seven

Lying Policemen

Papi whistles his special time-to-go whistle from the hallway. He's driving me and Mundín and Sam to school. I'm lingering in Lucinda's bedroom, watching her pack and repack her small suitcase as if there's going to be a test on it when she lands in the United States.

Mami comes to get me. "Papi's waiting."

"I want to stay until Lucinda leaves." In fact, I don't want to go to school at all! My eyes are all red from crying and my tummy's upset.

But Mami insists. "Anita, we've got to make everything look as normal as possible. Even I'm not going to the airport with the Washburns," she reminds me. "Now come. You'll be late."

I turn to face Lucinda, and we collapse in each other's arms, sobbing. She finally pulls away, trying to be the brave one. "Don't forget," she says.

I nod, though I honestly can't remember what it is I'm not supposed to forget.

Nothing feels right today. Just past our house, the police have stopped a car, and the passengers are getting out with their hands in the air. Papi's jaw tenses up. I slip the crucifix around my neck into my mouth—something I've started doing when I need extra good luck.

Papi slows often for the speed bumps that have been appearing all over the city. Everyone calls them "lying policemen," which makes me think of dead policemen buried underneath the street. I suppose with all the crazy stuff happening, my imagination is going wild.

My biggest fear is that something I've done or said will cause us to be killed. What if Lorena tells the SIM about how I kept a diary hidden under my pillow that I erased every night? I mean, that has to sound suspicious. *Please please please*, I pray to the little crucifix in my mouth.

We stop at the high school to drop off Mundín. He must know how bad I'm feeling because he turns around in the front seat and ruffles my hair like he used to when I was a little kid. "Maybe later we can go for a drive?" he offers. Mundín is allowed to take Tío Toni's hot rod up and down the driveways in the compound.

His being so nice makes me want to cry. I don't dare open my mouth, afraid a sob'll burst out.

"I'll go with you if she doesn't want to," Sam pipes up. All the way to school, he's been talking about what a great time he's going to have now that his bossy older sister is leaving. It makes me feel even sadder that his feelings are so different from mine. But then, the more I think about it, that's the way it's always been.

"I have some rather sad news to report," Mrs. Brown says first thing in class. I am so numb already, I don't think I can feel any more sadness. But when she says that the American School is going to close its doors temporarily, it's like the last straw Chucha says broke the donkey's back. Even though I complain about school, I really don't want the last normal thing in my life to stop. I lay my head down on my desk.

"Are you feeling ill, Anita?" Mrs. Brown is by my side. "You're going to have to answer me, dear, so I know what to do." Her voice is sweet and coaxing. She crouches down beside my seat.

I don't seem to have the energy even to lift my head and say, "I'm fine."

"I think we'd better have the nurse look at you," she says, taking my hand.

I don't resist. I stand and walk with her. As we cross the front of the room, Charlie Price makes a circle motion in the air to Sammy, who grins as if he agrees.

I feel like screaming, *I AM NOT CRAZY!* But instead, I swallow that scream, and suddenly it's very quiet inside me.

The nurse calls Mami, who appears at school in Tío Toni's hot rod, since Papi has the other car. She looks glamorous, with a kerchief over her head and dark glasses like a movie star. When she takes them off, I see that her eyes are red, too. She must have been crying after Lucinda left for the airport.

"What's wrong, *amorcito*?" she asks.

I want to tell Mami the truth, how I've gotten my period, how I'm already lonely for Lucinda, how I feel just awful that my father has to kill someone for us to be free, how I'm scared about what's going to happen to us, but all the words seem to have emptied out of my head. Finally, I remember one. "*Nada*," I say.

"Nothing? Are you sure?" Mami peers at my face. "She looks pale," she tells the nurse. "I better take her home to bed."

The minute we get in the car, Mami turns to me. She looks terrified. "You didn't say anything about Lucinda, did you?"

I shake my head. Can't she see that I'm not saying anything to anybody?

* * *

I spend the rest of the day in bed. Chucha brews me a tea of *hierbabuena* leaves that makes the flutter in my chest and the cramps in my tummy go away. Later, Mundín stops in. The high school is closing, too, he reports. Maybe tomorrow, if I feel better, we can drive around the compound. He keeps biting his nails as he talks. I know how he feels. Except instead of biting my nails or breaking out in hives like Lucinda, I seem to be forgetting words.

I'll start to say something, and just like that, I'll go blank over a word. It doesn't even have to be an important or hard word, like *amnesty* or *communism*, but something easy, like *salt* or *butter* or *sky* or *star*. That makes the forgetfulness even scarier.

