I said.

Dolores bumped her shoulder to mine. "You're a good bagger, Evelyn.

Thanks for the help."

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When I got back to the makeup counter, Lydia was dusting the lipsticks.

Her accent was Spanish, but a little different than Mami's.

"You Puerto Rican?" she asked.

"Yes."

"I'm Dominican."

I thought, *So what do you want, a medal for being Dominican?*

Then Lydia started to speak rapid Spanish. Something about how she didn't want to work because she had three kids, but had to work even though it was hard to find a babysitter ... Blah, blah, blah. I didn't want to hear any of that stuff, so I cut her off.

"I don't really speak Spanish that well." Not that it was true. I mean -- I understood Spanish as long as the person talking didn't use big words. I just didn't want to have to listen to Lydia. Telling her I didn't speak Spanish shut her up right away.

*Se puso sosa*. That was one of my favorite expressions in Spanish. It means, literally, that all flavor left her face. It was a little mean of me to stop Lydia, but it had been a long day. It was time to punch out.

"Bye, Lydia," I said.

She still looked sour.

"Adiós, Evelyn," she said quietly.

I went into the back and punched out.

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"See you, Mr. Simpson. What time tomorrow?"

"Same time, Evelyn."

Outside it was still hot, and Angel's father was selling piraguas.

"Hi, señor Santiago," I said carefully, wondering if he was going to remember me.

"Hey, Evelyn, right? ¿Qué tal?"

Okay, he knew me this time. Great, because I needed a nice, cold snow cone and I didn't feel like dealing with an old man in a bad mood. He took the towel off the big square block of ice on his cart, grabbed the ice scraper with his other hand, and started to scrape. I always wondered how he knew exactly the number of scrapes it would take to fill a cone with just the right amount of ice. He filled the cone perfectly.

One thing that always bothered me about señor Santiago's face was that it didn't agree with itself. Señor Santiago's mouth turned up in a smile, but his eyes were as sad as *la esperanza de un pobre* -- as sad as the hope of a poor person.

"¿Cuál quieres?" he asked.

I looked at all the colors of syrup for pouring onto the scraped ice. There was white, red, purple, and blue -- coconut, cherry, grape, and blueberry.

"Azul, blue," I said.

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Señor Santiago poured syrup into the cone. That was my favorite part -- watching the syrup melt and darken the ice. As I walked off slurping my cone, a cop approached señor Santiago.

I stayed near enough to hear the cop ask him, "You got a license to sell that stuff?"

"License?"

"Yeah, a license."

"No, I ..."

"You can't sell that stuff without a license. What if it's contaminated?"

"Contaminated?"

"Dirty."

"No, no, is clean. Just icy sirope."

The police officer took out his pad and started to write a ticket. "Yeah, well, the Board of Health might have another opinion."

"Wait! I can't pay a ticket!"

"You gotta, buddy. It's the law." He gave señor Santiago a summons.

"But I been selling *piraguas* for a long time."

"Doesn't make it right. Take care of that," the cop said as he walked away toward the guy who sold *bacalaítos fritos*, codfish fritters.

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Señor Santiago stared at the summons. He looked around like he needed to tell somebody something, but didn't know what or who to tell. His *esperanza de un pobre* eyes looked like they were going to cry.

I was glad I'd gotten my *piragua* before the policeman got there. Its icy cold cooled the heat of this summer day. But somehow the blue syrup didn't taste as sweet.

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## CHAPTER 3

### The Lady with No Eyebrows Appears

When I got home, there were three weird things going on.

Mami, who is usually at our *bodega* in the evenings, was home.

There was music blaring in our apartment.

At the kitchen table sat a woman whose eyebrows were drawn on with a black makeup pencil. On her eyelids was a thick spread of eye shadow the same blue as my snow cone. The woman's lips were as pink as the inside of a seashell. And, oh, her hair -- it was as orange as Bozo's, puffed up and



piled on top of her head like a wad of cotton candy. Mami was serving this strange lady a cup of coffee.

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Mami spoke in a very tired way. "Mija, this is your abuela."

I blinked. Twice. My grandmother?

