

Anita's Diary

June 3, 1961, Saturday, time of day, hard to say

We are finally settled in and Mami has said, go ahead, write in your diary as much as you want, we're in trouble already, maybe you can leave a record that will help others who are in hiding, too.

Mami now speaks in spurts of panic instead of sentences. I tell her that all I want to do is keep a diary, not save the world.

I don't want any freshness here, Anita, I've just about had it, I'm up to four Equanil a day, that's sixteen hundred milligrams, I can't take it.

You see why I need this diary.

June 5, 1961, Monday morning—Mami's showering in the bathroom next door

I can only write a little bit at a time, as I don't get much privacy around here, even though it's just me and Mami in the walk-in closet in the Mancinis' bedroom. When the Mancinis lock their bedroom door, we can visit with them in their room and do things like take a shower. Otherwise, we have to stay in the closet.

Last night in the middle of the night, Mrs. Mancini shook us awake and whispered, I don't know which one of you is doing it, but I'm afraid you don't have the luxury of snoring in this house.

Our sounds have to sound like their sounds.

June 6, 1961, Tuesday, early—or so it seems from the light streaming in the bathroom window

Mrs. Mancini says it's a good thing she has always been in the habit of locking their bedroom door in order to get some privacy. Also, she has always cleaned the master bedroom herself, as the help have enough to do with five kids. Besides, she doesn't trust anyone since she learned of the undercover training at the Domestic Academy. So the Mancinis' habits make their bedroom as safe a hiding place as any private residence can be right now.

The Mancinis have this kind of strange house like an apartment. The first floor is basically a large garage and laundry room and kitchen. They live on the second floor, since it's cooler up here with a gallery running all along the back and stairs going down to the garden.

From their bathroom window, I have a bird's-eye view of the grounds of the embassy. But unlike a bird, I can't fly free . . . except in my imagination.

Later, evening

According to Mr. Mancini, loads of people are being arrested. The whole town of Moca was imprisoned because one of the conspirators comes from there! El Jefe's son, Trujillo Junior, says he will not rest until he has punished every man, woman, and child associated with the assassination of his father. Actually, Mr. Mancini says that people are secretly calling it an *ajusticiamiento*, which means bringing to justice, the way criminals have to face the consequences of their evil deeds.

I feel so much better thinking that Papi and Tío Toni were doing justice, not really murdering killing hurting someone. But still . . . just the thought of my own father—

Have to go. One of the little Marías is calling at the bedroom door.

June 7, 1961, Wednesday afternoon, a cloudy day, I can tell rain is coming

Once the Mancinis go out, we have to stay quietly in the closet and can't move around or use the bathroom. (We have a chamber pot, but you'd be surprised how noisy peeing is, and how messy in the dark.)

Only two human beings in the house know we are here, Tío Pepe and Tía Mari (they insist I call them that now), and their two teeny Yorkshire terriers. Thank goodness Mojo and Maja remember me from school and Mami from the times the canasta group met here, so they don't bark at us. No one else knows. Tía Mari says it's going to be a job keeping a secret in this curious family. But it's just too dangerous right now to tell anyone where we are.

It is so strange to be in the very same house as Oscar, and he doesn't even know! Every time Tía Mari or Tío Pepe mentions his name, I can feel my face burn. I wonder if they notice my special interest?

The emergency procedure is, if the SIM start a search or anyone comes into the bedroom (besides the Mancinis), we slip into the bathroom, where there are two narrow closets; Mami goes in one and I go in the other, all the way to a crawl space in back, and we stay there and pray we are not discovered.

June 8, 1961, Thursday, right after supper, in bathroom

During supper tonight, Tía Mari turned on Radio Caribe kind of loud. Meanwhile, Tío Pepe tuned his shortwave radio to Radio Swan real low since that station is still illegal, and he and Mami and Tía Mari leaned forward listening closely to the "real" news. It was like night and day, what each station was reporting.

CARIBE: The OAS is here to help the SIM maintain stability.

SWAN: The OAS is here investigating human rights abuses.

CARIBE: Prisoners praise treatment to OAS investigation committee.

SWAN: Prisoners complain of atrocities to OAS investigation committee.

CARIBE: Consul Washburn has been recalled.

SWAN: Consul Washburn has been airlifted by helicopter to protect his life.

Both stations agreed on one thing: The plot did not work. Pupo, the head of the army, just wasn't there to announce the liberation over the radio, and instead, Trujillo Junior has taken over, and it's a bloodbath out there. The SIM are doing house-to-house searches. Over 5,000 people have been arrested, including family members of the conspirators.

I wanted to block my ears and not listen to this stuff!

Whenever I feel this way, I start writing in my diary so there's another voice that I can listen to. A third radio, tuned to my own heart.

So I snuck off to the bathroom with my diary, and soon enough, Mami was calling me, saying it was rude for me to be off by myself, come join them and be sociable, but then Tía Mari told her to let me be, that it's a good thing that I'm writing, that ever since I started keeping this diary, I'm talking a lot more.

It took her saying so for me to realize it's true.

The words are coming back, as if by writing them down, I'm fishing them out of forgetfulness, one by one.

June 9, 1961, Friday—evening

Mami has heard from Tío Pepe that Mr. Washburn is back in Washington and pushing to get Papi and Tío Toni on the OAS list of prisoners interviewed, as their lives are then much safer. Once the OAS has a name on record, it's harder for the SIM to get rid of that individual.

Mami and Tía Mari have begun praying a rosary to the Virgin Mary every night to take care of all the prisoners, but most especially to take care of Papi and Tío Toni.

I always kneel with them. But even though I'm talking again, I can't seem to fish the words for an Our Father or Hail Mary out of my brain.

June 10, 1961, Saturday, late night

The electricity goes on and off all the time. Tía Mari bought Mami and me little flashlights. Tonight, a total blackout again. So I'm writing by the light of this tiny beam.

I never know exactly what time it is anymore—except when the siren sounds at noon and then again at 6 for curfew. The Mancinis don't have an electric clock in their bedroom because it would never tell the right time anyhow. The kind you wind drives Tía Mari crazy because it tick-tocks too loud. She says she feels like someone is timing her life.

The truth is, when you live in such close quarters, you find out the most private things about people—like Tío Pepe always having to wear white socks to bed or Tía Mari tweezing little hairs from her upper lip.

I wonder what they've noticed about me? How I stroke a spot on my left cheek whenever I'm feeling scared or lonely?

June 11, 1961, after supper, second Sunday in hiding

Sundays are especially hard, as that was always the day of our big family gathering. But we were reduced to just the Garcías and us, then just us, then just us minus Lucinda, and now it's even less than a nuclear family, just Mami and me, like survivors after a bomb drops, a fallout family.

Every day, I ask Mami about Papi and Tío Toni. But on Sundays, I probably ask her more than once. (No, not "countless times," like she accuses me of!)

Today, I promised myself I wouldn't ask her even once. But by evening, I couldn't stand it anymore. Mami, I said, just tell me if they're okay.

She hesitated. They're alive, she said, and started crying.

Tía Mari pulled her into the bathroom, and meanwhile I was left alone in the bedroom with Tío Pepe. We were quiet for a while and then he said, Anita, one must think positively. That is how the greatest minds in history have survived tragedy.

I felt like reminding him I'm not one of the greatest minds, but Tío Pepe is so smart, maybe his advice is worth a try?

I close my eyes and think positively. . . . After a while, a picture pops into my head of Papi and Tío Toni and me walking on the beach. I'm real little, and they're holding me between them and swinging me out over the waves like they're going to throw me into the sea, and I'm giggling and they're laughing, and Papi is saying, fly, mi hijita, fly, like I am a little kite that is catching the wind!

Then, like on a birthday, I make a wish: that Papi and Tío Toni will soon be free and that we will all be together again as a family.

June 12, 1961, Monday night, bathroom, about ten o'clock

Sometimes, I try to think of my life in hiding as a movie that will be over in three hours. It makes it a lot easier to put up with Mami's nerves!