Maybe Charlie is right and I *am* going crazy?

Please, please, please, I pray. The crucifix around my neck is in my mouth so often the features on the little Christ face are starting to wear off.

As soon as Papi gets home, he comes and sits on the edge of my bed. Unlike Mami, he doesn't ask me a dozen questions. He smiles tenderly and strokes my hair. His eyes are the saddest in the world.

"One day . . . in a time not too far in the future . . . ," Papi begins, as if he's telling me a bedtime story, "you're going to look back on all this and think, I really was a strong and brave girl."

I shake my head. *I'm not so strong or brave*, I want to say.

"Oh yes, you are. I know you are," he insists, reading my thoughts. He tips my face up by the chin so I'm looking straight at him. I feel as if he's hypnotizing me. "I want my children to be free, no matter what. Promise me you'll spread your wings and fly."

What on earth are you talking about, Papi? I want to ask him. It's spooky to hear Papi sounding like Chucha! But I can't seem to get

the words out of my head and down the chute that connects them to my mouth.

Mami pokes her head in the door. "How's she feeling?" she asks Papi, as if I'm not in the room at all. She comes over to the bed and touches my forehead with the back of her hand. "I think it might be the mumps that's going around."

Papi shakes his head. "It's not mumps," he says. He turns back to me, still waiting for a promise I'm not prepared to give him yet.

Every night now, the men meet at our house on the back patio. They've grown extremely cautious, using code phrases all the time, but they let one little thing slip by them. The patio swings around the house to a private nook where they like to sit talking, and that nook is directly beside my bedroom window. Every night as I lie in bed, I can hear their hushed voices, even as I'm losing mine.

Tío Toni is always there, and Papi, and sometimes Mr. Washburn, who brings Wimpy. Mr. Mancini has stopped coming because the group decides that he can provide a safe house in case of trouble. I don't know what that means except that it's probably why, now that our American school has officially closed, Sam and Mundín and I go over to the Mancinis' house for our lessons. Mami and Mrs. Washburn and Mrs. Mancini—in fact, the whole canasta group—are not about to let their kids grow up dumb *brutos* just because of a dictatorship. All in all, I think there are about twelve of us from different grades, now thrown together, learning addition and algebra, "*Cielito Lindo*" as well as "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star."

Mundín and I always ride over with Sam in the consulate car, as it's less likely to be stopped at the guardposts beyond the lying

policemen. There are now all kinds of checkpoints and curfews. One day, we ride to school and every other person on the street and in their cars is wearing black. When Sam asks Mundín about it, my brother says these people are voicing a silent protest. Sometimes, I think of my growing silence that way: voicing a silent protest.

More and more people are getting arrested, too. I hear the men talking one night about this one drugstore where the owner, a sympathizer, will sell you a pill you can take if you get caught by the SIM. It kills you instantly; that way you can't be tortured and reveal the names of other dissidents. Every time I help Chucha with the laundry, I check all of Papi's and Tío Toni's pockets, just in case they've forgotten their pills there. I plan to flush them down the toilet, all but one, which I'll keep for myself. In case the SIM take me away, I'll slip that pill in my mouth, and then my crucifix. Maybe God will forgive me for committing suicide to avoid being murdered?

So much for trying to be brave and strong like Joan of Arc!

"*¡Ya esto no se puede soporta!*" Tío Toni is saying. This has got to stop. They've been waiting around for weeks for a delivery of what they call "the ingredients for the picnic." Tonight is no different from any other night, except that their voices are starting to sound more desperate.

"The Americans are playing with us, that's what you don't realize," Tío Toni continues. I know he's talking to Papi, who says that after the way Washburn helped with Lucinda, he trusts *ese caballero* with his life.

"It's not Washburn, it's his people in Washington dragging their feet," another voice is saying.

"*El pobre* Washburn," Papi agrees. Poor Washburn. "He's on his way out."

So the Washburns are leaving to join Susie in Washington! As for Lucinda, she's now in *Nueva York* with my grandparents and cousins, sending me postcards that show buildings so tall even Chucha is left speechless. Lucinda signs her name "Marilyn Taylor," after her two favorite actresses, Marilyn Monroe and Elizabeth Taylor. According to Mami, Lucinda knows we can get in trouble for corresponding with a person who hasn't returned when her visa expired.

