

Disappeared Diary

Mrs. Brown always says that writing makes a person more thoughtful and interesting. I don't know about interesting, but the diary I got for Christmas is sure making me think about a lot of things.

Sam, for instance. His blond-white hair that no longer seems too white . . . his dreamy blue eyes, like a daydreamy sky . . . and suddenly, I'm thinking, I *do* want him as more than a friend, whether I'm allowed to have a boyfriend or not!

Before I wrote all this out, I really didn't know I felt this way deep down.

I always write with a pencil for a reason. I want to be sure that on a moment's notice, I can erase what I've written. I still have Carla's huge eraser. With a few strokes back and forth, I can get rid of any evidence if the SIM come to our door.

Another danger is Mami. Not that my mother is the nosy kind, as she believes God in heaven can see you and that is supervision enough. But given how nervous she is these days, and given the trouble we seem to be in, and supposing a diary should just happen to fall out from under a pillow as she's straightening a bed, her eyes might read a sentence like "I think I am falling in love with Samuel Adams Washburn," and that'll be the end of my being allowed to have Sam as any kind of a friend.

So whenever I write down something personal, I let it stay written for the rest of the day, like savoring a piece of hard candy

before biting down on it. Then, at night, I erase that page to be on the safe side.

I haven't told Sam about my diary because I know he'll ask to see it. I do mention that my parents always review my letters to Carla before I send them off. As for Carla's letters to me, a messy censor must read them because the envelopes come torn and taped, with whole sentences sometimes blocked out.

Sam tells me about this invention in the United States called invisible ink that lets you write stuff down so that no one can read it until the page is soaked in a chemical that makes all the letters reappear.

I wish I had a bottle of that ink for writing in my diary because the truth is I feel kind of sad writing in pencil, always prepared to erase. But Sammy says that ink is probably not sold anywhere in the country, not even at Wimpy's.

School is supposed to reopen on Monday, January 9, soon after Epiphany, but we get a notice from the principal that classes will not resume until the end of the month. It turns out a lot of the Americans are traveling to Washington, D.C., for the inauguration of their new president, Mr. John F. Kennedy. Many, like the Farlands, won't be coming back.

Since Papi knows Mr. Farland from when he went to school in the States, we go over to say good-bye. Wimpy and Mr. Washburn are there, too. Papi joins them out on the patio. Little snatches of their conversation drift in: "tennis shoes," "outrage at the Butterflies," "CIA intervention . . ." Before I can puzzle out what they're saying, Mrs. Farland calls me away from the door. "Anita, sweetie, come over here and let Joey tell you about the inauguration for our new president."

I know all about how the Americans run their country because we have to study it at school. Every four years, they have a contest, and whoever wins gets to be the *jefe*. But he can't just keep being the *jefe*. He can only win the contest twice, and then he has to give somebody else a chance.

We have elections, too, but there's only one person in the contest, Trujillo, and he has already been our *jefe* for thirty-one years. I once asked Mrs. Brown why nobody ran against him, and she hesitated and said that perhaps it would be better if I asked my parents that question. When I asked Mami, she said, "Ask your father," and when I asked Papi, he told me to go ask Mami. After a while, I got tired of asking.

I can tell both Mami and Papi are really glad that Mr. Kennedy is going to be the American president. Mami thinks he is *muy guapo*, so handsome, with his hair in his eyes and *only* (!) forty-three years old. He's also a Catholic, which is kind of like being related to us since we are in the same religious family. And most importantly, Papi says, Mr. Kennedy has declared himself a champion of democracy around the world.

At the next canasta gathering, Mami's friends all count off the families they know that have left the country. Mrs. Washburn confesses that Mr. Washburn has talked of sending his family away. She always calls her husband Mr. Washburn, as if no one will know whom she's talking about if she calls him plain Henry.

"I told Mr. Washburn, over my dead body," she announces to the table. "We leave when he leaves! We've got diplomatic immunity. That S.O.B.'s a dead duck if he dares lay a hand on us!"

None of the Dominican women say a word. They sip their *cafecitos* quietly and look at each other. Mami, whose English has improved tremendously since the arrival of the Washburns next

door, says, "Doris, put the lid on the sugar bowl, *por favor*. There are so many flies."