So here's the scene every night when I want to write after lights-out:

SETTING: Dark inside of closet. Mother on her mat, not the most comfortable of beds, but a lot better than sleeping in prison or in a coffin!

ACTION: Girl feels for diary and flashlight under her pillow. Absolutely silently, she begins to slip out of the closet.

MOTHER: (whispering, loud enough to wake up sleeping couple in bedroom beyond closet) Remember, the Mancinis are asleep!

GIRL: I know. (Rolls her eyes in the dark, makes disgusted face, which, of course, mother can't see. Girl goes into bathroom, props flashlight on back of the toilet, and begins writing. Screen goes blurry and scene of what she's writing unfolds before our very eyes!)

Back to my diary—

I want to write down everything that happened the night that Tío Pepe rescued us from the compound—not that I'm likely to forget. I don't think I've ever been so scared!

Mami and I crouched down in the back of Tío Pepe's Pontiac with some sacks over us. Good thing, too, since the streets were crawling with tanks. When we got to the Italian embassy, Mundín was already there, and though Mami had sworn that she was going to kill him, she was so pleased to see him alive and well and biting his nails that she just hugged him and kept touching his face and hair. Poor Mundín looked like he had suddenly turned from fifteen to fifty, his eyes glazed over with the horrible news of Papi and Tío Toni being taken away.

Meanwhile, Tío Pepe and the Italian ambassador came up with a plan.

Since Mundín was most at risk, being a guy, he'd stay at the embassy, as it's off-limits to the SIM if they're obeying rules anymore. But the place was so packed with refugees seeking protection, we couldn't all stay there. So Mami and I were moved next door to the Mancinis', which is not as safe. (Private residences do not have immunity privileges.) The plan is to get us all out of the country as soon as a way can be found. Meanwhile, we have to lay low, not a peep from us, as the SIM close in with their house-to-house searches.

When we got to the Mancinis' bedroom that first night, Tía Mari showed us "the accommodations." Here is the dining room, she said, pointing to her bedside table with magazines, and here is your bedroom, she added, showing us the walk-in closet, then crossing the narrow hallway, here is your bathroom—living room—patio. She was trying to make us smile.

I started unpacking, and what a surprise to find my diary among my

things! Then I remembered Chucha scooping it up and stuffing it in my laundry bag.

Ay, how I miss Chucha!

June 13, 1961, Tuesday evening

Tío Pepe says he drove by the compound today and the whole place was crawling with SIM. He heard through Radio Bemba, which is how people are referring to gossip, Radio Big Mouth, that the compound is now a SIM interrogation center. It makes me sick just to think what might be happening in my old bedroom.

What about Chucha? I asked. The thought of anything happening to Chucha . . .

Chucha is fine! Tío Pepe assured me. It seems that the day after he evacuated us, Chucha also left the compound. She wandered into town on foot, to Wimpy's, and has gotten a job there sweeping out the aisles, which is near impossible to believe. But Wimpy is one of Tío Pepe's contacts, so maybe Chucha feels that by being there, she is close to us. Who can tell?

Just the thought of Chucha at Wimpy's makes me smile.

June 14, 1961, Wednesday morning, after breakfast

Poor Tía Mari has to think of meals on top of everything else!

For breakfast, she always fixes Tío Pepe's tray first thing, before the cook is up, and carries it to their bedroom. So that meal is never a problem. Tía Mari just brings some extra waterbreads and marmalade and cheese and a pot of coffee and one of milk, and fresh fruits. She locks the door, and Mami and I slip out of the closet and eat breakfast, taking turns drinking out of one cup while Tía Mari and Tío Pepe share the other one.

As for supper, Tía Mari and Tío Pepe used to eat out in the dining room, but now, with the excuse that they want to listen to the news quietly in their bedroom, they bring their trays in here and we all eat off the two plates.

The problem is the big midday meal, as the family always eats together in the formal dining room. So what Tía Mari does is hide a plastic bag under her napkin on her lap, and she serves herself lots of food and eats slowly so that the little girls and María de los Santos and Oscar are excused long before she is done, and then quick, she scrapes her plate into the bag for us. It's not the most appetizing meal, a bag of mixed-up food, but when I think—which I don't want to—of what Papi and Tío Toni and the other prisoners are eating, I feel grateful and make myself eat so Tía Mari doesn't have to worry about getting rid of leftovers. (Mojo and Maja can only eat so much.)

Tío Pepe likes to tease Tía Mari that she has gotten so good with that plastic bag, if she ever needs a job, the SIM would surely hire her!

June 15, 1961, Thursday evening, already two weeks in hiding!!!

Earlier this afternoon, I was in the bathroom writing and I heard the three little Mariás playing out in the yard. I felt such envy for them, enjoying the warm sun on their skin and the blue sky above.

Then I started thinking how Papi and Tío Toni might not even have a glimpse of sky and fresh air or a bite of food and all my positive thinking went out the window. I stroked my cheek, but that didn't help, either. I burst into tears. So much for the girl who never cried.

Mami caught me crying and began scolding, what is the matter with you, Anita, you're going to have to make an effort, please, you're too old for this.

Which made me cry even more.

Tía Mari pulled me into the bathroom and shut the door and whis-

pered, Anita, you have to understand that your mother is under tremendous pressure, tremendous pressure, and so take that into account, and just keep writing, don't stop. Stay calm. Pray to La Virgencita.

My brave and beautiful niece, she added, hugging me.

June 16, 1961, Friday, after supper

Believe it or not, we get mail here!

Mundín writes out notes that he gives to the ambassador, who gives them to Tío Pepe, then we answer back by reverse method. It seems so strange that we should be writing back and forth when we're only a house away! Mundín won't say where exactly he is hidden in case the note should fall into the wrong hands, but he tells us he is fine, though very worried about Papi and Tío Toni. Today's note was just to me. I guess from his hiding place, Mundín caught a glimpse of María de los Santos sitting on the gallery with some young fellow, and he wants to know what I know.

I couldn't believe that Mundín was thinking about a girlfriend at a time like this!

But then . . . I'm thinking a lot about Oscar! As Chucha would say, the hunchback laughing at the camel's hump!

Tonight at supper, I'll drop a question about María de los Santos and see if the Mancinis volunteer any news of a boyfriend.

Mojo and Maja are making it hard for me to write—they climb up on my lap and chew at my pen. They look like two little waterfalls of hair, with a pink and a blue ribbon tied in a teensy pigtail on top of their heads.

Stay calm, I say to them. Keep writing, I say to myself.

June 17, 1961, Saturday night

Another scene from the movie of my life in hiding:

SETTING: Girl and mother sitting in bedroom with husband and wife who are hiding them. Radio they have been listening to is turned off.

GIRL: (very innocently) How is María de los Santos?

WIFE: Muy bien, she is fine, gracias to La Virgencita María.

GIRL: Does she have a boyfriend?

WIFE: (shaking her head) When hasn't that girl had a boyfriend?

HUSBAND: (looking up from shortwave radio, alarmed) What's this? I didn't know you were allowing María de los Santos to have gentlemen callers.

WIFE: (hand on her hip) Allowing her? Who can tell that girl what to do? And where have you been that you didn't notice? Even the Chinese in Bonao know this.

(Soon, a full-blown disagreement is in progress. Mother and girl slip back into closet, and mother turns on girl.)

MOTHER: Look at what you started, Anita, I hope you're satisfied, such nice people, after all they have done for us.

(Girl keeps her mouth shut—someone has to keep the peace around here!)

June 18, 1961, Sunday, late afternoon, sunny and bright

My least favorite day . . . but today has been tolerable because Tía Mari invited Mami's old canasta friends for a Sunday barbecue. Of course, none of them know we are hiding here. But Mami has been so depressed that Tía Mari thought that just seeing her old friends secretly from the window would lift her spirits. It turns out that the whole canasta group are wives of supporters of the plot.

So why aren't they in hiding, too? I asked Mami.

Their husbands aren't directly involved, Mami explained. And we're in the most trouble because El Jefe was found in the trunk of Papi's Chevy.

