

three

Secret Santas

Now that the SIM are gone and the Washburns are living next door, Mami and Papi decide we can go back to school.

But first, Mami sits us down. "I don't want you talking about what happened with your friends," she warns.

"Why not?" I want to know.

Mami quotes one of Chucha's sayings, "No flies fly into a closed mouth.' " The less said, the better. "And that includes talking to Susie and Sammy," Mami adds, eyeing Lucinda and me.

Lucinda has become friends with Sammy's older sister, just as I have with Sammy. Poor Mundín is stuck without a new friend. But he says he doesn't care. Papi is giving him extra responsibility, taking him to work the days we aren't in school. Some nights after supper, Mundín gets to drive the car up and down all the driveways that connect the houses in the compound.

"If anything happens to me," Papi says from time to time, "you're the man of the house."

"If he wants to be the man of the house, he's going to have to stop biting his nails," Mami says, breaking the tense silence that follows such remarks.

The night before going back to school, I spend a long time picking out my outfit, as if I'm getting ready for the first day of classes. Finally, I settle on the parrot skirt Mami made me in imitation of

the poodle skirt all the American girls are wearing. But even after everything is laid out, I feel apprehensive about going back. Everyone will be asking me why I've been absent for over two weeks. I myself don't understand why we weren't able to go to school just because the SIM were on our doorstep. After all, Papi still went to work every day. But Mami has refused to even discuss it.

I go next door to Lucinda's room. My sister is setting her hair in rollers. Talk about torture! How can she sleep with those rods in her hair? For her outfit, she also picked out her skirt just like my parrot skirt, but she insisted on a poodle when Mami made hers.

"Linda Lucinda," I butter her up. "What are we going to tell everyone at school? You know they're going to be asking us where we were."

Lucinda sighs and rolls her eyes at herself in the mirror. She motions for me to come closer. "Don't talk in here," she whispers.

"Why?" I say out loud.

She gives me a disgusted look.

"Why?" I whisper in her ear.

"Very funny," she says.

I sit around until she's done with her rollers. Then she jerks her head for me to go out on the patio, where we can talk.

"If people ask, just tell them we had the chicken pox," Lucinda says.

"But we didn't."

Lucinda closes her eyes until she regains her patience with me. "I know we didn't have the chicken pox, Anita. It's just a story, okay?"

I nod. "But why didn't we really go to school?"

Lucinda explains that after our cousins' departure, too many upsetting things have been happening and that's why Mami hasn't

wanted us out of her sight. Raids by the SIM, like the one we had; arrests; accidents.

"I heard Papi talking about some accident with butterflies or something," I tell her.

"The Butterflies," Lucinda corrects me, nodding. "They were friends of Papi. He's really upset. Everyone is. Even the Americans are protesting."

"Protesting what? Wasn't it a car accident?"

Lucinda rolls her eyes again at how little I know. "'Car accident,'" she says, making quote marks in the air with her fingers, as if she doesn't really mean what she's saying.

"You mean, they were—"

"Shhh!" Lucinda hushes me.

Suddenly, I understand. These women were murdered in a pretend accident! I shiver, imagining myself on the way to school, tumbling down a cliff, my parrot skirt flying up around me. Now I feel scared of leaving the compound. "So why send us to school at all?"

"The Americans are our friends," Lucinda reminds me. "So for now, we're safe."

I don't like the sound of "for now," or how Lucinda makes those quote marks in the air again when she says "we're safe."

Mami is actually a lot calmer now that the Washburns have moved in. Not only is it nice to have the special protection of the consul next door, but the extra rent money is coming in handy. Construcciones de la Torre isn't doing well. Everything is at a standstill because of the embargo, whatever that is. We're having to cut corners and sell off our uncles' cars and the furniture from my grandparents' house from when Papito was making money. I offer to let

Mami sell my brown oxfords and old-fashioned jumpers I don't like. But she smiles and says that won't be necessary just yet.

Lucinda and I aren't the only ones to make friends with our neighbors. Mami starts a canasta group to introduce Mrs. Washburn to other Dominican ladies and help her practice her Spanish. Two or three tables are set up on the back patio. The ladies chat in lowered voices. Every once in a while, the new maid, Lorena, comes around with a tray of lemonades or clean ashtrays. Although Mami is trying to save money, there's too much work keeping up with all the houses in the compound for just Chucha. So Mami has hired the young girl to help out. But we have to be extra careful what we say around her.