I look around for flies, but there are none I can see. Lorena has just come out from the kitchen with a tray to collect the empty coffee cups. Perhaps she scared them away.

Then, just like that, it dawns on me: My mother is speaking to Mrs. Washburn in code. She's saying: *We are being overheard; be quiet*. It's as if I've stepped into a room I'm not supposed to be in—but now that I'm inside, the door has disappeared. I feel the same way as when Lucinda told me how one day I, too, would get my period. "What if I don't want to?" I asked, disgusted at the thought of bleeding between my legs. "You don't have a choice," she shot back.

Later, I write in my diary about the Washburn family maybe moving back to the United States. Just thinking about losing Sammy, I start to cry. Wiping my tears from the page, I smudge the writing so badly, I won't have to erase a thing tonight.

According to Mami, I'm developing the same case of bathroom-itis as Lucinda.

I roll my eyes when she says so. Can't I at least have my own diseases?! I'm told I have my mother's *café con leche* skin color, my father's curly black hair, my grandmother's slightly turned-up nose, the dimples from some great-aunt who spent her whole life smiling at everyone. I feel like just a hand-me-down human being!

Mami is right, of course. I *am* spending a lot more time in the bathroom. But I'm not about to tell her that it has nothing to do with my copying Lucinda and a lot to do with my liking Sam.

Liking a guy sure makes a girl think about whether she's pretty enough. I stand in front of the mirror, staring at myself. My black

hair is a tangle of curls. My nose is average. My mouth is average. Come to think of it, my whole face is really pretty average. But Mrs. Washburn says I look a little like Audrey Hepburn with a suntan. When I tell Lucinda, all she says is "Dream on."

Still, if Mrs. Washburn thinks so, maybe Sam thinks so, too? I search Lucinda's old *Novedades* magazines and Mrs. Washburn's cast-off copies of *Look* and *Life* for pictures of Audrey Hepburn. But every one I find, I have to agree with Lucinda, and dream on.

One canasta afternoon, Mrs. Mancini brings Oscar along. Mami has told her that I would be *encantada*—enchanted!—to have my classmate around. When she says so, I have to do everything in my power not to roll my eyes. Mami says this is a terrible habit I've picked up since I turned twelve. (She must not have been looking at me when I was eleven!)

I'm worried that Sammy will not want to hang out with me if "cousin" Oscar is around. I stay in my room after Mami calls that my guests have arrived. When I finally come out to greet them, Oscar and Sammy have disappeared. I find them jumping on the trampoline, daring each other to see who can touch the branches of the ceiba tree.

Even though I've been worried that they'll be enemies, now I'm upset they've become friends without me. Sometimes, it's totally confusing to be me! Only writing in my diary helps me feel a little less crazy.

Oscar is the first to notice me. "Hola, Anita!"

Instead of waving back, I turn to go.

"What's wrong with her?" I hear Sammy ask.

"I think her feelings are hurt," Oscar replies. "Hey, Anita, wait"

up," he calls. I can't believe it's Oscar who understands my feelings, not Sammy, whom I'm secretly planning to marry.

When they catch up with me, it's also Oscar who says, "I was wondering where you were."

"Yeah," Sammy adds, and sunshine breaks upon my heart again.

"The entire country is in trouble," Oscar explains. We're sitting under the trampoline after having busted one of the ropes by all three jumping on it at once. "Mami saw Mrs. Brown at Wimpy's and she said the school might have to close because so many families are leaving."

"We're staying!" Sam announces proudly. "We've got amnesia."

"Amnesty," Oscar corrects. I bite my lip so as not to smile. Even though I'm almost in love with Sam Washburn, I can't resist feeling proud when a Dominican corrects an American's English. "But you mean immunity," Oscar goes on. "We have immunity, too, because my father is with the Italian embassy. Lots of people hide in the embassy because the SIM can't touch them if they're on another country's property. Like your uncle," he says, turning to me.

"Which uncle?" I want to know. Of course, I'm thinking of Tío Toni.

"I'm not supposed to mention names. But the embargo means countries are closing their embassies. That's why you don't have an embassy anymore," he points out to Sammy. "Just a consulate."

"My father's the consul," Sammy boasts.

"I know, but he's not the ambassador."

"So?"

Oscar shrugs. "Just that he can't help the people who want to free this country."