Suddenly, it struck me that for a whole night, we were living with a dead body in our garage! It seemed so spooky, as well as dumb. Why would Papi and Tío Toni leave El Jefe's body lying around where the SIM could find it if they searched us?

The plan was to bring Pupo over to the house, Mami explained some more. Pupo had said he wouldn't start the revolution until he saw the dead body.

Usually, Mami starts to cry or gets upset with me when I ask her about all this stuff, but today she was the calmest I've seen her since we came into hiding. We took turns peeking out the high window in the bathroom, standing on the toilet. Mami reported on everyone she saw, Ay, pero Isa has gotten so thin, and look at Maricusa, she's cut her hair, y esa Anny is going to have twins.

When it was my turn, my eye was caught by a young man, off by himself, reading. Suddenly, I realized it was Oscar! Maybe it was from not seeing him for several weeks, but he seemed a lot older and very handsome. I kept watching him, every time I had a turn.

I've decided that I want to read more myself. I've been here almost three weeks now and all I've done is page through Tía Mari's magazines, play cards with Mami, listen to the radio, and write in my diary. Reading would make the time pass and take my mind off gloomy thoughts about what is happening to Papi or Tío Toni or us.

So I asked Tía Mari if she'd get me a book out of our old classroom. Which book? she wanted to know.

I shrugged and told her to get me anything she thought I'd like.

June 19, 1961, Monday night

Tonight, Tía Mari said, oh dear, I keep forgetting to get a book for you from the children's library. Here's one to start. And she gave me this book about the life of the Virgin Mary.

I tried to read some of it, but it was not very interesting.

Instead, I experimented with some new hairdos in the mirror, wondering what Oscar would think of a young lady with her hair pulled back in a ponytail.

June 20, 1961, Tuesday, late night

I talked to Tío Pepe about how I want to read more, and he said it was an excellent idea. He told me all about famous people in prisons and dungeons who did incredible stuff, like this nun way back in colonial times, who I guess wrote tons of poetry in her head, and the Marquis de Sade, who wrote whole novels, and someone else who worked on a dictionary, and another person who came up with some new kind of printing press. It was real inspiring, but not for me. I think I'll just stick to reading some books and writing in my diary.

Tío Pepe said that one thing all these famous prisoners found while they were locked up was that it was important to keep a schedule so as not to go crazy. Right then, remembering how Charlie Price called me crazy, I decided to draw one up and try to follow it every day.

Anita de la Torre's Schedule in Hiding:

MORNING:

Wake Up—Slip out so as not to wake Mami and touch my toes (20 times) and do waist exercises (25), plus the ones that Lucinda taught me so my breasts will grow (do 50 of those).

Shower and Dress—Brush my teeth for at least a minute so as not to end up toothless like Chucha, shampoo hair twice a week, and definitely do not spend the whole day in my pajamas or muumuu! Tío Pepe said the Marquis de Sade put on his powdered wig and morning jacket while he was locked up. Also, British lords used to dress in their white linens in the jungle and look at how long they

ruled the world. I was going to remind Tío Pepe how El Jefe was real finicky about what he wore, too, and look at what a monster he was . . . but I decided I better keep my mouth shut.

During Breakfast—Try to learn one new thing from Tío Pepe, who must be a genius, as he knows about everything and speaks five languages perfectly.

After Breakfast—read good book (once Tía Mari remembers to bring me one), write in diary, try not to be bored, as Tío Pepe says boredom is a sign of the poverty of the mind—definitely do not want that!!!

NOON:

Lunchtime—Try to keep my stomach from growling before Tía Mari comes back with her hidden lunch bag, try to be nice about the eggplant squashed up with the rice and beans and leftover chicken (always dark meat, my least favorite) because, as Mami says, beggars cannot ask for *cebollitas* with their *mangú*. (But I don't like onions with my mashed plantains!) Most of all, try to be nice to Mami.

AFTERNOON:

Free Time—Write in diary, talk with Mami about happy times in past. Tía Mari says this will really help improve her spirits. Try not to think about the tanks we keep hearing rolling down the street or the gunshots from the direction of the national palace, the dead quiet once curfew sounds at six.

NIGHT:

Eat Dinner—Usually the best meal, as Tío Pepe has to have his pasta once a day, which is my favorite food, too. Tío Pepe says I must have Italian blood in me. And, of course, that gets Mami and Tía Mari started on the Family Tree.

After Dinner—Listen to Radio Swan, try not to think of the sad

news, of the 7,000 arrests, of the bodies thrown off cliffs to the sharks, of the army generals in their tanks shooting at neighborhoods where they think people are hiding, and instead . . . think positively! Join in discussions, think positively! Write in diary, look through Tía Mari's magazines, anything to avoid bad thoughts that might drive me crazy.

Sleep—Lights out around 10 P.M., but I can stay up in the bathroom reading or writing, provided—Mami does love a lecture—that I am very quiet, so as not to bother the Mancinis. Listen politely, try not to roll eyes and make disgusted face at Mami when she gives this lecture every night.

Before Going to Sleep—Think about Tío Toni and Papi on the beach, try not to think of bodies thrown into the sea, think positively, think of the sand and wind in my hair, and Papi saying, Fly, and Tío Toni laughing as they swing me up in the air.

X X X X X
X X X X

(one mark for each day I missed writing in my diary!!!)

June 30, 1961, Friday, bathroom, very hot night

I know, I know, it's been nine days and I haven't written a word.

I just couldn't after the fright we had the night I wrote up my schedule.

What happened was just awful!!! I was getting ready to cross back from the bathroom to the closet to bed when I heard someone moving around in the yard. The night watchman had already made his rounds at 10 P.M. or so, and this was after 11 P.M.

So I woke up Mami, who "never sleeps a wink," but I always seem to find her fast asleep, and we woke up the Mancinis, who turned Mojo and Maja loose on the gallery, and they scampered off and down the steps into the yard, barking and growling, and then there were gunshots, and Tía Mari was screaming from the gallery, MOJO! MAJA! but no answer, and Tío Pepe was trying to drag her back inside, while also hurrying into his dressing gown as there was now loud knocking downstairs at the front door.

We went into emergency procedure—Mami and I slipped into the bathroom closets and back into the crawl space—one of the boards is loose and it made a terrible Whack!!! sound—scared us half to death! We waited for what must have been 20 minutes but seemed forever. My heart was pounding so loud, I thought surely it could be heard throughout the house, and then, oh my God, I remembered I had left my diary on the back of the toilet when I rushed to the closet to wake up Mami! I didn't dare sneak out to get it and I didn't dare tell Mami because she would just die of one of her nerve attacks right then and there.

In a little while, Tío Pepe was back, and we all sat on the floor of the closet, and Tío Pepe told us the story.

The SIM had come to the door to say they had been called by the embassy because there were intruders on the grounds. (A lie!) It turned out the SIM agent in charge recognized Tío Pepe, whose brother-in-law, Dr. Mella, had saved his little daughter's life after a ruptured appendix. Anyhow, when Tío Pepe invited them inside to search the house, this grateful man said that would be unnecessary. Tío Pepe stood talking to them a little longer at the door and then they left.

Tía Mari quieted while Tío Pepe told the story, but then she started to cry again about Mojo and Maja.

The next morning, the night watchman reported the two dead dogs. Poor Tía Mari was just crying and crying. Mami and I felt terrible,

as it was our fault that this happened. And I felt doubly terrible leaving my diary out in the open! What if the SIM had come in and found it there? I could have cost us our lives on account of my carelessness.

For days, I wasn't able to write a single word. The third radio was turned off. But then, I started thinking, if I stop now, they've really won. They've taken away everything, even the story of what is happening to us.

So, tonight, I picked up my pen and, sure enough, I've been writing my heart out even if my hand is shaking.

July 1, 1961, Saturday morning

Two resolutions for the new month:

#1: Try to write something every day!

#2: Keep diary hidden at all times!!! At night under my mat, and during the day when we roll up the mats, in the pocket of Tía Mari's fur coat that she wears when she travels to cold countries. It's become so much me that finding it would be like finding me. So it's got to be a diary in hiding.

