

Operation Maid

Mami and Papi are still in shock as we cross over to our house after the party.

"I can't believe it!" Mami is saying.

"Nobody was expecting him," Papi agrees. "Washburn got a call at the last minute. El Jefe wanted to drop in and congratulate the young lady. Imagine! How could he refuse? Washburn says before he could even think to come over and tell us to break it up, the SIM were at the door. If it hadn't been for our little messenger here . . ." Papi reaches out a hand and I take it.

I feel so brave and proud—even if the evening was a disappointment. I never did get a chance to dance with Sam. Mami made me stick to her side as if someone was going to pounce on me.

"We've let ourselves get careless!" Mami continues as we climb up the driveway toward our house. Tío Toni and his constant flow of visitors have to go somewhere else. "They're putting our children's lives in danger."

"Where can they go?" Papi argues back. "This is probably the safest place for Toni right now. For all of us."

Just then, we hear the clang of Lorena trailing behind us with an armload of empty platters. Mami always says that one thing Lorena never learned at the Domestic Academy is how not to make a racket.

"We have to find a way to let her go," Mami whispers to Papi.

It won't be easy. We can't get on Lorena's bad side. Out of spite, she might report any number of curious things to the SIM. In fact, Mami has been bribing her with old clothes and tips and extra days off to keep her happy with our family. There is only one way to get rid of her, and that is to enlist Chucha's help in scaring the young woman. It's no secret to any of us that Lorena is really superstitious and squeamish. She won't wash her hair or cut her nails on Friday. She can't stand the sight of blood. She never sleeps faceup because she believes the devil will take her soul. She is deathly afraid of seeing the dead and has all kinds of charms pinned to her bra to keep a ghost from coming near. Needless to say, she is terrified of Chucha, who dresses in purple like a *bruja* and sleeps in a coffin.

Up ahead, Chucha stands at the door to her room, watching our progress. She must have crossed over earlier and turned on the lights to guide our way. Seeing her there, backlit, in her long gown, I feel that no harm will come to us as long as Chucha is around. Recently, she told me of a dream she had in which first Lucinda, then Mundín, then Mami and I sprouted wings and flew up into the sky.

"What about Papi?" I asked worriedly.

"Not everyone can be a butterfly," Chucha replied.

The morning after Susie's party, a black limousine with palace plates rolls up our driveway and delivers a bouquet of roses tied with red, white, and blue ribbons, the colors of our flag. The little card reads:

Para la linda Lucinda,

flor de la patria,

de un admirador.

"For the beautiful Lucinda, flower of the nation, from an admirer." Mami flings the card to the floor as if it's contaminated. "I told you to keep that shawl over your shoulders," she scolds Lucinda. Poor Mami is so desperate, she has to find someone to blame.

Lucinda bursts out crying the minute she realizes the roses are from El Jefe. Her neck is more inflamed than I've ever seen it. "He's not going to take me away, is he, Mami? Oh please, Mami, don't let him take me away." Lucinda looks as scared as "the little baby" who sometimes crawls into bed with her at night.

Mami hugs Lucinda so tight, her hairband falls off. Normally, Lucinda won't permit Mami to give her these bone-crunching hugs. Now she collapses into Mami's arms. "That man gets near *mi señorita*, I'll cut off"—Mami glances over at me—"I'll cut off his hands," she vows.

"We'll protect you," I join in. My voice sounds small and silly even to me. Lucinda bursts out crying again. I feel like crying myself.

Midmorning, Susie and Mrs. Washburn drop in. They saw the palace limousine turn up our drive and wondered what was going on. "Goodness gracious," Mrs. Washburn says, putting the card back in its envelope. "That old goat!"

"Don't worry, Lucy," Susie reassures her friend. "Daddy won't let anything happen to you." I nod, hoping that what Susie says is true.

"I told her to wear that shawl." Mami starts up her scolding again.

"Carmen, honey, I don't think that shawl would have made a darn bit of difference. You can't hide your light under a bushel. And that old codger's got eyes on his"—she notices me. Why is

everyone always looking at me when they are about to say interesting things?—"eyes on the back of his butt."