We are free! I want to cry out. But thinking about how the SIM raided our property, how Tío Toni had to disappear, how I have to erase everything in my diary, I know that Oscar is telling the truth. We're not free—we're trapped—the Garcías got away just in time! I feel the same panic as when the SIM came storming through our house.

"Your father," he points to Sammy, "and yours and mine, too," he adds, pointing to me and then to himself. "They all know about this, but they don't want to worry us."

"So, how do you know all of this stuff?" Sammy confronts him.

A slow grin spreads across Oscar's face. "I ask a lot of questions."

So do I, I'm thinking, but until now I never got any answers.

All these things that Oscar tells us I write down in my diary.

I don't know what I'd do without it. It's like my whole world is coming undone, but when I write, my pencil is a needle and thread, and I'm stitching the scraps back together. Sometimes, I wake up in the middle of the night crying out. I cross the hall to Lucinda's room and slip in beside her. She seems to welcome my presence because she lets me stay there instead of telling me to scram, like in the old days.

The worst stories Oscar tells are the ones about El Jefe. When I first heard how bad he was from Lucinda, I felt so confused. Everyone had always treated El Jefe like God. I shudder to think how many times I've prayed to him instead of to Jesus on His cross.

"He does even worse things than crucify people," Oscar tells us one time. "He disappears them."

I remember Chucha saying the SIM disappeared people. "What exactly does that mean?" I ask Oscar. He's so much easier

to talk to than Lucinda. I usually have to beg her and then throw in a free back rub before she'll tell me anything.

"He arrests people, then cuts out their eyes and fingernails, and throws their cadavers in the sea for the sharks to eat them."

"Wow!" Sammy says, impressed, his eyes greedy for more awful details.

I feel sick to my stomach. The thought of Tío Toni, eyeless and fingernail-less, is just too horrible to think about. But I don't want to throw up in front of a boy I'm falling in love with and a cousin I don't want to be related to. "We have a mystery ghost," I speak up, wanting to change the subject. I mean to make my news sound scary, but a ghost now seems harmless compared to what we just heard.

"He comes at night, then leaves during the day," Sam adds. I've told Sam about the light I saw at Tío Toni's house Christmas Eve. We fill Oscar in on all the particulars of the unlocked door and cigarette butts.

"Let's go see," Oscar insists.

As we head for the back of the property, we hear hurried footsteps coming down the walk toward us.

"What are you doing back here?" Chucha questions, looking from one to the other, as if she's trying to figure out which one of us will be most likely to tell her the truth.

"We're allowed to," I announce, showing off in front of my friends.

Chucha levels her gaze at me. I know she's about to say that she's the one to allow or not to allow things, as she once changed my diapers.

Quickly, I back down and explain. "Somebody's been in Tío Toni's casita, Chucha."

Her dark eyes widen in warning. "You have to be very careful," she whispers, making the familiar gesture of cutting off her head. "Things will be happening soon for which there is no protection." She looks up at the sky and then all around her as if she sees signs everywhere. "No protection but silence, no protection but dark hiding places, wings, and prayers." Listening to her, I remember how Chucha sometimes sees the future in dreams. I shiver, wondering what she has seen.

Although Sam knows a little Spanish, he rarely understands Chucha, who has a tendency to mumble and mix in Haitian words with her Spanish. "What's she saying?" he wants to know.

"I'm not sure," I tell him. "Sometimes she talks in riddles and you have to try to figure out what she's saying." Turning back to my old nursemaid, I ask her what's uppermost on my mind. "Is Tío Toni all right?"

As if Chucha not only gives answers but makes them materialize, a face appears at the window of the small house. There's no mistaking the dark, curly hair, the strong jaw, the good looks that make pretty girls call up my aunt Mimí and ask if they can come over and look at her orchids. I feel a rush of relief to see my uncle intact, no eyes or fingernails missing. But I have sense enough not to call out his name.

"Who's that?" Sammy asks. He and Oscar are peering in the direction I'm looking.

I don't know how Chucha can guess what Sammy has asked, since she doesn't know a word of English, but she replies, "Tell the *americanito* that it's someone he did not see."

Even though I know English, I don't know how to translate something that makes no sense at all, even to me.