When I write in it, I feel as if I've got a set of wings, and I'm flying over my life and looking down and thinking, Anita, it's not as bad as you think.

July 2, 1961, Sunday afternoon

Another dreary Sunday, worrying about Papi. It's been over a month since I saw him. Sometimes I find myself forgetting what he even looks like, and then I feel bad, like my forgetfulness means he is gone forever.

When I get this way, I don't care about following my schedule or writing in my diary or daydreaming about Oscar. All I want to do is lie on my mat in the closet. Mami gets upset with me.

Come on, Anita, she scolds. You can't lie around all day. Who do you think you are, the Queen of Sheba?

Queen of the Walk-in Closet is more like it.

July 3, 1961, Monday night

The little Mariás gave us such a scare this afternoon. Tía Mari was out doing grocery shopping at Wimpy's, and she must have thought she locked up her bedroom door as usual, but she hadn't. Mami and I were in the walk-in closet, with the door open for some ventilation and light, playing concentration, being quiet but not especially careful, when suddenly we heard the little girls coming into the bedroom.

Mami's going to be mad, one of them was saying—I couldn't tell which one.

She is not! said another. She won't even know.

Then there were sounds of opening drawers, and giggles, and one of them saying, you put on too much. They were at the vanity, trying on the lipsticks and perfumes, which I've done in my own mami's bedroom countless times.

Look what you did! You spilled it.

Then one of them said, Let's go see Mami's bear, which is the way they refer to their mother's fur coat hanging in this closet.

Mami and I froze. Our concentration game was spread out on the floor. We had no time to pick it up or cross over to the bathroom closets, so we just backed in among the clothes.

Suddenly, we heard someone else coming into the room. What are you girls doing? You know you're not supposed to be in here. It was Oscar! I hadn't heard his voice in so long. It sounded deeper, more like a man's voice than a boy's.

The little girls scrambled off, but curious Oscar stayed on, looking around. Soon the steps came around the corner and into the narrow

hall, and then Oscar stepped inside the closet and ran his hand over the hanging suits and dresses, then stopped cold. Something had caught his eye. Very quietly, he backed out of the closet and shut the door.

Mami and I stayed hidden until we heard Tía Mari coming back. Virgen María! she cried. I believe I left the door unlocked.

On the floor of the closet, our concentration game was undisturbed—all the center cards facedown. But one card had been turned over: the queen of hearts!

July 4, 1961, Tuesday early morning

Before breakfast, I heard a little pebble strike the window of the bathroom. Then another. I didn't dare look out just in case. But when a third went ping!, curiosity got the better of me, and I peeked out the high window—

Oscar was standing in the yard, looking up. I ducked down before he saw me.

Later

I've been wondering if Oscar did see me?

So just now, I took the queen of hearts, slipped it out the window, and watched it sailing down to the yard below.

July 5, 1961, Wednesday, after siesta

Yesterday being the day of independence for the United States, Wimpy had a barbecue behind his store. The Mancinis were invited. Tío Pepe says that Wimpy knows where we are and is doing all he can to ensure our safety, whatever that means.

Was Chucha there? I asked Tía Mari.

Was she there! She and Oscar would not stop talking.

I touched the spot on my cheek, trying to calm myself down. But

my imagination has been going wild. Could they have been talking about . . . me?

Oscar was again outside early this morning, looking up!

July 6, 1961, Thursday evening news

This evening, a surprise: Tía Mari brought me *The Arabian Nights*, which has to be one of my all-time favorite storybooks. When she saw the smile on my face, she said, So he was right.

It turns out Tía Mari asked Oscar this morning what book he might recommend for someone about his age, and he pulled this one out.

I opened the book, and there it was as a bookmark—the queen of hearts!

July 7, 1961, Friday night

Just knowing that I might have a secret communication going with Oscar makes every day brighter. I'm spending a lot more time in the bathroom, trying out hairstyles.

This afternoon, Mami saw me fussing and said, Who's going to see you here, for heaven's sake, Anita?

My face burned. Of course, she's right. But still, I told her what Tío Pepe had said about the Marquis de Sade. Mami just answered with one of Chucha's sayings: Dress the monkey in silk, he's still a monkey!

During supper tonight, Tío Pepe got into a long explanation about how human beings aren't using their full potential. If the brain were this plate, he said, we're using this grain of rice. Einstein maybe used this wedge of avocado. Galileo, this yuca patty.

(To think how much potential I'm wasting combing my hair and wondering if I'm pretty enough!)

How do you know when you're using your full potential? I asked Tío Pepe. But before he could get a word out, Tía Mari said, I'll tell you

when you're using your full brain power—when you're smart enough to eat your supper before it gets cold. That made even Tío Pepe smile and dig in.

July 8, 1961, Saturday evening

Reading *The Arabian Nights* again has started me thinking . . . can stuff like this really happen? A girl who saves her life by telling a cruel sultan a bunch of stories? Let's say El Jefe had taken me away to his big bedroom, like he wanted to do with Lucinda. Could I have told him some stories that would have changed his evil heart? Or are some people so awful that nothing can really get inside them and make a difference?

I asked Tío Pepe, and he said that is the million-dollar question. He said many great thinkers like Knee-chi (sp??) and Hide-digger (sp???) tried but never came up with a satisfactory answer (and they were working with a lot bigger plate of brains than I am).

Tía Mari has promised to ask Oscar for another book recommendation.

July 9, 1961, Sunday, late afternoon

Mami and I have been alone all day, as the Mancinis went to the beach to visit friends. They shut up the house and sent all the servants away. The place is so creepy and quiet. And of course, every little noise scares us.

Mami and I played cards for a while, and then we went into the bathroom, and Mami herself put my hair up in a bun like a ballerina and made me up with a little lipstick and rouge.

Mami, I asked as we studied the results in the mirror, do you think I look just the tiniest bit like Audrey Hepburn?

Much prettier, Mami said.

She couldn't have said anything nicer! I forgave her all her nerve

attacks and how she hasn't said one nice thing to me in ages. I turned around and gave her a bone-crunching hug.

Watch you don't break something, Mami said, laughing, I can't exactly go to the doctor's right now.

Later, Sunday night

Tía Mari came back from the beach with some seashells Oscar and the little girls collected.

I picked one to take with me to the closet, a shiny spiral with brown freckles. But then I remembered how Chucha used to say girls who keep seashells die old maids, and I took it back to Tía Mari and said, Keep this for me until I'm married.

She looked a little surprised.

Tío Pepe just returned from the embassy next door with some exciting news—Mundín is going to be evacuated soon! It seems there is an Italian cruise ship in the harbor headed for Miami. The ambassador was hoping to get us all on board, but the captain said he could only take one mysterious passenger, as more would be too high a risk in view of how the SIM are carefully monitoring all ports of exit.

Mami is worried about Mundín and whether the transfer will go okay, and that starts her worrying about Papi and Tío Toni. She isn't sleeping as well anymore, as she doesn't have any Equanil left. Tía Mari says that the drugstores are all out. It seems the whole country is taking tranquilizers.

July 11, 1961, Tuesday night

Last night, as we lay on our mats in the closet, Mami started telling me stories about growing up on a sugar estate where her father was the resident doctor. It was like old times again, when we used to get along so well.

The best story was about when she turned fifteen, and her parents threw her a big quinceañera party. She wore a long white dress like a bride's and a tiara of sugar flowers made especially for her by the plantation pastry cook.

When the party was over, Mami really wanted to save that crown, but her little brother Edilberto found that sweet crown and sucked off the sugar rosettes. All that was left was the wire frame!

You laugh now, Mami laughed, but I cried as if he'd eaten up my heart.

Speaking of queens, Mami said, I don't know if you remember how six years ago, El Jefe's daughter was crowned Queen Angelita I? You were just a little girl, but when you saw her in the papers wearing that ridiculous silk gown that cost 80,000 dollars, you said, Mami, is that our queen? And I didn't know what to say because the help was all around, and so I said, we don't actually have a royal family here, but Angelita was made into a queen by her father. And for a while afterward when we asked you what you wanted for your birthday or for Christmas or Vieja Belén or Los Tres Reyes Magos, you'd say you wanted your father to make you a queen.