I knew I had a grandmother in Puerto Rico, who had married the guy with the painted cheeks in Mami's picture. But this lady looked nothing like any grandmother I'd ever seen.

She got up to kiss me. *Mypiragua* had turned to a puddle in my cup.

My grandmother's hot-pink sleeveless sweater was low cut. She wore black cotton pedal pushers. Her burgundy-colored toenails peeked out of chunky-heeled sandals.

Her accent was as thick as the blue syrup in my cup and heavier than Mami's accent. "Rosita, you are so beautiful," she said.

She crushed me to her. My face just reached her neck. I could feel she was wearing one of those stiff one-piece long-line bras that go from the chest to above the knees. I didn't think anybody wore that old-fashioned corset type underwear anymore.

I glanced at Mami, who didn't look anything like her own mother. Mami was more white looking, with light brown hair always pulled into a tight bun. She never wore makeup or heels. Mami's shoes looked like something a

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tired nurse would wear. Her skirts fell below the knees, and she didn't ever wear pants.

My grandmother smothered me in her strong arms for a long time, while Mami went into the living room to turn off the record player. The needle scraped the record as Mami stopped the music.

Mami came back and put the record on the table in front of my grandmother, like she was daring her. My grandmother huffed. She released me from her killer hug. "You didn't tell me Rosa was so beautiful," she said.

"I never know where you are to tell you anything," Mami said.

"That's not true. I told you when I moved from Caguas to Cayey, and then to Cabo Rojo."

"It's very hard for me to keep up with where you go. Especially when you don't give the address."

There was silence then. Though the music was off, the song was going on in my head. The singer had been singing "... *siembra* ..." which means planting or something. He was singing about how Latin people should plant something for the future.

"Heat up the food when you get hungry, Evelyn," Mami said.

"Evelyn? Who's Evelyn?" asked the lady with the fake eyebrows.

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"I'm Evelyn."

Mami explained, "Since she got to be fourteen last month, she wants to be called Evelyn. I guess you don't know, but Evelyn is one of her middle names."

My *abuela* put a hand on her round hip. "Of course I know it's one of her middle names. And I do remember when she was born."

"That's right," Mami said. "I did speak to you on the phone after I gave birth ... wherever you were."

This whole scene sounded like something on one of the *telenovela* soap operas on Telemundo. I had never heard my mother use such a harsh tone before. It was my turn to talk.

"I decided to call myself Evelyn. Too many girls in *El Barrio* are called Rosa."

"Good for you, Rosa -- I mean, Evelyn. People should be called whatever they like to be called. I will try to remember you are now Evelyn."

"It shouldn't be too hard since you just met her." Mami's tone was as sharp as señor Santiago's ice scraper. My grandmother acted like she didn't hear. She kept talking to me.

"... if you try to remember to call me Abuela."

Mami wouldn't look at either of us. "Mama is going to stay with us for a while," she told me. Then Mami grabbed her purse. "I cooked some asopao. Have some while it's hot."

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Nobody likes cold stew. I have to get back to the bodega. I'm not usually home at this hour."

My grandmother patted her hair. "I'm sorry I came in the middle of the day. It's just that I found a last-minute flight and --"

Mami cut her off. "Porfirio is waiting for me at the store." Then she left, slamming the door harder than she ever had.

Abuela studied me for a long moment. I did the same to her. She was an older, overdone version of me. Same complexion. Same rounded face. Same dark eyes.

"Your mother said I could stay in your bedroom."

Sometimes saying nothing is the strongest answer. So I kept my mouth shut and went to my room, where there had been a clothes explosion.

Abuela's suitcase was on my bed, yawning open, with a bunch of scarves, tops, and skirts in bright colors. My clean white desk was covered with books in Spanish. My dresser was piled with record albums and a makeup bag full of compacts -- some broken, some not -- and lipsticks and powders. In the middle of the dresser mess were combs with teeth missing and brushes clogged with hair. Abuela had hung a bag of hair curlers on one side of my mirror, and a mass of chain belts on the other.

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There was only one place left to go where I could be alone. I didn't know the right Spanish word for it, but it was my only getaway -- el roofo.