The door opens a crack, and a dagger of light cuts through the darkness. It's Mami, checking up on me. She usually waits until all the men are gone, but maybe she wants to catch me before I fall asleep. "Are you up, *amorcito*?" she calls into the room. Of course, had I been asleep, her calling out would have woken me. I turn on the three monkeys lamp so that she feels invited in.

Mami sits down beside me on the bed. She chuckles when her eyes fall on the silly lamp. Three monkeys—one with his hands over his eyes, one with his hands over his ears, and a third with his hands over his mouth—stand in a row under a palm tree with a green shade that covers the lightbulb. It's one of the things we inherited from the García girls when they left the country. Carla and I always made fun of this awful lamp that one of our aunts with poor taste once gave them. When Lorena broke my bedside lamp cleaning one day, Mami got this one out of the storage closet.

Mami is shaking her head at the monkeys. "We can move Lucinda's lamp in here if you want." I've always pretended to hate the lamp, rolling my eyes theatrically. But really, it's kind of comforting to have the three monkeys lamp Carla and I made fun of together beside me.

"Wouldn't you like that?" Mami is giving me that pleading look she wears these days when I won't talk much. "Ay, Anita, tell me what's going on. You look so skinny and sad, and you're too quiet to be Mami's *cotorrita*."

I hate when Mami worries about me and starts calling me her little parrot and treating me like I'm five again.

"You miss your sister, don't you? And now I have—not bad news, just a change."

"The Washburns are leaving." My voice comes out hoarse, I guess from not using it much anymore.

"How did you find out?" Mami looks puzzled. "Sammy doesn't even know." She continues studying my face for clues as to what I'm feeling, her eyes filling. "Maybe we've told you too much? Maybe we made you grow up too fast?"

"Mami, don't . . ." I've forgotten the word for *cry*. I put my little crucifix in my mouth. Sometimes, doing so helps me remember the words for what I want to say.

"I'm sorry." Mami is sobbing now. She reaches for me and holds on so tight, I'm reminded of the hug she gave Lucinda the day El Jefe's roses arrived. "I wanted you to have a childhood," Mami sniffs, wiping her tears.

I think of reassuring her by telling her that my childhood is over anyway. That I've already gotten my period. But the voices outside my window have grown animated. Mr. Washburn and Wimpy have arrived.

"It's bad news," Mr. Washburn is saying. "They're not going to send any more ingredients for the picnic."

"I told you they'd back out on us," Tío Toni reminds the group.

"I'm sorry, fellas," Washburn says. And he really does sound sad. "I'll deliver what I have on hand in a few days at our drop-off."

"Our usual place," Wimpy confirms.

Mami looks like the monkey with his hand over his mouth. I don't know if she's upset at the news she just heard or at suddenly realizing that I've been listening in on the men's secret meetings for months. She leans over my bed and angles the jalousies open. "*Señores*," she calls out, "everything can be heard from this room."

The gathering goes absolutely silent, and then Papi walks over to the window and peers in over Mami's shoulder to where I sit on my bed.

"No wonder" is all he says.

The men move their meetings back to Tío Toni's *casita*, even though it isn't as convenient as the patio with the shortwave nearby in Papi's study tuned to Radio Swan. Oscar says that Swan is a new station that broadcasts important bulletins by exiles who want to liberate the island. Everyone in the whole country is listening in, even though it's illegal to do so. I've heard the men say that there are dissidents everywhere—even among the armed forces and policemen and cabinet members—just waiting for a signal that El Jefe is out of the way.

One time I try turning on the shortwave, hoping to hear that we're free. But I don't know which knob is for the volume and the radio blares for a minute. Mami hurries in. "What are you doing, Anita? Come along now and help me get the card table out."

Mami wants me by her side at all times when I'm not at the Mancinis'. With only Chucha left in the household, I've taken over lots of little jobs, including helping out when the canasta group comes over, cleaning ashtrays, refreshing glasses of lemonade.

"Hey, sweetheart," Mrs. Washburn calls me over to her side

one afternoon. She puts her cards facedown on the table. "Are you going to miss your pal Sam?" Although Mr. Washburn won't be leaving until late June, Mrs. Washburn has decided she and Sam will join Susie in Washington soon. It's April, and Sam has already missed too much of the school year. And Susie is proving to be a handful for her poor grandparents.

Mrs. Washburn puts her arms around me and squeezes hard. "Why haven't you been coming over to visit? Did you and Sammy have a little squabble?" She winks at Mami. Obviously, they've been talking about me. "Maybe you'll come visit us in Washington?"

I know I'm being rude, but I can't come up with the words to answer her.

"Will you come and visit us sometime?" Mrs. Washburn persists.