"Why?" I ask. "Because she's new?"

Mami gives me a look that has "*Cotorrita!*" written all over it. After I told Mami that her nickname for me was really getting on my nerves, she promised to stop using it. But she still lets me know with her eyes when I'm speaking up too much. "Just be careful what you say," Mami repeats.

I guess you can't trust a maid who hasn't changed anyone's diaper in the family!

Actually, I can't really complain about being asked to keep secrets. Sammy and I haven't said a word about our discovery. Twice we've gone back to Tío Toni's *casita* only to find the door closed and the padlock in place. But there have been fresh footprints leading to and from the *casita* and a pile of cigarette butts, as if someone without an ashtray has thrown them out the window.

"Very fishy," Sammy observes, an expression which he says means that something strange is going on.

Our compound is crawling with fish, all right.

* * *

At school, any interest in my disappearance for two weeks is upstaged by two much more exciting developments: Christmas is coming *and* Sammy has joined our class.

"Samuel Adams Washburn," Mrs. Brown introduces him.

"Sam," Sammy corrects her.

Mrs. Brown asks "Samuel" to come to the front of the room and say a little something about himself. Mostly, Sam shrugs as Mrs. Brown introduces him herself.

Then Mrs. Brown goes down each row, and we have to introduce ourselves. When my turn comes, Sam pipes up, "I know Anita already." My face burns with pleasure.

Behind me, Nancy Weaver and Amy Cartwright giggle their flirty hellos. I feel a pang of jealousy! Being Americans, they'll have so much more to share with Sam than I do.

I knew him first! I want to shout. *He's living in my cousins' house next door!*

Not that I think of Sam as a boyfriend, which I'm not allowed to have anyway. Mami doesn't approve of my being around any boys who aren't related to me. But since my cousins moved away, the rules have both tightened and loosened in odd ways. I can't talk about the SIM's visit or my cousins' leaving for New York City, but I can have Sam for a best friend even if he is a boy.

After we all introduce ourselves, Mrs. Brown says she has an announcement to make. "Class, we are going to play a special game for Christmas!" Everyone cheers. Mrs. Brown holds a finger to her lips to hush us. When we quiet down, she continues. "You will each pick a name out of a hat, and you'll be that classmate's Secret Santa—"

Oscar's hand is in the air before Mrs. Brown is done explaining, which is something we're not supposed to do.

Mrs. Brown ignores him. "As a Secret Santa, you'll be leaving hidden notes for the person whose name you've picked. Little gifts and surprises. Things like that. Then, at our Christmas party, you'll each find out who your Secret Santa has been." Mrs. Brown claps her hands at the fun this is going to be.

"Any questions?" Mrs. Brown adds, looking over at Oscar, who waves his hand eagerly. The class groans.

"What if you pick your own name?" Oscar wants to know.

Mrs. Brown thinks for a moment. "That is a good question. I suppose the best thing would be to put the name back in the hat and try again."

I look over at Oscar. Sometimes he is sort of smart. He's about Sammy's height but with a permanent suntan, as the American kids sometimes describe our color of skin. Oscar is actually only half Dominican, on his mother's side. His father, who's originally from Italy, works at the Italian embassy, which is why Carla and I have always thought Mrs. Brown is more patient with Oscar than with the rest of us "natives."

It sounds like this Secret Santa game could be fun, although now that Carla is gone, there's only one other person whose Secret Santa I want to be. I lift my chain out from inside my blouse and put the little cross in my mouth. Somehow it makes me feel closer to God. "*Por favor*, please, please, let it be Sammy," I plead.

But when I unfold my piece of paper, the name on it is Oscar Mancini! I consider folding the paper back up and pretending I picked my own name. But it seems like a mean thing to do, especially at Christmas.

The Secret Santa idea is short-lived. The next day in class, Mrs. Brown announces that due to some parental complaints, she is

going to have to cancel the game. The class groans. "I know, class," Mrs. Brown says, pulling herself up as if someone has hurt her feelings, but she can't say who. "I'm disappointed, too."

At recess, we all find out from Amy and Nancy what has happened. Some Dominican parents complained to the principal about having Secret Santas.

I'm not surprised the complaints have come from Dominican parents, many of whom don't like the idea of Santa Claus's replacing the three wise kings. But it turns out that the objections aren't religious. Instead, some parents feel that there's enough tension in the air. Kids sneaking around and leaving secret messages might be taken the wrong way.