"Honestly, Mother," Susie says, rolling her eyes at Lucinda. But my poor sister is too scared to share in Susie's disgust.

"Where's Sam?" I ask. It suddenly strikes me that Sam has not come over with his sister and mom like usual.

"Young Master Sam and Master Oscar are probably sleeping off a mighty hangover. Yes, ma'am," Mrs. Washburn adds, nodding at my mother. "Those two boys got into the rum last night. One of those tin-medal generals bullied them that they had to learn to drink like little men. Mr. Washburn can't wait for Samuel Adams to recover from his hangover so he can get what else is in store for him today."

I wonder what else is in store for Sam today. Do the Americans punish their children by making them sit on a punishment chair, the way my parents once did? We've all outgrown that chair. In fact, it seems we've outgrown punishment altogether in the last few months. All we need to get back in line is one of Mami's desperate looks or Papi's stony-faced *¡No!* that allows for no further argument or discussion.

When the phone rings, we all jump. Once, twice, three times, it keeps ringing until Lorena picks it up. In a minute, she is at Lucinda's door. "It's for *la señorita*," she calls out through the door.

"*¿Quién es?*" Mami calls back.

"*Un señor*," Lorena replies. As a graduate from the Domestic Academy, Lorena knows to ask for the name of a caller. Unless, of course, that caller is someone who needs no introduction.

Lucinda sinks back in her pillow and begins to sob again.

Mami stands to take the call, but Mrs. Washburn comes to

our rescue. "Let me handle this." She opens the door and follows Lorena down the hall. "I'm sorry," we hear her say in her bad Spanish. "There's no one here by that name."

When Papi comes home from work at noon, Mami tells him what has been going on all morning. Papi is so upset, he won't eat his lunch even though it's his favorite, a *sancocho*, with leftover *pastelitos* from the party. He and Tío Toni go off to the back of the property, and a little later, Papi crosses over to discuss things with Mr. Washburn.

Meanwhile, the phone keeps ringing. Mami has instructed us not to answer it. As for Lorena, there's no danger of her interference. Mami has given her the rest of the day off. "I've been overworking you, and it's not fair," Mami said, stuffing a tip in the young woman's pocket and practically pushing her out the door.

Papi comes back from the Washburns' with news of a plan the consul has thought up. They are calling it Operation Maid. Friends in Washington who will be stationed in Colombia have been looking for someone who can teach their children some Spanish. Why not send Lucinda?

Mami won't have it. "My daughter's not going to be anybody's maid—"

Papi's reply cuts off all argument. "Would you prefer she be Mr. Smith's little *querida*?"

Mami doesn't say another word. It's decided. Mr. Washburn will request a special visa from the foreign ministry to send Lucinda to the States to help out his friend.

But Tío Toni isn't so sure the plan will succeed. The ministry will never disappoint Mr. Smith in order to please a mere consul.

"I say we take Smith down now!" my uncle insists. He paces the patio, lighting cigarettes he forgets to finish, flicking the butts into the ginger bushes nearby.

"The king must die," Papi agrees.

My mouth drops. They're talking about murdering El Jefe! I feel scared just thinking about what I've overheard. What if the SIM have a way to read people's minds?

"Let's not rush into this," Mami cautions. "El Jefe is many things, but he's not stupid. He won't refuse the consul. Remember, he really wants to win back the Americans so the embargo stops."

"We'll see," Papi says, as if he's struggling to believe what Mami is telling him.

For the rest of the day, I can't concentrate on anything. I just can't believe my own father would do something he's always taught me is wrong! Maybe saying the king must die was like the metaphors Mrs. Brown was always talking about? A figure of speech, not something that's actually true.

I corner Mundín in the hallway and ask him to please tell me what is going on. "Are Papi and Tío Toni really going to kill El Jefe—"

Mundín claps a hand over my mouth and looks around worriedly. "Don't ever say that to anyone!" His voice is so desperate, I burst into tears. He must feel bad about scaring me because he adds, "Everything'll be all right." I try hard to keep my mind on those words and on what Chucha dreamed—Lucinda, Mundín, Mami, and I, sprouting wings. Maybe she didn't see Papi because he went ahead, preparing our way in a country he is already familiar with?