And so for your next birthday, you remember? Your father made you a marshmallow crown. You wore that thing all day long in the sun, you wouldn't take it off, and those soft marshmallows began to melt on your hair. We had a time washing them out.

The thought of Papi made us both fall silent. I lay in the dark, remembering Papi and Tío Toni, walking on the beach with me, and the sand and the wind, and Tío Toni joking, Let's throw her in, and Papi holding on tight and laughing—

I reached out for Mami's hand just as she was reaching out for mine.

July 12, 1961, Wednesday night

Wimpy and Mr. Washburn have been trying to do all they can. But Papi's name and Tío Toni's were not listed among those of the prisoners the OAS interviewed when they came. I don't need Mami to tell me that's not a good sign.

I heard some of the stories the prisoners told during those interviews. Mami and the Mancinis were listening to the OAS report on Radio Swan tonight. They thought I was writing in my diary in the bathroom, but I was still in the hallway. The announcer read out passages, his voice matter-of-fact, but the facts themselves were horrible.

Prisoners complained about how their fingernails were pulled out, their eyes sewn open. About being put on an electric chair called the Throne and given shocks so they would tell who else was involved. About how one of them was fed a steak, only to find out it was the flesh of his own son.

For the first time in a long time, I slipped my little crucifix in my mouth and said an Our Father. Then I went in the bathroom and threw up my supper.

July 13, 1961, Thursday night

What a surprise!

We were out in the bedroom with the Mancinis, listening to the news, when there was a knock: the maid announcing that the Mancinis had visitors.

Who is it? Tía Mari asked through the locked door.

El embajador with a lady, the maid replied.

Tía Mari and Tío Pepe were not expecting the ambassador, and so of course they suspected a SIM trick. We instantly went into emergency procedure.

A little later, we heard Tía Mari coming back into the bedroom with

someone else. We heard her locking the bedroom door. Then she came into the bathroom and said, it's okay. You can come out now.

So we crept out of the crawl-space closets, thinking the other person was Tío Pepe or the ambassador himself, but as Mami and I headed out, there was a blond girl sitting on Tía Mari's bed with her back to us.

We hurried back to the bathroom.

But Tía Mari called, come on out here, somebody wants to see you.

Mami and I were shocked. We all know that we are not to show our faces to anyone, except our two hosts.

Tía Mari appeared at the door of the bathroom with this blond girl wearing sunglasses and a dress that you could tell she didn't much like by the way she was looking down, disgusted at herself. Then she glanced up with the most familiar eyes in the world.

Mundín! Mami cried out.

Hush! Tía Mari said, laughing. So it works, she said. I told el embajador that the best test would be if his own mother and sister didn't recognize him.

Mundín was on his way to the boat. He hugged us good-bye. I'm not all that happy about this, he said, and I don't mean the disguise. I mean leaving you. Papi always said if anything should happen—

He stopped when Mami started to cry.

Tía Mari let me walk with Mundín to the door of the bedroom. With every step, I felt my heart falling apart, like that torture I heard about on the radio where a man was slowly cut up alive.

Mundín turned to me, and they say boys don't cry, so maybe it was because he was dressed as a girl, but there were tears in my big brother's eyes.

As for me, I was sobbing so hard, I could barely breathe.

July 15, 1961, Saturday morning

Mami and I stayed up late last night talking. Earlier, we had been listening to Radio Swan, and the announcer closed the program by saying, ¡Que Vivan Las Mariposas! Long Live the Butterflies!

That must have got Mami thinking about Papi because she started talking about the old days and how Papi and my uncles became involved in the underground movement against the dictator.

After your father came back from college in the States, Mami explained, he got so busy working and raising his own family that he didn't pay much attention to politics. Mami was whispering real low, so as not to disturb the Mancinis. I had to roll to the very edge of my mat to hear her.

But things began to go from bad to worse. Our friends were disappearing. One of your uncles was arrested. But we didn't know what to do.

Then we heard about these sisters who were organizing a movement to bring freedom to the country. Everyone called them Las Mariposas, the Butterflies, because they had put wings on all our hearts.

Some of your uncles, like Tío Carlos and Tío Toni, joined right away, Mami went on. But Papi held back, afraid to risk all our lives.

Somehow, the SIM found out about the movement. They started arresting people, and their families, torturing them, and getting more and more names. Mamita and Papito and your uncles got out while they could. Tío Carlos made it just in time.

As for the Butterflies, they were ambushed and murdered on a lonely mountain road, their car thrown over a cliff to make it all look like an accident.

And it was then that your father and I took up the torch of the Butterflies and began the struggle again.

I couldn't believe my own mother with her bad nerves was part of

a secret plot! But suddenly, like one of those lamps you click one more turn and it throws an even brighter light, I saw her at Papi's old Remington, typing up declarations, or out in the yard, burning incriminating stuff, or in the garden shed, covering a sack of guns with an old tarp. My Joan-of-Arc mother, my Butterfly mami! I felt so proud of her!

Mami went on telling about how the movement spread all over the country. Everyone was joining up. Papi contacted Wimpy and Mr. Farland, whom he knew from his college days, and the Americans agreed to help them. Some other men even persuaded General Pupo to join the plot. The General said that once he had proof that El Jefe was out of the way, he, Pupo, would take control of the government and hold free elections.

But then, things started to fall apart, Mami said. She sounded like one of those wind-up toys winding down. Washington got cold feet. The night of the ajusticiamiento, no one could find Pupo. The SIM moved in fast.

The end, Mami finished. Her voice was barely a whisper.

I closed my eyes, remembering the promise Papi wanted me to make, and I thought, No, Mami, not the end. Long live the Butterflies!

July 17, 1961, Monday, late night

As we were getting ready for bed tonight, Tía Mari said, Oh yes, I almost forgot. Chucha came up to me at Wimpy's today and said something I didn't quite understand. All three of us were in the bathroom, brushing our teeth. We have to do all our noise simultaneously.

She said to tell you to get ready to use your wings again.

Mami looked surprised. I thought no one but you and Wimpy knew we were here.

Believe me, Tía Mari said, I didn't let on. But she followed me all through the store and then out to the car. And again, she said the same

thing. I said, Chucha, I don't know what you're talking about. And she just gave me that look of hers and then she took this out of her pocket.

It was a holy card of San Miguel lifting his huge wings above the slain dragon.

My heart has a pair of wings, too—one wing fluttering with excitement because maybe we'll soon be free! The other shaking with fear because I don't really want to be free without Papi and Tío Toni.

July 18, 1961, Tuesday night

I'm using my little flashlight Tía Mari gave me, as the electricity is out again all over the capital today. Tío Pepe's theory is that it's a SIM sabotage, one more reason to roll out the army tanks.

We are all feeling very hopeful, as there is a rally planned for tomorrow. There was also a letter that took up a whole page in the paper, stating the rights of man, and signed with a lot of important people's names.

Tío Pepe says this is our Magna Carta, and I'm so glad I was paying attention that day in history class so I don't have to ask what that is.

July 19, 1961, Wednesday—we can hear the rally going on, shouts of LIBERTAD!

There is a very small chance, very small, Tío Pepe says, holding his thumb and forefinger so close they almost seem to be touching, that we might be able to get on a private flight that will be taking a bunch of Americans to Florida. Wimpy has been trying to work it so that Mami and I can board that plane at the last minute.

Suddenly, the thought of leaving our hideaway is scary.

Tío Pepe once told me about this experiment with monkeys who were caged for so long that when the doors were left open, they wouldn't come out.

I wonder what it will be like to be free? Not to need wings because you don't need to fly away from your country?

July 20, 1961, Thursday

Oscar and I have a secret language of books going. So far, he has picked out El Pequeño Príncipe, Poesías de José Martí, Cuentos de Shakespeare para Niños, The Swiss Family Robinson. When I'm done with each book, I give it back to Tía Mari with the queen of hearts card back in it.

Then, when the next book arrives, sure enough, there's the queen of hearts bookmark!