The evening's heat met me as soon as I pushed open the roof door. At least it was quiet and I was alone.

I leaned down on the sloping edge of the roof. I took a hard breath, closed my eyes. That's when I heard the sound of my name pressing into my solitude.

"Hey ... Evelyn."

It was Angel, leaning over me. He smelled like sweat. His shirt was all grimy, just like his neck. He was chewing slowly on his fingernails. "What are you doing up here?"

"I *live* in this building, remember?" I snapped.

Angel got quiet. We sat without talking. I thought about this *abuela* of mine. How she popped in out of nowhere. How different she was from my own mother. I knew other relatives had raised Mami in Puerto Rico, so I could understand why she didn't know Abuela very well. But this was the first time I'd ever seen Mami so moody.

Angel must have sensed I needed quiet. He let me be alone with my thoughts.

This felt like the longest day ever.

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A buela ruined my life immediately.

Since she'd taken over my room, I was now sleeping on our living-room sofa bed, under a thin sheet.

The morning after Abuela came, I woke up hot and sweaty. I kicked the sheet off just as Pops, who had forgotten I was sleeping in the living room, stepped out of the other bedroom. When he saw my naked leg up in the air, he turned to go back into his room so fast that he banged his face on the door.

"¡Caramba!" he yelled.

I hid under the sheets. When it was safe to come out, I wrapped the sheet around me and ran to the bathroom to get my bathrobe and do my business. But the bathroom door was locked.

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"I need to go!" I shrieked.

Abuela was already in there.

Pops came up behind me. He had a hankie pressed to his nose, which was bleeding.

"Abuela, we have to get in there!"

She flung open the door. The sight of her made us suck in our breath in horror. Abuela had green goop all over her face. Without her eyebrows drawn on, she looked like an escapee from a monster movie.

"Sorry, Porfirio, I was giving myself a facial."

Pops was hot-mad.

"You got a bloody nose?" Abuela asked.

That brought my mother running in from the kitchen. "Bloody nose? ¿Qué pasó? Ay, Dios mío."

We all started talking at once. I had to pee -- badly. I was hopping from one foot to the other. If it hadn't been so early and so hot, this all would have been funny.

"Ven, Porfirio," said my mother, coaxing Pops into the kitchen. I scooted into the bathroom past Abuela, shut the door behind me, and quickly used the toilet. Abuela had left stuff all over the sink. Lotion bottles, shavers, tweezers, nose-hair scissors, hairbrushes, combs, and three half-used tubes of Alberto VO5. Even the drain had evidence of Abuela -- it was clogged with wads of her Bozo-orange hair.

#### **40**

When I came out, Abuela had disappeared, probably into my bedroom. Mami was trying to stop Pops from fleeing as he pressed the hankie to his nose. "Wait, Porfirio -- eat something."

"I'll eat at the store," he answered gruffly, slamming the door behind him. I tiptoed into the kitchen.

"¿Avena?" Mami offered.

She dumped some oatmeal in a bowl. Abuela came to the kitchen, green face and all. My mother put some oatmeal in a bowl for her. She made a face as soon as she tasted it.

"Eww, you've put a lot of sugar, ¿sí?"

"Sí," Mami answered, dragging out the word to sound like seeeeee.

"If you put a lot of sugar in, you get fatter than you already are." Abuela shot Mami a harsh look.

Mami pressed her lips together, grabbed her purse, and flew out the door. The green gunk on Abuela's face had begun to harden. She turned and went into the bathroom, where she started to run water. Soon she came back to the kitchen.

"I wish your mother didn't get so mad at me," Abuela said. She had replaced the green gunk with a layer of Pond's cold cream. My grandmother with no eyebrows

#### **41**

now looked like a space alien. She threw out her sweetened oatmeal and made a fresh bowl for herself with no sugar.

"The only thing I have sugar in is café," she explained, trying to make conversation. Rummaging through the cabinets she found some raisins.

"Perfect," she said, "I'll put these in my oatmeal."

"Those raisins are for the bread pudding Mami makes to sell at the store," I said. "Besides, oatmeal tastes better with sugar."