I can feel Mami's eyes prying the words from deep inside. I try to pull them out myself. But they won't come. All I can do is shake my head.

"Young lady," Mami corrects. No matter how worried she is about me, she still won't stand for rudeness. "That's no way to turn down an invitation."

But Mrs. Washburn waves Mami's scolding away. She gives me another tight squeeze. Can't she see that I'm not a little girl anymore? That I have breasts that hurt when she does that?

"Thank you, Mrs. Washburn," my mother coaches.

"Thank you," I echo in the small voice I've learned for being polite.

Sam still comes over, but it's not to visit me anymore. Now it's to hang over the hood of Tío Toni's hot rod with Mundín, fixing up

the motor. Tío Toni has promised Mundín the car as soon as my brother gets his license when he turns sixteen. What I always wonder is, how good can a car be that always needs some repair?

The special feelings I once had for Sam have definitely faded. Now he seems like a regular boy, with his hair too white as if it's been left in a bucket of bleach overnight, his eyes a dull blue. He and Mundín are always talking about cars. Chucha and I will pass by the carport and overhear them discussing the carburetor and brake pads, points and plugs. I'll repeat these words to myself, as if by doing so I'll somehow be able to understand my older brother and my former love a little better.

Sometimes, when Mundín and Sam are out working on the car and Mami and her friends are playing canasta on the patio, it seems as if things might be going back to normal. Suddenly, I'll think up a dozen things to say to Chucha about something I saw in one of Mrs. Washburn's *Life* magazines or a plan for a hairdo that'll make me look older. But then something happens to remind me that we're not safe, and my words slide away again.

Thursday morning, we are on our way to Oscar's house for class, Sam and Mundín and I. His chauffeur has the day off, so Mr. Washburn is driving. He has a stop to make downtown at Wimpy's anyway.

Wimpy is over at the Washburns' a lot these days. I've heard Sam tell Mundín that Wimpy is really an undercover agent for the United States. That's why Mr. Washburn has been bringing him to the secret meetings at our house.

Today, traffic is heavy. Probably, El Jefe's car is expected down the main avenue, which means cars will be backed up until his motorcade passes. We inch forward at a crawl. Beside me, in the

backseat, Sam is looking uncomfortable, squirming this way and that.

Suddenly, the car ahead of us brakes, and as we brake, too, the car behind rams into us, and the trunk flies open.

Mr. Washburn is out of the car in a flash. From their guardpost, two policemen, who have seen the accident, head down the block toward us. Sam turns pale at the sight of soldiers approaching, wielding machine guns. He opens his door and hurries out to join Mundín and Mr. Washburn at the back of the car. I'm right behind him.

"No problem," Mr. Washburn is saying to the driver who has run into our car. "It's understandable, bad *tráfico*." He's talking too fast, as if he's the one who rammed into a car, his hand trying desperately to push down the trunk that has flown open. But the dent in the trunk won't let the latch catch.

"Allow me," one of the policemen offers, strapping his weapon over his shoulder and rolling up his sleeves.

"*No, no, por favor,*" Mr. Washburn insists, waving him away from the trunk. "All that is needed is a piece of rope."

The driver of the car behind us runs off to get some rope he has stored in his trunk. Meanwhile, the second policeman heads back to his guardpost to make out his report.

"You will dirty your sleeves!" Mr. Washburn is still arguing with the remaining policeman about helping with the dented trunk. But the policeman is insistent. He steps forward and lifts the lid to inspect the damage.

I cannot describe what I see, for the words slide away from my memory. In fact, no one says a word. We stand for a long moment, looking down into the trunk of that car. The driver, who has arrived with the coil of rope, glances down and his eyes grow wide.

Jolted from their sugar-cane sacking, barrels poking out, the ingredients of the picnic have spilled out across the floor of the trunk. The guns were on their way to the drop-off point, the mission disguised as a school ride for us kids.

The policeman must see them, too. But all he does is reach for the rope from the terrified driver and loop one end into the lid and then through the bumper and knot them tightly together.

"You better get that fixed," he says quietly to Mr. Washburn when he's done.

"*¿Todo bien?*" his buddy calls from their guardpost.

"Everything is fine," the policeman lies, waving us on our way.

Back inside the car, Mr. Washburn's hands are shaking so badly, he has trouble turning on the ignition. I smell urine, as if someone has peed in his pants. My heart is thundering in my chest. I pull out my chain and put the little cross in my mouth, but I can't come up with the words for a simple prayer of thanks.