In Lucinda's bedroom, everything is in disarray. Piles of match-

ing blouses and skirts lie all over her bed. Even in the middle of an emergency, my older sister worries about what to wear. Finally, with Mrs. Washburn's help, Mami packs a small, sensible bag of what is necessary.

I stand by, as stunned as I was that November day when my cousins left. Even though it's only been less than four months, it seems so long ago. It's as if I've gone from being eleven back then to being really old now, at least as old as my grandparents, who are in their sixties. The thought of losing Lucinda to the United States of America, hard as she sometimes is on me, is too sad to think about. Not even the thought of falling in love with Sam is a consolation anymore. Overnight, all boys (except for Papi and Tío Toni and Mundín) have become totally gross. Here's an old lech flirting with my sister. Here are Oscar and Sam drinking liquor and throwing up. If only I could be Joan of Arc, cut off my hair and dress like a boy, just to be on the safe side. Or even better, if only I could go backward to eleven, instead of forward to thirteen!

Since it might be our last night together, Lucinda invites me to sleep in her room. I help her roll up her hair, and even when I don't get the rollers tight enough, she doesn't say anything. She also puts some of her pimple cream on my face, though I don't really need it—but then, neither does she.

Finally, Lucinda turns off the light and seems to go right to sleep. I try, I really do. But lying in the dark, I start seeing visions of El Jefe lying in a puddle of disgusting blood, and Papi and Tío Toni standing beside the body, and I feel sick to my stomach. Then I hear a sob. At first, I think it's mine, but it turns out to be Lucinda crying.

I reach out a hand and touch her shoulder. It feels strange to be comforting my older sister. And here she promised Tío Toni to take care of me!

"I just want you to know," Lucinda sobs, "that I . . . I . . . I'm sorry for anything mean I've ever done."

That does it. A loud sob bursts from me, too. Lucinda rolls over, and we hug each other until we have no more tears left. "We're going to look awful tomorrow," she says, laughing and crying both. What do I care? No one will see me. It's Lucinda who'll be meeting people in the United States she has to impress.

We talk in the dark, Lucinda telling me all about boys she likes and how many times she has been kissed. The first kiss she ever got, she was wearing her blue organdy dress, which is why she never would let me have it, even after she'd outgrown it. It's nice knowing she was being sentimental, not mean. I feel so sad to be losing my sister just when we're getting closer. Finally, we both fall asleep.

When I stir the next morning, my nightgown and legs feel damp. Oh, no! I think. I wet the bed! And here Lucinda has been treating me like someone her own age. Lifting the sheet, I gasp. There are bloody stains on my nightgown and on the bed!

My first thought is that I've been stabbed. But how can that be when nothing hurts anywhere? Maybe some horrible thing has happened to Lucinda? Maybe the SIM snuck into our house in the middle of the night and stabbed her in punishment for not taking Mr. Smith's phone call?

"Lucinda," I shake her awake. "There's blood. . . ."

"Go back to sleep," she says wearily. But then, my words must register because suddenly she is wide awake and sitting up. "Where?"

I lift the sheet and she looks down with a questioning expression. Then a knowing smile spreads on her lips. "Congratulations," she says, leaning over and kissing me. "My baby sister's a *señorita*."

I don't feel like a *señorita*. I feel more like a baby in wet diapers. And I don't want to be a *señorita* now that I know what El Jefe does to *señoritas*.

"Let's get you cleaned up," Lucinda is saying. She has gotten out of bed and is searching through a drawer. She finds a spare belt and shows me how to rig it up with a sanitary pad.

"Just please don't tell Mami," I plead. Mami will tell Papi, and right this moment, the last thing I want is a man knowing I've gotten my period.

"What'll we do with the sheets?" Lucinda asks, nodding toward her bed.

I know one person who will keep my secret. As soon as I've dressed, I make my way warily down the hall, a white bundle under my arm, trying hard to ignore the sanitary pad I'm wearing. How do girls ever get used to walking with this contraption between their legs?