Abuela changed the subject. "I will go shopping today. You come with me?"

"I'm working. I have to go to my room to get dressed."

Abuela's shoes, scarves, and long-line bras were all over the place. I tried to ignore the mess. I started to take the rubber band out of my hair, but it got stuck.

"Evelyn?"

Abuela had followed me.

"Let me help you with that."

"No ... I can do it...." But I was struggling.

Abuela got manicure scissors out of her makeup kit.

"I can just cut that rubber band."

She had already started cutting and was very determined. All I could say was, "Fine, go ahead."

"You should never use rubber bands. They break your hair. It's best to use one of these."

#### **42**

She showed me a fabric-covered elastic hair band. I nodded.

"Where do you work?" Abuela asked.

"The five-and-dime."

"I'm sure they sell all kinds of nice bands that won't break your hair. I can go shopping there later. My gray hairs are coming in -- I have to get hair dye to cover up my canas, and I could use some new makeup. I'll just come

to the five-and-dime to get everything I need. I know exactly where the store is. I used to live on 116th Street years ago."

Abuela had set my hair free. Before I knew what was happening, she was brushing it and gently putting my hair into a ponytail. It didn't hurt at all, and my hair looked good. "*Gracias*," I said softly, then turned to go.

"I see you later?"

I sure hoped not. I didn't want my grandmother with no eyebrows and orange hair coming to my job. I shrugged, not answering yes or no.

The whole day at work I watched for Abuela. I knew she'd come but was still shocked when I saw her. She was wearing a striped halter top and flowered pants. At least they were long pants. And this time only half of her hair was piled up. The other part was flowing down her back.

### **43**

She looked around expectantly, all open-faced. I tried to make believe I didn't know her. Dolores spotted her right away and approached Abuela. I wanted to die. They talked, then Dolores pointed to me. Abuela came over, smiling. Lydia was taking care of a customer. I tried to hide behind the hairbrushes.

"There you are!" Abuela squealed.

"Hi."

I introduced Abuela to Lydia.

"Lydia, this is my ... grandmother."

"Your grandmother! *¡Sí, seguro que sí!* You look exactly alike."

Lydia couldn't stop staring at my grandmother's drawn-on eyebrows. Then, to make this moment even more terrible, Awilda came in with Dora and Migdalia. I wanted to slip through a hole like one of the roaches or mice from Pérez y Martina, my favorite childhood tale, a love story between a mouse that dressed like the King of Spain and a cockroach that wore a *mantilla* and a skirt. If only I were that cockroach -- I could escape what had to be the most humiliating moment of my life.

But I wasn't a roach or a mouse that could disappear quickly. The next best thing was to try to get to Mr. Simpson's office.

### **44**

"Lydia, there's not too many people in the store now," I said. "Mr. Simpson told me to check back in with him."

But it was too late to make a getaway.

"Hey, Rosa," Awilda called.

Abuela said, "She doesn't like to be called Rosa anymore. She likes Evelyn, ¿verdad?"

"Excuse me, lady?"

"Awilda, this is my grandmother."

"This is your grandmother?"

Dora and Migdalia came up, and I figured I'd get it over with. "Migdalia, Dora, this is my grandmother."

Migdalia was working hard not to laugh. "*Hola.*"

Now she was the one who couldn't stop looking at Abuela's eyebrow lines.

Abuela didn't seem to notice. "Hola," she said, "and who is the other one?"

"I'm Dora." She was checking out my grandmother's hair and halter top.

"Evelyn, where is the hair-color section? I have to dye my canas."

I pointed.

"I'll get some nice hair bands for you, too."

"I'll show you where those are," said Lydia. And they went off. That left me with Awilda, Dora, and Migdalia.

## **45**

Awilda spoke first. She spelled out my name. "So what's happening, E-v-e-l-y-n?"

"You could just say Evelyn, without spelling it," Migdalia said.

"That's okay," I said. "I know Awilda has to show off that she *can* spell."

"I don't need to show off anything. Everybody knows I can spell."

"Ha, ha, ha!" said Dora. Laughing as if Awilda was so funny.