What will become of Oscar and me? I wonder if there'll be a movie about us, like Romeo and Juliet? I just hope and pray our story has a happier ending!

July 28, 1961, Friday, another rally on the street

Because of all these rallies, the SIM have started arresting people again and conducting their house-to-house searches.

We are on the alert from Wimpy that our evacuation might be sooner rather than later. The problem is how to move us to an undisclosed location where we can take a flight to freedom.

The Mancinis are trying to figure something out.

There have been no more book deliveries. On Monday, Tía Mari sent the girls and Oscar and Doña Margot away to their friends with the beach house. Because of the rallies, there's lots of gunfire and massive arrests. Several bullets came through our old classroom window that faces the street. Thank goodness the children were already out of the house. Tía Mari refuses to go in there.

Mami and I are getting on each other's nerves again with all the

tension. I try to do my pacing where she isn't doing hers, but there's not much room inside a closet.

It's hard to concentrate on anything, even writing in my diary. I haven't had the energy to keep to my schedule.

Tía Mari suggests we entertain ourselves playing cards, but when Mami sorts through the deck, she says, What on earth happened to the queen of hearts?

July 30, 1961, Sunday—most BORING day so far!

This morning, the Mancinis drove out to the beach for the day to see the kids, so it has been like a tomb around here. All I've done is read and nap and look at magazines and eat the leftover waterbreads from breakfast, and now I'm going to try to write—

We're in the crawl space—and I'm scribbling down this note by flashlight just in case anyone finds this diary—

—There was a huge roar in the backyard like a plane landing—now a crashing sound at the downstairs door—

Oh my god—they're coming through the house!!!!

My hand is shaking so hard—but I want to leave this record just so the world knows—

Freedom Cry

"Anita, *por favor*," Mami calls from the other room. "Turn that thing off."

I'm sitting in front of the television at the Hotel Beverly, where my grandparents have been renting an apartment on the top floor. We've been in New York City already over a month and a half. I mark off every day on the calendar. Today, I made such a heavy x that I tore through the paper. September 18, 1961, isn't even over, but it's already gone!

The days are getting cooler. Down on the street, ten flights below, the little toy trees are beginning to turn reddish, like someone is lighting a match to them.

Every time I get a chance, I watch TV. I tell Mami that I want to learn more about this country. But really, I just want to keep my mind off everything I could be worrying about right now.

Like the phone call Mami is about to make from the other room. Twice a week, she calls Mr. Washburn in Washington to find out if there's any news about Papi and my uncle. We all sit around—my grandparents, Mamita and Papito, Lucinda and Mundín and me—watching the reactions on her face.

"With Mr. Washburn, *por favor*," I hear Mami saying. I go up

to the television to turn it off, and just then, she comes on, the only Spanish lady I've ever seen on TV. There's also a Cuban guy called Ricky Ricardo, who has a wacky American wife who reminds me of Mrs. Washburn. This lady carries a big basket of bananas on her head like the *marchantas* in the market calling out their wares.

I turn down the volume and sing along under my breath.

The first time I saw her, I couldn't believe what she was saying: "*I'm Anita Banana and I'm here to stay.*"

"NO!" I screamed at the TV and clapped my hands over my ears. "I am not staying, I am not staying!"

Lucinda ran into the room. "*¿Qué pasa?* What on earth are you screaming about, Anita?" Thank goodness Mami and Mamita and Papito were out with Mundín, getting him a winter jacket, otherwise my screaming would have shot their fragile nerves. "You want us to get thrown out of here?"

I nodded and then shook my head. Of course I didn't want to get thrown out and sent back to live in a closet. But I wanted the dictatorship to be over so we could go home to live as a family again. "The lady," I said, pointing to the silent screen.

"What about her?" Lucinda asked, turning the volume back up. She watched the rest of the commercial. "You're crying about her?"

"No, not about her, about what she said." I explained the lady's prediction as if the television were a crystal ball.

Lucinda let out one of her long-suffering sighs. "Ay, Anita, that's not what she's saying." Lucinda swirled her hips, imitating the lady. "She's saying Chiquita Banana, not Anita Banana and she's here to say, not stay!"

I guess my nerves were pretty shot, too.

I'm still seeing ghosts and signs everywhere. And Chucha isn't around to help me interpret them.

"I am so sorry to be molesting you, Mr. Washburn," Mami is saying as I come in the room. Lucinda has explained to her that *molestar* does not mean *bother* in English as it does in Spanish. But Mami says how is she supposed to remember all the crazy ways the Americans have changed Spanish around. Sometimes, sad as I am, even I have to smile at Mami.

"Yes, yes, I understand, yes, Mr. Washburn," Mami is saying. With each yes, I can hear her voice getting weaker. Her knuckles are bone-white from holding the receiver so tight. "No news is good news. You are right. We are so much in gratitude to you," she says at the end.

"Nothing," Mami says quietly after she hangs up. "They're trying to put pressure on Trujillo Junior to leave the country. Then the prisoners will be released. We just have to keep hoping and praying," she adds more cheerfully. She doesn't sound very convinced.

"¡Exactamente!" my grandfather agrees, trying to inject confidence into all of us. But my grandmother begins weeping. "Mis pobres hijos, mi pobre país." Her poor sons, her poor country!

Lucinda joins in, and before long, Mami and I are also crying. Mundín hurries off to the bathroom, where I'm sure he cries, too.

My grandfather puts on his overcoat and heads for the drug-store to get my grandmother some more of her blood-pressure medicine.

I want to go with him, but I can't because it's sort of illegal that we're staying in their rooms with them, as they would have to pay

more. Papito has told the doorman who's Puerto Rican that ours is "a temporary situation," and the doorman says he understands, just to be *discretos*. So we try to be discreet and go out one by one, so it doesn't look like we know each other but are just separate people staying in the hotel rooms on the lower floors.

I go stand by the window and watch for Papito to come out downstairs, an old man in a Panama hat—one of the few familiar faces in this country where the only people we know are the ones who came with us.

The day we were surprised in our hiding place, I had no idea that it would be my good-bye to my country. I actually thought the SIM had discovered us and it was good-bye to my life.

That's why, scared as I was, I kept writing in my diary. I wanted someone to know what had happened to us.

But when the crawl-space doors were thrown open, it was Wimpy and his paratroopers coming to the rescue! The Mancinis, who were away at the beach, didn't even know that the airlift would be that day. A number of things had to fall in place for our evacuation, and that Sunday, July 30, they came together at the last minute.

I had been about to stash away my diary under a loose board. But Wimpy grabbed me and picked me up, and the diary came away with me in my hand. An unmarked helicopter was waiting on the embassy grounds to airlift us out, and there wasn't a minute to spare. Outside on the streets, an angry rally was going on, and the SIM were too busy with crowd control to notice a dragonfly helicopter flying by with a terrified mother and daughter inside.

North of the city, we landed on an abandoned airstrip, where a cargo plane was waiting. A van drove up with some other people,

some of whom I recognized. Wimpy helped everyone climb on board, a grim look on his face, his eagle tattoo pumping away. As our plane took off, I glanced out the window at the cracked tarmac and the swaying palms waving good-bye, and I thought I saw a flash of purple getting back into the van with Wimpy.

We flew higher and higher, over green valleys and dark, ridged mountains, and then over the coast, waves breaking on the white sands. Miles below, Oscar was in one of those tiny beach houses . . . maybe looking up! How long before he returned home? Would he realize right away that I was no longer hidden in his parents' closet, using his queen of hearts to mark my place in *The Swiss Family Robinson*?

So many people and places I might not ever get to see again! Looking down, I saw a quilt of faces and memories spreading out over the sea—Monsito carrying our sack of *plátanos* in his wheelbarrow, Tío Pepe with his white socks, Porfirio watering the ginger plants while singing his sad songs—and the purple thread stitching piece to piece was Chucha, my dear Chucha, who had helped me survive this year of my life falling apart!

I stared out the window, too shocked even to cry, until we climbed into the clouds and there was nothing else to see. A little while later, I leaned against Mami and fell asleep.