* * *

Tell him it's someone he did not see, I'm writing in my diary when there's a knock on the door. "Un momentito, por favor," I call out, and quickly erase the page I've been writing before shoving the diary back under my pillow.

It's Mami at the door. "Everything all right?" she asks, looking around the room, probably wondering what I'm hiding that I need the delay of "un momentito" before I say, "Come in."

"I want to show you something," Mami says, motioning mysteriously for me to follow her outside.

She leads the way out past the patio and around the front of Mamita and Papito's house to the pond that used to be filled with Tía Mimí's water lilies. Now it's covered by a layer of green scum and overrun by bullfrogs. We sit on the stone bench, and Mami takes my hands in hers.

"I know many unusual things have been happening, Anita," she begins. "And I know there are many questions and worries in your head." She touches my face ever so gently, as if she wants to banish all the worries that have been piling up in the last month. "Suddenly, you have to be a big girl—"

"I am twelve, Mami!" I sigh and roll my eyes. Recently, if anyone talks to me as if I'm a little kid, I get mad. But I also feel sad that I'm not a little kid anymore and that I know as much as I do. I've written about these confused feelings in my diary, too, but this is one confusion that doesn't get any clearer by writing about it.

"You are a young lady," Mami agrees. "And I'm going to confide in you the way I do in Lucinda and your brother. Okay?" she adds uncertainly, as if she isn't sure whether to take the next step.

I roll my eyes. "Mami, I know a lot more stuff than you think I do!"

"Oh?"

I wonder if now is the time to tell her about all the scary things Oscar has told me or about seeing Tío Toni at the window of his *casita*. But I'm afraid if I say a word, Mami might never get to her story. "Just stuff about becoming a *señorita*."

Mami hesitates. "Have you gotten . . . your period?"

I shake my head. I used to think when I started bleeding between my legs, Mami would be the first to know. Now I'm not so sure that I want to tell Mami something that personal.

"What happened was your uncles and their friends were unhappy with the government and they had a plan that the SIM found out about." Mami's story follows the same lines as what Lucinda has told me. "Many of those friends were arrested. Some, like Tío Carlos, left the country. Some were killed."

Mami stops a moment and wipes her eyes. Then her hands curl up into fists on her lap.

"At first, your father didn't want to endanger his family. But sometimes life without freedom is no life at all."

It sounds scary. Like something someone facing a firing squad might say before they're shot. "Then why not go be free with the rest of the family in *Nueva York*?" I ask, hoping that she'll reassure me that we're not trapped, that we can leave if we want to.

"No!" Mami says, her hands formed into fists. "What would have happened to the United States if George Washington had left his country? Or if Abraham Lincoln had said, 'I've had enough'? The Negro people would still be slaves."

I feel ashamed of myself for being a scaredy-cat. I think about what Papi has said about having a country where everyone, including Monsito, can have a chance.

"And someday," Mami continues, "we will be free, and all your cousins and aunts and uncles will come back and thank us."

She looks around at the scraggly grounds, the overgrown bushes, the abandoned houses. A sad look crosses her face. "In fact, the embargo is already helping. Some observers are here from other countries and the government's trying to show off how fair it is. That means all Tío Toni's friends in prison have been freed. Things are going to change, but until that day, we have to be patient and make some sacrifices."

I knew she'd get to the hard part sooner or later.

"Your uncle Toni has been . . . in hiding," she explains, choosing her words carefully. "Now he can come out. But the SIM can still decide at any minute to take him away. He's pretty safe in the compound with Mr. Washburn next door. But it's best if you and Sammy and Oscar avoid going back there." She nods in the direction of the *casita*. "Also, you are not to speak about this to anyone. Only to your pillow . . ."

I must look guilty just thinking about what's hidden under my pillow right this very moment. It's as if my mother can read my thoughts. "One last big favor to ask you, *mi amor*. No more writing in your diary for the time being."

"That's so unfair!" Mami gave me the diary for Christmas. Telling me not to write in it is like taking away my only present.

"I know it is, Anita." Mami wipes away my tears with her thumbs. "For now, we have to be like the little worm in the cocoon of the butterfly. All closed up and secret until the day . . ." She spreads her arms as if they were wings.

Hearing the thrill in her voice, how can I refuse her anything she asks me?

I go back to my room and erase every page of my diary. Then I put it away in my closet beside Carla's things. Until the day.