"Oh, come on!" Amy says, rolling her eyes. "What are they talking about?"

"It's the embargo," Oscar explains. Everyone looks over at him. None of us are really sure what an embargo is.

"Many countries will not have anything to do with us anymore," Oscar continues. "Including the United States," he adds, nodding at Amy as if she ordered the embargo herself.

"That's ridiculous," Nancy says. "If we didn't want anything to do with you, why would we be here?" She rolls her eyes at Amy, who rolls her eyes back at her.

Oscar considers this for a moment. "I don't know," he finally admits. "But my parents are preoccupied and that is why they do not wish anything sneaky to go on."

"So, it was *your* parents who complained!" Nancy says, hooking her arm into Amy's. The two girls stalk off toward where Sammy is bouncing a basketball with some of his new friends.

"Secret Santas are not sneaky!" Amy calls over her shoulder. Whatever Secret Santas are or are not, I sincerely hope that

my parents aren't among the complainers. But at supper that night, when I mention that the Secret Santa game has been canceled, the relieved look on their faces makes me suspect they also spoke to the principal.

"There are enough secrets"—Mami stops while Lorena brings in the flan dessert and clears the dinner plates—"enough secrets in the world already," Mami says as if she herself isn't always asking us to add to that amount!

In class, Mrs. Brown tries explaining how an embargo works. Sometimes a group of countries disapproves of what another country is doing, and they refuse to trade or do business with that country until the situation improves.

"As you know," Mrs. Brown is saying, "the United States has now joined the embargo."

Oscar turns and gives Nancy and Amy an I-told-you-so nod.

A dozen hands go up. Lots of the American students have questions. Is it okay for them to be in a country that is being embargoed? Are they behind enemy lines? Will they be taken prisoner?

Mrs. Brown shakes her head and laughs. "Heavens, no!" she reassures them. "It's not like that at all. Countries can disagree but life goes on. The United States wants to be friends with this country. How many of you have a teenage brother or sister?"

Lots of hands go up.

"You know how your parents will sometimes ground your brother or sister? It's not because they don't love him or her, now, is it? It's because they're concerned and want to make him or her a better person."

The more I think about it, an embargo sounds an awful lot like the punishment chair at home whenever we misbehave.

"So how has the Dominican Republic misbehaved?" one of the Dominican students wants to know.

But that is a question Mrs. Brown won't answer. "Enough about politics, class! We have our own politics to take care of. We're going to have to have an election today."

It turns out that Joey Farland, our current president, will be leaving over Christmas vacation. His dad, Ambassador Farland, has been recalled to Washington, D.C., because of the embargo. Sam's dad, Mr. Washburn, is in charge of the embassy that's now only a consulate. Something like that.

When Mrs. Brown asks for nominations, Nancy raises her hand. "Sam Washburn," she announces. The whole class breaks out clapping, as if Sammy has already won.

At school, I'm too shy to fight my way into the inner circle of Sam's fans. But back at the compound, we're still good pals. I draw him a map of the whole place and tell him some of the stories Tío Toni has told me about Sir Francis Drake and his pirates burying treasure on the property when they raided the island back in the 1500s, or about the Taino Indians having once had a burial yard behind Tío Fran's house that is full of spirits now—stories that are exciting to tell even if I don't really believe them anymore.

"Wow!" Sam keeps saying. "Pirates and ghosts right here where we're standing?"

I nod. I just love impressing the most popular boy in our class! We might not have the greatest country on earth, but we certainly have an interesting one!

One afternoon, while Chucha and Mami are out shopping, we sneak into Chucha's room and I show Sammy her coffin.

"Wow!" he says, glancing around at Chucha's purple towel

hanging from a peg, her purple mosquito net strung between two nails, her purple dresses draped over a chair. "Does everything she wear have to be purple?"

I nod. "Even her panties and stuff have to be dyed." My face burns as I realize I'm talking about underwear to a boy.

But Sammy is too busy peering into the coffin to notice. "Why's the inside all ripped up?"

I'm about to tell him how the SIM overturned the coffin and stuck their knives in the lining. But then I remember Mami's orders not to discuss the SIM raid with anyone.

"You know what I bet happened?" Sammy guesses. "I bet the lid came down one night and she had to claw her way out." Sammy makes claws with his fingers. His face has gotten flushed, as it always does when he gets excited. "Don't you think that's what happened?"