When she shook me awake, it was dark outside the plane. We had landed. Somehow, I stumbled in my half-sleep across a runway, Mami holding on to me, to a bigger airplane taking us to New York City.

The next I knew, I was looking down at the view I had seen on the postcards Lucinda used to send us that left even Chucha speechless—buildings so tall that I couldn't quite believe they were real, and patches of green like scatter rugs, and tiny antlike people whom I could blot out just by putting my hand on the small

square of the window. How could I live in this world full of strangers and gray light instead of a country of cousins and family and family friends and year-round sunshine?

We landed and entered a terminal where officials took us into a room to issue us special papers. Then one of them shook our hands and said, "Welcome to the United States of America," and pointed us out of Immigration. And there was my answer to how I would survive in this strange, new world: My family was waiting for us—Mundín and Lucinda, my grandparents, Carla, her sisters, and Tía Laura and Tío Carlos and Tía Mimí—all of them calling out, "Anita! Carmen!" Carla says my face was worth a thousand bucks as the family rushed forward and locked us in their arms.

By the end of September, we still have no news of Papi and Tío Toni. The Garcías have invited us to move out to their house in Queens, but Mami won't hear of it. Any day now, we will be returning home. The *campo* suburbs are for those who have decided to settle down in the United States, like the Garcías. New York City is where you stay on your way back to where you came from.

While we are waiting around, Mami decides that we should learn perfect English. Lucinda already is a pro from being here since February, but Mundín and I could use practice. "Papi will be so pleased!" she says excitedly. There is an uneasy silence when she says these things. But I so want to believe her that I'll do anything, *anything* that might help make this happen.

Mami goes to a nearby Catholic school and asks the principal if we can sit in on any class till we go back home. The principal is a nun with a bonnet like a baby doll, except it's black. She is a Sister of Charity, and maybe that is why she is so kind and says yes, she will put us wherever there is a spot.

The next day, I don't think she is so kind. I am sitting at a small desk in the second grade, the only elementary classroom that had extra space. The teacher, Sister Mary Joseph, has a sweet face with pale whiskers and watery blue eyes as if she is always in tears. Her breath is musty, like an old suitcase that hasn't been opened in years.

"Annie is a very special student," she tells the class, "a refugee from a dictatorship." When she says this, I stare down at the wooden floor and try not to cry.

"She came here with her family in order to be free," Sister Mary Joseph is explaining. But my family is not all here, I feel like saying. And how can I be free when my mind is all worried about Papi and my whole self is so sad, I can barely get up some mornings?

"Would you like to tell the class a little something about the Dominican Republic?" the old nun prompts me.

Where do I begin telling strangers about a place whose smell is on my skin and whose memory is always in my head? To them, it's just a geography lesson; to me, it's home. Besides, talking about my country would make me too sad right now. I stand in front of this roomful of staring little kids, not saying a single word. At the very least I should show them that I can speak their language, so they don't think I'm a complete moron who is almost thirteen and still in the second grade.

"Thank you," I murmur, "for letting me into your country."

Sister Mary Joseph gives me an assignment to do on my own. I am to write a composition about what I remember from my native country.

"Maybe it'll be easier to write down memories rather than just think on your feet," she suggests. She shows me how I'm supposed to make a little cross at the top of each page, and then print the initials *J.M.J.*, dedicating my work to Jesus, Mary, and Joseph.

Below, on the first line, I am to put my own name, which she writes out as *Annie Torres*, and the date, October 4, 1961.

I bend to my work, make my little cross on top of a clean page, dedicating my composition to *J.M.J.* But then, I add *M.T. & A.T., Mundo and Antonio de la Torre*.

"What's that?" Sister Mary Joseph says, peering over my shoulder.

"My father and my uncle." I point to each set of initials.

She is about to protest, but then her watery blue eyes get even more watery. "I am so sorry," she whispers—as if Papi and Tío Toni are dead!

"I will be seeing them soon," I explain.

"Of course you will, dear," Sister Mary Joseph says, nodding. Today, her breath smells like the sachets my grandmother sticks in her underwear drawer.

As the class goes over cursive letters, I work on my assignment. At first I can't think of what to say, but then I pretend I'm writing in my diary again. Soon I'm filling page after page, making lists of people and foods and places I miss, describing them using metaphors like Mrs. Brown taught us. I also write down my favorites of Chucha's sayings:

With patience and calm, even a burro can climb a palm.

Dress the monkey in silk, he's still a monkey.

You can't dry yesterday's laundry with tomorrow's sun.

As I write, I can almost hear Chucha at my side whispering, "Fly! Fly free!" Those were the last words she ever spoke to me. But how can I be really free without Papi in my life? If something happens to him, then the part that is the wings in me would die.

When I hand in my composition, Sister Mary Joseph reads it over, marking pencil in hand. I stand by her big desk, watching her

pencil dip down, correcting my mistakes. She chuckles when she gets to the page with Chucha's sayings.

"Very good," she remarks, although the pages are full of little red marks.

By the end of October, Papi is still in prison and Trujillo Junior is still in power. He is getting crazier with revenge and refuses to cooperate with the Americans, so even Mr. Washburn doesn't have a whole lot of details. I decide to write to Oscar, who always seemed to know about everything, and ask him what he knows.

I've tried writing him before. But every time I sat down, I felt a wave of homesickness, and I had to put the letter away.

But this time, I have a mission, though I've got to be extra careful on account of the censors. I start out telling him all about *Nueva York*; how cold it's gotten and how uncomfortable it is to wear so many heavy clothes; how the people don't smile a whole lot, so you can't really tell if they like you or not; how I am in school learning lots of English (I leave out the part about second grade); how my teacher, Sister Mary Joseph, is making me write down stories like the girl in *The Arabian Nights*; how she did a whole geography segment on the island, and Mami fried *pastelitos* for me to take in, which everyone liked a lot. I mix in the good and the bad and sometimes, I admit, when there's not much good to report, I make some things up.

Then, very casually, I slip in, "*How are things in the sultan's court?*" I underline *sultan's*, but then I erase my underlining, in case it is too obvious a clue.

I give the letter to my grandfather to mail because I don't really want Mami to know I'm writing to a boy, even if he is my cousin. But Papito looks at the address on the envelope and explains that

no mail is getting through. The country is all closed up, just like this place called Berlin, where an iron curtain has come down that keeps people from going in or getting out.

I take the letter back and tear it up into lots of little pieces. Then I open the window and watch them fall, a sprinkle of white to the ground below. Some of the people on the street look up. Maybe they think it's snowing? The García girls out in Queens have told me all about winter in this country. By Christmas, they've promised, I'll get to see the snow.

"I won't be here by then," I keep telling them.

But as each day goes by, and the leaves all fall off like the trees have some disease, and October turns into November, I wonder if I'm going to be here for a lot longer than just the first snowfall of this year.

Often, on the way home from school, I'll stop at the grocery store for a visit. No matter how sad I am, every time I step in front of the door and it opens by itself, I feel a rush of excitement like I'm back at Wimpy's. I love to walk down the aisles, half expecting I'll find Chucha with the big feather duster the stock boy uses to clean the shelves. I can't believe all the boxes and brands. Soups and sauces, cans of this and cans of that, a dozen different cereals, tons of candies. Even the animals in this country get lots of choices. Six kinds of cat food! What would Monsito say about that?!

Today, I don't know what gets into me, but instead of just looking, I decide to take a cart. I go up and down each aisle, filling the basket with things I really like, pretending I have the money to buy them. When I'm done with all the aisles, the basket is piled so high, I can barely see over it. I head back the way I came, carefully putting everything back in its place.

Suddenly, a big, chesty man is barreling down the aisle toward me. He wears a white apron like a butcher and his face looks like a raw piece of meat, pinkish and maybe angry. I can't tell for sure with American faces what they are feeling, but I would say this man looks angry.

