

Mr. Smith

Now that I'm grounded from roaming the property, I spend a lot of time playing card games with Sam on our patio. I really don't understand why Mami has to be so cautious. With the consul living next door, marines guard the compound round the clock. Sometimes, I wake to the *click-clop* of their boots as they patrol the grounds at night.

We play casino and canasta and concentration. Susie and Lucinda, who are as bored as we are, join us. Except for school, which has finally reopened, we don't go out anymore. Parents are being cautious, especially the parents of young ladies.

"Why's that?" I ask. We're sitting on the patio, playing casino.

Susie fans out her cards in her hand. Her nails are painted pale pink like the inside of a conch shell. "On account of Mr. Smith," she says, eyeing Lucinda meaningfully. Both girls burst into giggles when Sam and I ask together, "Who's Mr. Smith?"

"Mr. Smith's not his real name." Susie lowers her voice. Even she whispers when we get onto certain subjects. "He's a very powerful guy. And he likes girls—young, pretty girls. So parents won't let their daughters go out to public places where they might be seen by Mr. Smith. Because if he sees them and wants them, he gets what he wants."

I shudder and look over at Lucinda. The nervous rash on her neck has reddened, and she's scratching it.

"Hey, genius, who's winning?" Susie asks Sam, who is keeping score. She often addresses her younger brother with sarcasm. "Ooooh, Lucy-baby! You've got fifteen. Lucky number!"

In two weeks, Susie will be turning fifteen. Lucinda has told her how a girl's fifteenth birthday is really important in our country. Some parents throw *quinceañera* parties as lavish as weddings. "We just have to do something for your birthday," Lucinda insists.

"Like what? We can't go to the country club, we can't go to the beach." Susie goes through her list of grievances. I have a feeling that she goes through this list often with her mother, probably as often as Lucinda does with ours. "I'm soooo bored. I wouldn't mind a little excitement." Susie lets out a long sigh, just like her mother when she has a bad hand.

"How come you don't just have a party here?" Sam says absently. He's tallying up the scores again—and again he has the lowest score so far. "This place is like a country club."

Both girls look at him as if he has sprouted wings.

"Well, it is," he adds defensively.

"Samuel, dear," Susie says, "that's a *fantástico* idea!" She reaches over and smacks a kiss on her brother's cheek, which he immediately wipes off, making his I've-got-an-anaconda-around-my-neck face.

"My brother, the genius," Susie declares, this time without sarcasm.

At first, Susie's parents are not keen on a big *quinceañera* party. "They wanted me to wait until I'm sixteen!" she complains to Lucinda and me. We're practicing the twist in her room, listening to a guy called Chubby Checker on Susie's portable record player. Sammy's out at a Scouts' meeting, so I've been invited to join

them. Lucinda usually tells me to scam when she's with one of her girlfriends. But recently, she's being a lot nicer to me. Maybe she's realizing I'm not just a stupid little sister but a potential friend. Well, *potential friend* is maybe stretching it!

"'Now, Susan Elizabeth,'" Susie says, imitating her parents, "'you can have a big party for your sweet sixteen back in the States.' Can you believe it?"

"That's terrible," Lucinda says.

I nod. "I didn't have a party for my birthday, either," I offer.

"Poor kid," Susie commiserates. "But guess what?" Her face is full of excitement. I know better than to take a guess.

"I told my parents what you guys told me about fifteen being the big birthday here. They're the ones always saying that in Rome you're supposed to do what the Romans do. Anyway, they said yes! So, we're going to twist, twist, twist all night." She raises the volume on Chubby Checker and we twist in celebration.

Susie's party is planned for her birthday, February 27, which is perfect, as that's our national independence day. "You'll have free fireworks," Lucinda notes.

For the next two weeks, it's as if someone is getting married in the compound. The Washburns hire two gardeners, who spiff up the grounds. The property begins to take on its old groomed look of a park. Paper lanterns are hung from tree to tree, and Tía Mimí's lily pond is cleaned out so we can again see the coins we once threw in for good luck. The canasta group meets daily to make party favors and help with the invitations. The party will start with refreshments, followed by dancing—rock and roll on the record player for Susie's friends and merengues and cha-chas by a live Dominican combo for her parents' guests. Susie's *quinceañera*

never has become a full-blown reception by the consul. But it can't be helped, Mr. Washburn explains. In the touchy atmosphere of a country under embargo, you have to be careful not to step on any toes.