I don't know what's worse, telling a secret or a lie. So I shrug to be on the safe side. No flies fly into a closed mouth, I remind myself.

I suppose Mami is right to say that there are enough secrets in the world already. I could make a long list just of the secrets in our compound: my cousins' sudden departure, the SIM's two-week stay in our driveway, the intruder in Tío Toni's *casita*, the fresh footprints, the cigarette butts by the porch. One day, I bump into Chucha hurrying toward the back of the property, carrying food tins stacked in a carrier. "Where are you going, Chucha?" I ask.

"*Mi secreto, tu silencio*," she whispers—one of her old sayings, "My secret, your silence"—and hurries away.

Sometimes, the phone rings, and when I answer, whoever's at the other end hangs up.

But one time, a man's voice asks for Don Mundo, and after I call Papi in his study, I stay at my end to make sure he picks up before I set the receiver down. "Don Mundo?" the voice asks. "¿Cómo están las cosas?" How are things?

"We're waiting for Mr. Smith's tennis shoes," Papi says. It is such an odd reply that, though I had meant to hang up, I stay on. "They'll be at Wimpy's," the voice replies, and hangs up.

Wimpy's? Wimpy's is the fancy grocery store where mostly Americans and other foreigners shop. The doors are made of glass and open magically as you approach. The air-conditioning is cranked so high, you have to bring a sweater along. Chucha claims the place is bewitched, and she refuses to go inside whenever Mami goes shopping there.

Slowly, I place the receiver back in its cradle.

My parents seem to be playing their own kind of Secret Santa game.

School is out for the holidays. This is usually my favorite vacation—first my birthday and then Christmas. But with everyone gone, I'm not looking forward to the loneliness. Thank goodness the Washburns have moved in next door.

On my birthday, Mami offers to invite Sam over, but I already told him I was twelve two weeks ago, so I don't want to be caught in a lie. My birthday cake is in the shape of a heart this year. Mami is known for her fancy cakes, but she can't get good flour or the American food dye, so she uses a *criollo* brand that turns the cake a purply color instead of the rose red she wanted. Chucha, of course, is delighted.

Because of the embargo, some of the American foods we use

ally eat at Christmas are not available or are too expensive. This year, there will be no red apples in a bowl or candy canes on a little dish to offer visitors. Mr. Nutcracker won't have walnuts, only almonds from the almond tree behind Mamita and Papito's house.

Also, I'll only be getting one gift this year. I try to decide between a charm for my bracelet or a diary with a little lock and key like Lucinda got last Christmas. I finally settle on the diary because Mami hints that gold is too expensive right now on our budget. But truly, what I want most of all is to have my family back together again.

"We're still going to have a lovely time," Mami promises.

The Saturday before Christmas, we go shopping in the open air *mercado* for roasted pig, avocados, guava paste, and ripe plantains for *plátanos maduros*, the different merchants calling out their wares from their stands. Beside them on the ground sits a pile of their little children, in rags, looking up at me. I feel both lucky and ashamed.

Papi always says that we need a government that will give these children a chance, like the one the United States has. "Education is the key! Who knows if one of those little *tigueritos* in the *mercado* isn't an Einstein or Michelangelo or maybe even a Cervantes!" Mami hushes him with her usual "No flies fly into a closed mouth, Mundo." But her face is fierce with pride, as if Papi is a hero for saying what he thinks.

Monsito, the boy who helps us carry our sacks, always takes us to the best stands, where everything is fresh. He's about my size, but we don't really know how old he is. When Mami asks him, he just shakes his head and grins. "Don't you know when your birthday is?" I persist. He looks worried, as if he thinks he might get in trouble for not knowing. "Sixteen," he finally says, but it sounds

like a guess. Mami says Monsito could very well be that old and still be as small as I am. "Poor kids who don't get good nutrition just don't grow."

Even though we are on a budget, Mami gives Monsito a big tip for his family to buy food for Christmas. She also gives him several pairs of Mundín's old trousers that probably won't fit Monsito until he's eighteen, or maybe never.

On the way back from the *mercado*, we drive slowly to look at all the sights. The roads are crowded. It seems as though everyone has come to the capital to see the decorations at the palace. A life-sized Nativity scene has been set up on the lawn below the towering statue of El Jefe on his horse. It looks as if those shepherds and camels and even Mary and Joseph have come all the way from Bethlehem just to see him.