"Let's go to the pool at Jefferson Park," Awilda said. "Then maybe my apartment. There's nothing happening around here ... except maybe a grandmother clown show ..."

Thank God they left right after that. Abuela had purchased her hair dye and wasn't far behind them on her way up the street.

I went into Mr. Simpson's office.



"Yes, Evelyn?"

"Mr. Simpson, could I please try working at the hardware counter?"

"The hardware counter?"

"Yeah, I think I'd like to learn how to make keys and cut window shades."

Mr. Simpson looked as though he was thinking about it.

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I didn't tell him that the real reason I wanted to work behind the hardware counter was that then I wouldn't have to talk to anybody. Not too many people came to the hardware counter, and when they did, they didn't talk much. All they cared about was getting a key made or a shade cut. The hardware counter was a good place if you didn't want to interact with people.

After two days with Abuela, a crazy morning with my parents, and an afternoon with Awilda, Dora, and Migdalia, I was ready for keys and shades that didn't talk back.

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## CHAPTER 5

### Wilfredo

The next day, Mr. Simpson taught me how to make keys.

"After you clamp both keys in the slots -- the blank copy and the original -- you follow the outline of the original."

He pulled down his safety goggles, switched on the saw's power, and began grinding along with the keys' metal edges.

Halfway through, he said, "Now you try it."

I put on my own smaller pair of goggles and finished making the key, doing exactly what Mr. Simpson had told me. It was pretty easy, and fun, too.

"Looks like you got it, Evelyn. If you need help, just let me know. I'll be in my office working."

I knew he was going back there and reading the

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newspaper. Mr. Simpson read the *New York Times* every day. Maybe that's what he called work.

I swept up the metal shavings.

"Oye, Mami."

I turned around. It was Wilfredo.

"How you be?" he said.

I flinched when I saw him. He had a black eye and a cut lip.

"Wilfredo, what happened to you?"

"Nothing ... I just had a ... confrontation, let's say, with some ... friends."

Wilfredo could even make a black eye look good. The swollen skin around his eye couldn't keep me from checking out their wild amber color, made even more beautiful by the flecks of gold inside their brown warmth.

"How come you don't hang with my sister, Miggy, anymore, or come around the house?" he said.

"I've been busy. I worked at the *bodega* in July and now I'm here."

Wilfredo was checking me out, but not in a good way. Then I realized -- oh, God, my bangs. They must have gotten pushed up after wearing those goggles. And my blouse -- I hadn't tucked it in.

"Work must be agreeing with you, because you look good, Evelyn."

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Wilfredo said my name slowly, like he was tasting it and liked the flavor. I was surprised he knew I wanted to be called Evelyn. That meant Migdalia had been talking to her brother about me, even though she hardly talked to me.

"Miggy told me you were working here, but I didn't know you'd be in hardware, Mami."

He kept calling me Mami like I was his girlfriend or something. All I could say was "Uh-huh."

"You be the perfect one to make this little key for me." He held up a small key that looked like it was for a locker. It was on a little key chain that Wilfredo swung in front of me. If he was trying to hypnotize me, it was working. I reached up and took the key chain out of his hands. I put on my goggles, careful to get my bangs out from under them so I didn't look like a doofus. But when I read the words engraved on the key, I pushed the goggles onto the top of my head, wadding my bangs up in them.

"What's this key for?" I asked. "It says 'Do Not Duplicate.'"

"Just make it up for me, mamacita."

"I don't think I can...."

A little cloud passed over Wilfredo's expression. But then he brightened up.

"Come on, baby. It just be a key to where I used to work, and I gotta get my things out of there, that's all."

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Wilfredo had dropped out of school his last year and now just mostly hung around, decorating the neighborhood with his presence. I didn't remember him having any job.

"Why don't you use that key in your hand?"

His eyes got narrow. But he still looked good.

"What a lot of questions you be asking me."

"Let me just check with my boss about making your key."

"Oh, come on. You so afraid you've got to ask permission to make a stupid little key?"

"No, I ... just ..."