In our own house, Lucinda tries on every one of her dressy dresses, Mami watching and commenting. They have an ongoing argument about necklines and bare shoulders. Finally, they settle on a strapless pale yellow gown, a hand-me-down from a glamorous aunt who used to be a beauty queen before she married and had kids. It has a narrow waist and a crinoline skirt that bells out like a ballerina's tutu. Lucinda agrees to wear a shawl, not to be modest, but to hide the rash on her neck that won't go away. "That shawl must not come off," Mami keeps reminding Lucinda, who is disgusted enough to roll her eyes at me in the absence of a friend her own age.

"As for you, young lady," Mami says, turning to me, "I hope you know this is an exception."

Of course, I know that going to a night party where there will be boys is unusual for a girl who has not yet turned fifteen. But this is supposed to be a "family gathering," hosted by our neighbors next door. I'm glad I haven't told Mami about my feelings for Sam, or she would make me stay home, trying to fall asleep to Elvis Presley howling "You Ain't Nothing but a Hound Dog," or the merengue band singing "Compadre Pedro Juan" and "Last Night I Dreamt About You."

(And I would die if I didn't get to dance with Sammy!)

Tío Toni is back. Every night, visitors drop in to see him. They sit on our patio, talking for hours. Sometimes, they walk off to his *casita* for more privacy. Mr. Washburn often joins them.

Papi and Tío Toni usually speak in English with Mr. Washburn. They both went to school in the States, Papi to Yale, which poor Mami always mispronounces "jail." The first time she met Mrs. Washburn, Mami bragged that her husband had gone to jail. The consul's wife smiled tensely and said, "Oh, dear, that's too bad," which baffled Mami completely, as she thought Yale was the school where the best families in the United States educated their sons.

Tío Toni always joins us for meals, not that he eats much. Sometimes he tells about what happened to him in the last few months. How the SIM raided one of the meetings he was at with friends, how he managed to get away, but rather than come home and put his family at risk, he went into hiding, going from one safe house to another, never sleeping more than a few hours a night. He's still real nervous all the time, jumping up whenever the door bangs or Lorena drops silverware on the floor. He's attentive to everything, noticing Lucinda's rash and Mundín's bitten nails. It's *una vergüenza*, he keeps saying, his jaw tensing, a shame that children can't be children anymore in this suffering country.

Papi is nodding little nods like those dogs with springs in their necks that people put in the back windows of their cars. "Democracy," Papi says, "but democracy is only the beginning. Education is the key."

Mami hushes them both with her eyes. We have to be careful of being overheard by someone on the SIM secret payroll. Lorena was recently caught "cleaning" the desk drawers in Papi's study.

Papi and Tío Toni are so brave. It makes me want to be like Joan of Arc, a courageous girl who heard heavenly voices. But unfortunately, unlike Saint Joan, I've yet to hear a voice tell me what I can do to help my suffering country.

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"I hear there's going to be a big fiesta next door," Tío Toni says at dinner one night.

"Aren't you coming, Tío?" Lucinda seems surprised that our handsome uncle would pass up a party. He's a great dancer and extremely popular with the ladies.

"I think it's best if your *tío* doesn't say *pío*," Tío Toni laughs. Best to lay low. Besides, he hasn't been invited. Mr. Washburn has to turn in his guest list to the Foreign Ministry every time he has a gathering. It would look bad for the American consul to be hosting a man who has only just been pardoned by the government.

"I wish I could be there," he adds, winking at Lucinda. "I'd like to see that trail of broken hearts."

"Ay, Tío, don't start," Lucinda scolds, pretending to be disgusted.

"I mean it," Tío Toni persists. "You will be the queen of the ball."

I glance over at Lucinda, and I'm surprised at how pretty she is. Her dark hair is pulled up in a high ponytail, and her dimples show when she smiles. Lucinda reminds me a lot of the oldest girl on the *Mickey Mouse Club* show I've seen on the Washburns' television. "Hi, I'm Annette!" the girl calls out.