We make a quick stop at Wimpy's to pick up one apple to put in the mouth of the roasted pig and a few dates for the delicious bread pudding, *puddín de pan*, we always eat on Christmas Day. "Luxuries for *Nochebuena*," Mami explains. I keep my eyes open for tennis shoes, but there don't seem to be any for sale.

Papi disappears to the back office with the owner, whose nickname, Wimpy, is also the name of his store. He's a former marine who came to the country with an occupation force years back, but once the troops left, he stayed on, marrying a rich Dominican lady and opening his successful grocery store. He has bulgy muscles with a tattooed eagle on his right arm. Sometimes he'll flex for us kids, and the eagle looks like it's flapping its wings.

When we're ready to leave the store, Papi is not with us. It turns out he's already outside in the parking lot, standing by the trunk of our car, one foot on the fender, smoking a cigarette and

talking to Wimpy in a low, serious voice. In the backseat sits Chucha, arms crossed, glaring at the storefront. All I can think of is what Mami sometimes says to Lucinda when my older sister makes a face: "If looks could kill . . ."

We begin decorating the house to welcome the baby Jesus. One Sunday, we drive out to the beach and cut down a small sea grape tree, paint it white, and hang it with our lights that look like nose droppers filled with colored water. We place the olivewood crèche from Bethlehem, which was blessed by the Pope, under the tree and hang the lighted-up Santa face on the wall beside the portrait of El Jefe by the front door. Sometimes Papi pauses as he walks by, the reddish light illuminating his tense face. But it isn't Santa he's staring at with a fierce, if-looks-could-kill look in his eyes.

The night of *Nochebuena*, Mami and Papi throw a small "rooster" party, which will last till the wee hours when the cocks start to crow. They invite a few friends over, including the Washburns and Oscar's parents, the Mancinis. Oscar's mother, Doña Marina, has recently joined the canasta group, and during one of the games, Mami and she have discovered that they are related. They use the back of the score pad to sketch a whole forest of family trees. It's such a distant connection that I hope Oscar won't bring up our being kissing cousins at school.

Before everyone arrives, there's a special call from *Nueva York*. This time it isn't just Mamita and Papito or one of the uncles on the other end. Everyone is gathered together at my grandparents', and one by one we take the phone and shout, "*Feliz Navidad*," as if it were volume and not the cable at the bottom of the sea that carried our voices over the miles. When my turn comes, Mami reminds me to mind what I say, but she doesn't have to worry. I'm

so tongue-tied that I can't think of any of the dozen things I've saved up to tell Carla. "Did you get my card?" she shouts.

"No, not yet!" I shout back. All mail has to go through the censors first, so, especially at Christmas, it takes a long time to get a letter.

I stay up late, helping Lorena and Chucha pass around trays of the traditional rum punch. This year the glasses are smaller, but everyone is happy to be together. Papi lifts his glass and offers a toast. "May the new year bring peace and liberty. . . ." I can see Mami tense up, watching Lorena from the corner of her eye. Papi must sense some danger as well because he adds, "*Paz y libertad* to all the peoples of the world!"

"What do you want Santa Claus to bring you?" Mrs. Washburn asks me. I have to bite my tongue not to be fresh. It's true that I'm small for twelve, but I'm wearing Lucinda's hand-me-down patent leathers with the little heels that bring me up to almost five feet. Mami has also put some of her lipstick and rouge on me and sprayed hair spray in my hair to make me feel more grown-up. But I guess I still look like I'm twelve going on eleven.

Later, in bed, I keep waking to the dull, pleasant sound of voices coming from the patio outside my window. Toward midnight, everybody starts singing carols in English and Spanish, and sometimes in both languages combined, now the English overpowering the Spanish, and now the Spanish overpowering the English, depending on whose voices carry the tune of that song.

I finally fall asleep and dream that Santa has arrived in a black Volkswagen filled with cousins carrying baskets full of apples and raisins and nuts. He's knocking and knocking at our front door, but no one can hear him for all the party noise inside.

I sit bolt upright in bed, determined to let him in. An eerie

silence fills the house. The guests seem to have left. I open the
jalousies beside my bed and look out past the patio to the yard
beyond. The party lanterns have been blown out and the garden
is shrouded in darkness. But far off, at the back of the property, a
light is shining in Tío Toni's *casita*, a glittering sparkle among the
dark foliage. In my dazed and sleepy state, I feel a surge of joy, as if
Secret Santa has arrived and I am a little kid again.