And suddenly, as fast and bright as Wilfredo had been a minute ago, he got slow and dark. "Hey, just forget it, Mamita. I'll get this done by someone else. I just thought you were cool. But I guess I be wrong." He snatched the key out of my hand, looked over his shoulder, and turned to go. Then, like he'd had a second thought, he turned back, and looking to where the tools were, he hurried over and got a crowbar.

"Wrap this up for me, okay?"

I wrapped the crowbar, nervous that Wilfredo wouldn't have money to pay for it, but he did. I handed the crowbar to him and watched him meet his boys outside the store.

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Were they Viceroy's or Dragons? I couldn't tell from where I was standing. I came out from behind the counter to get a better look, but when I saw that Dolores had been watching the whole thing from her place at the paper goods counter, I scurried back and patted my bangs.

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## CHAPTER 6

### Killer Photo Album

Two weeks with Abuela felt like a month as the snipes between her and Mami grew sharper and sillier. They argued about everything. One night when I came home, they were standing over a pot on the stove in the kitchen.

"I can tell you right now that Porfirio doesn't like those kinds of beans," Mami said. "He only likes red beans and black beans."

"These beans don't go with rice. These you eat alone. It's bean soup. Like asopao," Abuela countered.

"He hates any kind of *sopa* that isn't *asopao* or Cuban black bean soup. Any other kind of soup is for when you feel sick," Mami argued.

Next they bickered about a song.

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Abuela had put on an old 78 record. It must've been one of the first records ever made. It was thicker than a Frisbee, but still played. Even the big wave in its vinyl didn't prevent it from playing as it undulated around the turntable.

The music was super corny. It was by a group called Pajarito y su Conjunto. The sound coming from it was so full of static, and so scratchy, that I could barely hear it. From what I could make out, it told a story about a massacre.

"Why do you have to play *that* song?" Mami said tightly. "Can't we just have music about amor?"

"This *is* about love. Love of Puerto Rico."

"It's about bad memories," said Mami.

Both were silent as the music played.

Heavy air had swelled between these two stubborn women. I muttered, "I gotta get ... something from my room."

My bedroom was still a mess with Abuela's stuff all over. I had to move her pink and orange long-line padded bras off the dresser just to be able to open my top drawer, which was stuck. I jiggled the drawer as hard as I could, and pulled the whole thing out of the dresser, spilling everything onto the floor -- panties with the days of the week printed on them, hair rollers, clips, bandanas, and the thing that was jamming up the works -- a photo album filled with greeting cards and pictures.

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Three Valentine's Day cards and one Christmas card slipped out. The Valentines were puffy hearts. One was from a "Hernán," another was from "René." My *abuela* had lots of boyfriends.

There was also a Christmas card that my mother had sent Abuela in 1965. I couldn't believe Abuela had saved a card for four years. She didn't seem like the sentimental type. Keeping old Christmas cards was more like something Mami would do.

I looked through the whole album. There was a picture of Abuela as a young teen standing by my grandfather. Abuela looked better in the old days. Her clothes did anyway. She was wearing a light-colored dress with a round collar and black buttons that went from her neck to the bottom of her hem. She had on little-girl socks and wedge sandals with a strap that went around her ankle. The outfit looked pretty cute, and except for the clothes,

it could've been me standing next to my grandfather. As a teenager Abuela looked even more like me.

There was also a picture of Abuela with a little baby. Was that my mother? I turned to the album's next page, where there was a picture of Abuela and three girls about her own age, taken at what looked like the top of a hill. The girls were watching the town below. Villea, was written on

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the back of the photo. It was the only picture taken in a real place, not in a photo studio.

But it was the pictures stuck way in the back of the album that really flipped me out. They were worn and might've been from newspaper articles. Two were pictures of policemen with rifles pointed, but you couldn't tell what they were shooting at.

The third picture was so big it had to be folded to fit on the page. Or maybe it was folded over because it was so shocking. It was a photo of a sunny street in what looked like a small town in Puerto Rico. There were policemen shooting in that image, too, only you could tell what they were shooting at -- a crowd of terrified people.

One thing was clear, though. Abuela's past was a mystery.