As I pass Papi's study, I hear voices: Papi and Mami discussing something with Mr. Washburn. The consul must have come over first thing this morning with some news. The kitchen and pantry are deserted. Lorena hasn't returned from her night off. Out back, in the walkway between the house proper and the servants' quarters, Chucha is putting out her bedding to sun on the line. She glances at the bundle under my arm and guesses exactly what has happened.

"It's about time," she notes. Then, unfolding the sheets and glancing at the bloody marks, she adds, "This will do."

"Do what?" I ask. I know Chucha made Mami save all our bellybutton cords from when we were newborns to bury in the backyard. Does Chucha also do something with a girl's first menstrual blood?

"*Mi secreto, tu silencio,*" she replies as usual.

I promise not to divulge her secrets, but for the first time, I ask her to return the favor. "Please don't tell Mami, Chucha, please."

She studies me for a moment, then nods as if she understands my desire for privacy. "Everything will be all right," she promises, echoing Mundín's words from the night before. "Mr. Washburn is already here with good news. Your sister is leaving today. *La amiga* Susie is going as well."

I feel relief to hear that my sister will be safe, even though it means Lucinda has to go away. It's like one of those operations where they save your life but take out some big part of you.

"You will be flying, too, one day soon," Chucha reminds me. "But right now, we have to get someone else out of the house." She glances over her shoulder at the door to Lorena's room. "Come with me."

She leads the way into her room, hung with purple cloths at the windows, a sweet, herbal smell in the air. We stop in front of a picture of a saint with a flickering votive candle in front of it. The saint isn't Santa Lucia because she doesn't have a little tray in her hands with her eyeballs rolling around. And it isn't Santa Barbara because she doesn't have a crown on her head and a tower behind her back. This saint has long hair and wears a red tunic and sandals and wields a huge sword above a disgusting-looking dragon with a tiny human face. "San Miguel," Chucha intones, "protect this house from all enemies. Expel the bad. Bring all to safety who dwell within. Amen."

I pray along with her, and then—as Chucha likes to say—the work of God that must always be done by man begins. Between the two of us, we push and drag and tug that coffin out the narrow door, upend it, turn it around, and put it in the room next door. We set it up in front of the neatly made bed, lid open, with Lucinda's bloody sheets spilling out the sides. It looks like a dead person just crawled out, leaving his bloody winding sheet behind.

I admit I feel mean participating in this scheme—but I also understand that our lives are in danger. A tip from Lorena could wipe us out. It's so unfair to have to live in a country where you have to do stuff you feel bad about in order to save your life. It's like Papi and Tío Toni planning to assassinate Mr. Smith when they know that murder is wrong. But what if your leader is evil and rapes young girls and kills loads of innocent people and makes your country a place where not even butterflies are safe? I feel sick to my stomach all over again just thinking about all this.

After we are done, Chucha closes herself up in her bedroom and begins to pray to San Miguel again. On my way back through the house, I bump into Mr. Washburn coming down the hall from Papi's study. I turn my face away, trying to avoid his eyes. He's the first man I've encountered since getting my period. I'm sure he can see right through my pants to the belt and pad I am wearing.

"I have some good news, Anita," Mr. Washburn is saying. "Your sister's visa came through."

I glance up at those kind blue eyes that are exactly like Sam's eyes, and my disgust begins to fade away. Mr. Washburn is risking his life to help my family as well as my suffering country. Here is another man (along with Papi and Mundín and Tío Toni) to add to the list of good guys I might be able to trust again.

Back in Lucinda's bedroom, Mami is explaining that Lucinda

has only gotten a visitor's visa, so she doesn't have to be a maid, after all. The new plan is that she will accompany Susie on a visit to her grandparents in Washington. Once she is safely out of the country, Mr. Washburn will figure out how to keep her there.

"By the way," Mami asks, glancing down at the bed, "what happened to your bed?"

"Chucha stripped it this morning," Lucinda says, looking over at me. "She said she knew I'd be leaving today."

"*Esa Chucha es un cuento.*" Mami smiles, shaking her head. Chucha is something else.

Just then, we hear a cry from the back of the house. Lucinda and Mami look at each other worriedly. What can it be?

We don't have to wait long to find out. Minutes later, Chucha is at the door with the news that Lorena is packing her things and also leaving the house.