I try to act like I'm old enough to be grocery-shopping by myself. In a month, I'll be turning thirteen. Last week, a lady in the elevator at the hotel guessed I was fourteen! My baby face is sinking down to the past and a new face is coming to the surface, with my grandmother's slightly turned-up nose and my father's deep-set eyes and my mother's coffee-with-milk-color skin. I guess the only thing that is all mine is the scar above my left eye, where *Mundín* once hit me with a pellet from a BB gun he had aimed at the sky.

The man stops directly in front of my cart like a roadblock. "Do you have the money to buy all this, young lady?" His tone of voice suggests that he knows I don't.

I make the mistake of looking into his glaring eyes. In their harsh light, I am sure it shows that I am not one hundred percent certain I should be doing what I am doing. I stammer out a barely audible, "Sí, señor," too scared at the moment to be able to speak in a second language.

"Don't you understand English?" he says, taking hold of my arm.

I'm about to tell him I do, but already he is yanking me to the front of the store and out the opening door to the sidewalk. Some people walking by turn their heads to look.

"I don't want you coming back without an adult, you hear me?" He is patting me all up and down checking to see if I've taken something.

At first, I just stand there, ashamed, submitting to his search as

if I've done something wrong. But when he slaps his big hand on my chest, I cry out, "I wasn't doing anything! This is a free country!" Actually, I'm not really sure this is true. Maybe this is a free country only for Americans? Maybe if a policeman happens by, my whole family will be deported home, where we'll all be killed by the dictator's son?

This thought is so terrifying that it's as if I have Superman strength. I wrench myself free from the man's grasp and take off running down the block, turning left, then right, trying to lose anyone who might be following me to the Beverly. When I get to the hotel, I rush past the American doorman, who is not as friendly as the Puerto Rican, and around the revolving door into the lobby, where, rather than wait for the elevator, I race up the stairs two at a time to the tenth floor, my heart pounding so hard, I'm sure it's going to explode.

I stop before our door, trying to catch my breath and calm the wild panic that I'm sure shows on my face. Inside, I hear my grandmother crying. Mami has probably just finished one of her twice-a-week calls to Mr. Washburn in Washington.

Part of me wants to avoid going in and facing even more sad news. But the terror of deportation is bigger than a disappointment I'm becoming used to. So, I knock very lightly, and call out in a little voice, "Soy yo." It's just me.

Mundín opens the door, his face so drained and pale that I'm sure the police have somehow tracked me down and my family is in deep trouble.

I start crying. "I wasn't doing anything wrong."

Mundín takes my hand. "Mr. Washburn is here," he says in a flat voice, like a bulldozer has just run over it.

As I follow my brother into the main room, I'm puzzling over

how Mr. Washburn could have gotten here all the way from Washington to deport us when the grocery store incident just happened? Maybe he was already in New York? Maybe the grocery store man had planned an ambush beforehand with the State Department? But even as I entertain these farfetched possibilities, I know that I'm just trying *not* to think of the obvious reason Mr. Washburn would be here, a reason more horrible than any angry store manager or policeman coming to report me for getting into trouble.

On the couch where Mundín sleeps at night sit Mami and Lucinda holding on to each other. My grandfather is leaning forward on the recliner, listening to something Mr. Washburn is saying. Another man in a military uniform with his back to me is standing behind Mr. Washburn's chair. In the other room, I hear my grandmother crying. "She had to go lie down," Mundín explains. "She had to take a tranquilizer pill."

"Why?" I ask. My heart is tottering on the edge of a very high place, and I am waiting, breathlessly, for it to either fall down into a thousand pieces or be rescued by good news at the last minute.

Mr. Washburn stands up and folds his arms around me. When he lets go, I follow Mundín to a place on the couch beside Papito's recliner, my hand on my chest as if I could reach in and steady my heart inside my ribs. As I go by Mami, she looks up and starts crying.

My grandfather reaches over and takes my two hands in his. "We are all going to have to be very brave," he says quietly. His eyes are also red. Then he says the words I will never forget. "Your father and uncle are dead."

"We got a report yesterday," Mr. Washburn begins explaining. "The dictator's family had agreed to leave." His voice is official-

sounding, but every once in a while, little clouds of sadness travel across it.

"Just before dawn, the son took off for his beach estate. Meanwhile, his SIM buddies drove over to the prison and seized the six remaining conspirators and took them to the beach—" Mr. Washburn stops abruptly.

After a moment, he adds, "*Lo siento,*" which means much more than that he is sorry, but that he feels what we are feeling.

"Tell us!" Mami orders. "I want to know how they died. I want my children to hear this. I want my country to hear this. I want the United States to hear this."

She sounds so absolutely sure, Mr. Washburn clears his throat and goes on. "Trujillo Junior and his cronies were quite drunk. We're not sure, but they might also have been drugged up. At any rate, they tied the prisoners to palm trees and shot them, one by one, until they were all dead. Then the bodies were taken out to sea and dumped over the side of the boat."

Before Mr. Washburn is even finished, Mami is sobbing, great gouging sobs, as if she is trying to scoop out all the sadness inside herself so there will be room for other feelings. Lucinda sobs, too, but in a distracted way, watching Mami, afraid of such huge grief none of us has ever seen before. Papito and Mundín dab at their eyes, my grandfather with his monogrammed handkerchief that reminds me of Papi's, Mundín with the back of his hand.

But I don't cry. Not right away. I listen carefully until the very end. I want to be with Papi and Tío Toni every step of the way.

When Mr. Washburn is done, Mami and Mundín and Lucinda and I stand up and put our arms around each other. Papito joins us, all of us crying into the empty space at the center of our family.

Snow Butterflies

"What is it going to look like?" I ask my cousin Carla.

"It's hard to describe," Carla says. "Just wait and see."

We are staying with the Garcías in Queens until we find our own place nearby. Mami and Lucinda and Mundín are inside with the rest of the cousins and my aunts and uncles and grandparents, but Carla and her sisters are standing with me in their backyard in mittens and hats and coats, waiting for my first snow to fall. All day the radio has been predicting a white Thanksgiving. The gray sky looks heavy and low, a piñata filled with snow.

Carla has grown up a lot since last year when we were best friends back home. She wears her hair in a flip with a hairband instead of tucking it behind her ears and puts glossy stuff on her lips, so they don't chap, she says, but it looks sort of like lipstick. She speaks English so fast that sometimes I have to stop her and say, "*Por favor en español,*" which Tía Laura loves to hear, as she worries that the girls are forgetting their native language from having to speak only English in school.

"Usually, it doesn't snow this early," Carla is saying. She talks as though she's lived in the United States all her life! "This is special, Anita."

"It brings good luck if it snows before Christmas," Yo adds.

"You're making that up!" Carla cuts her eyes at her younger sister. And maybe Yo is inventing things again. But I think it's

sweet how the Garcías are trying to make it up to me after what happened to Papi.

"Girls," Tía Laura calls from the kitchen window she's just opened. "We're almost ready to eat."

It's *el día del pavo*, as my grandparents call it, the day of the turkey, but I know from going to the American school that its real name is Thanksgiving, the day the Pilgrims in their black hats and capes gave thanks for surviving their first year in the United States. Some of my cousins have come down from the Bronx and my grandparents came from the city on a train that goes under the ground. We're not all here because Tío Fran and his family are in Miami, and Tía Mimí has a boyfriend, who's taken her over to meet his parents. But most of the rest of our family is here.

Usually, Carla and her sisters have to help out, but today, there are too many cooks in the broth, as Tía Laura says. (Even I know that my aunt gets most of her sayings wrong in English.) So we've walked around the block I don't know how many times, past the house where a cute boy in Carla's class lives. Carla is always falling in love and talking about getting married. Mami says, and I agree, that Carla has become a little boy-crazy in this country. But Carla claims that that's what happens when a girl gets to seventh grade. (I hate to tell her, but it happened to me in sixth.)

We moved in with the Garcías a couple of weeks ago, after hearing the news. Right away, Mami registered me at the Catholic school Carla and her sisters are attending. I was put back in sixth grade because I'd missed most of it back home. But the principal, Sister Celeste, has promised that if I make progress, maybe I can be jumped up to Carla's grade by spring.

I had hoped we'd be long gone by then! But Mami now says