"And this *señorita* isn't far behind," Tío Toni says, winking at me. My uncle claims I've grown up in the months since he has been gone. In fact, I'm not a *señorita*, as I haven't gotten my period yet. But odd things are happening to my body. My breasts have swollen into two small buds that hurt if anyone bumps into me. I've also grown a whole quarter inch since Christmas. Maybe I'm not going to stay small forever, like poor Monsito, who never gets enough to eat.

Inside my heart, odd things are happening as well. By now, I'm

almost one hundred percent in love with Samuel Adams Washburn. The one percent doubt has to do with what happened on Valentine's Day. I mean, what *didn't* happen. I didn't get a card from Sammy—but then, none of the girls got valentines from boys, that I know of.

Before Tío Toni leaves, he puts his arms around Lucinda and me. "I want my two butterflies to take care of each other," he says in a soft voice, squeezing our shoulders.

"We will, Tío," Lucinda promises, kissing my uncle. Then she leans over, brushes away my bangs, and kisses me!

On Lorena's day off, two men come over from the consulate to check the whole house for bugs. And I don't mean insects, either. The SIM like to hide little devices in houses so they can listen in on what you say. They might have planted some when they came for their raid . . . or someone could have planted some since then.

"Who?" I ask Lucinda. She spells out Lorena's name in English!

That afternoon, I overhear Mami talking to the canasta group on the patio. "The place is clean, thank God!"

"What about the girl?" someone asks.

Mami hired the recent graduate without checking her references because we desperately needed another maid to help Chucha. "She showed me her diploma from the Domestic Academy."

"Don't you know?" Mrs. Mancini whispers, looking over her shoulder. I pull back just in time from the doorway. "That place is nothing but a front for the SIM. They train those poor girls to be spies in households!"

Suddenly, I hear footsteps behind me. I jump. But it's only

Chucha! She leans forward and whispers one of her favorite sayings: "*Camarón que se duerme, se lo lleva la corriente.*" The shrimp who falls asleep is carried off by the current.

I guess if I'm going to spy, I'd better watch out for other spies—like Chucha!

The night of the party, we hear cars going up and down the driveway. Voices drift over from the neighboring yard, punctuated every now and then by the report of firecrackers going off in different parts of the city in honor of Independence Day. The early guests are starting to arrive.

Lucinda has taken her dress to the Washburns' so that she and Susie can get ready together. Mami is delayed in the kitchen, where she and Chucha and Lorena are frying extra batches of the Washburns' *pastelitos* for the party.

"When are we going over?" I keep asking. I know I'm nagging, but I'm dying to get all dressed up and have Sam see me.

"With patience and calm, even a burro can climb a palm," Chucha reminds me.

"Take this over, please," Mami asks Lorena when the first batch is done.

"Let me do it," I volunteer.

But Mami shakes her head sharply. "That's enough, Anita."

As soon as Lorena disappears down the shortcut path through the hibiscus hedge, Mami calls out, "Coast is clear!" Papi and Mundín slip out and join some men who have crossed over from the party to talk to Tío Toni. Tonight, I'm too excited thinking about my first grown-up party to ask Mami what is going on.

Finally, the frying is done. Mami and I dress quickly—she in

of fireworks in the sky. Lucinda and Susie and their girlfriends sit on lounge chairs, their crinoline skirts spread around them like the petals of flowers. Young men surround them, as if drawn by the perfume of those flowers, closer and closer.

From their post by the buffet table, my mother and Mrs. Mancini are nervously scanning the crowd. They look relieved when they spot us coming back from the garden. Mami turns her head slightly, signaling to Papi. Men in dark glasses who look like the thugs who raided the compound months ago lurk at the shadowy edges of the patio.

What are the SIM doing here? Perhaps they've been summoned to protect the high-ranking military guests and ambassadors? I'm about to ask Oscar what he knows when there's a shout. "¡Atención!"

The party goes silent. The crowd parts as if a god is coming down among us. An old man, chest gleaming with medals, face whitened with pancake makeup, steps onto the patio.

"¡Que viva El Jefe!" a woman's voice cries out.

"Long live the chief," a chorus of voices echoes. Boom, boom, boom, the fireworks explode, lighting up the sky. For a moment, night turns into day as Mr. Smith lifts a small, spotted hand and gives us a weary wave.