



WHEN I WAS PUERTO RICAN



Esmeralda Santiago



A Merloyd Lawrence Book
DA CAPO PRESS
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The Turkish Lover



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for Mami

*El bohío de la loma,
bajo sus alas de paja,
siente el frescor mañanero
y abre sus ojos al alba.
Vuela el pájara del nido.
Brinca el gallo de la rama.
A los becerros, aislados
de las tetas de las vacas,
les corre por el hocico
leche de la madrugada.
Las mariposas pululan
—rubí, zafir, oro, plata...—:
flores huérfanas que rondan
buscando a las madres ramas...*



Under its palm frond wings, the little house on the hill senses the freshness of morning and opens its eyes to the dawn. A bird flies from its nest. The rooster jumps from his branch. From the nostrils of calves separated from the cows runs the milk of dawn. Butterflies swarm—ruby, sapphire, gold, silver— orphan flowers in search of the mother branch.

*from “Claroscuro”
by Luis Lloréns Torres*

PROLOGUE: HOW TO EAT A GUAVA

Barco que no anda, no llega a puerto.



A ship that doesn't sail, never reaches port.

There are guavas at the Shop & Save. I pick one the size of a tennis ball and finger the prickly stem end. It feels familiarly bumpy and firm. The guava is not quite ripe; the skin is still a dark green. I smell it and imagine a pale pink center, the seeds tightly embedded in the flesh.

A ripe guava is yellow, although some varieties have a pink tinge. The skin is thick, firm, and sweet. Its heart is bright pink and almost solid with seeds. The most delicious part of the guava surrounds the tiny seeds. If you don't know how to eat a guava, the seeds end up in the crevice between your teeth.

When you bite into a ripe guava, your teeth must grip the bumpy surface and sink into the thick, edible skin without hitting the center. It takes experience to do this, as it's quite tricky to determine how far beyond the skin the seeds begin.

Some years, when the rains have been plentiful and the nights cool, you can bite into a guava and not find many seeds. The guava bushes grow close to the ground, their branches laden with green then yellow fruit that seem to ripen overnight. These guavas are large and juicy, almost seedless, their roundness enticing you to have one more, just one more, because next year the rains may not come.

As children, we didn't always wait for the fruit to ripen. We raided the bushes as soon as the guavas were large enough to bend the branch.

A green guava is sour and hard. You bite into it at its widest point, because it's easier to grasp with your teeth. You hear the skin, meat, and seeds crunching inside your head, while the inside of your mouth explodes in little spurts of sour.

You grimace, your eyes water, and your cheeks disappear as your lips purse into a tight O. But you have another and then another, enjoying the crunchy sounds, the acid taste, the gritty texture of the unripe center. At night, your mother makes you drink castor oil, which she says tastes better than green guava. That's when you know for sure that you're a child and she has stopped being one.

I had my last guava the day we left Puerto Rico. It was large and juicy, almost red in the center, and so fragrant that I didn't want to eat it because I would lose the smell. All the way to the airport I scratched at it with my teeth, making little dents in the skin, chewing small pieces with my front teeth so that I could feel the texture against my tongue, the tiny pink pellets of sweet.

Today, I stand before a stack of dark green guavas, each perfectly round and hard, each \$1.59. The

one in my hand is tempting. It smells faintly of late summer afternoons and hop-scotch under the mango tree. But this is autumn in New York, and I'm no longer a child.

The guava joins its sisters under the harsh fluorescent lights of the exotic fruit display. I push my cart away, toward the apples and pears of my adulthood, their nearly seedless ripeness predictable and bittersweet.

JÍBARA

Al jíbaro nunca se le quita la mancha de plátano.



A jíbaro can never wash away the stain of the plantain.

We came to Macún when I was four, to a rectangle of rippled metal sheets on stilts hovering in the middle of a circle of red dirt. Our home was a giant version of the lard cans used to haul water from the public fountain. Its windows and doors were also metal, and, as we stepped in, I touched the wall and burned my fingers.

“That’ll teach you,” Mami scolded. “Never touch a wall on the sunny side.”

She searched a bundle of clothes and diapers for her jar of Vick’s VapoRub to smear on my fingers. They were red the rest of the day, and I couldn’t suck my thumb that night. “You’re too big for that anyway,” she said.

The floor was a patchwork of odd-shaped wooden slats that rose in the middle and dipped toward the front and back doors, where they butted against shiny, worn thresholds. Papi nailed new boards under Mami’s treadle sewing machine, and under their bed, but the floor still groaned and sagged at the corners, threatening to collapse and bring the house down with it.

“I’ll rip the whole thing out,” Papi suggested. “We’ll have to live with a dirt floor for a while...”

Mami looked at her feet and shuddered. A dirt floor, we’d heard, meant snakes and scorpions could crawl into the house from their holes in the ground. Mami didn’t know any better, and I had yet to learn not everything I heard was true, so we reacted in what was to become a pattern for us: when frightened her I became curious about, and what she found exciting terrified me. As Mami pulled her feet onto the rungs of her rocking chair and rubbed the goose bumps from her arms, I imagined a world of fascinating creatures slithering underfoot, drawing squiggly patterns on the dirt.

The day Papi tore up the floor, I followed him holding a can into which he dropped the straight nails, still usable. My fingers itched with a rust-colored powder, and when I licked them, a dry, metallic taste curled the tip of my tongue. Mami stood on the threshold scratching one ankle with the toes of the other foot.

“Negi, come help me gather kindling for the fire.”

“I’m working with Papi,” I whined, hoping he’d ask me to stay. He didn’t turn around but continued on his knees, digging out nails with the hammer’s claw, muttering the words to his favorite *chachachá*.

“Do as I say!” Mami ordered. Still, Papi kept his back to us. I plunked the can full of nails down hard, willing him to hear and tell me to stay, but he didn’t. I dawdled after Mami down the three steps into the yard. Delsa and Norma, my younger sisters, took turns swinging from a rope Papi had hung under the mango tree.

“Why can’t they help with the kindling?” I pouted.

Mami swatted the side of my head. “Don’t talk back,” she said. “You girls keep away from the house while your father is working,” she warned as we walked by my sisters having fun.

She led the way into a thicket behind the latrine. Twigs crackled under my bare feet, stinging the soles. A bananaquit flew to the thorny branch of a lemon tree and looked from side to side. Dots of sunlight danced on the green walls of the shady grove above low bushes weighted with pigeon peas, the ears screened with twigs, sensitive *moriviví* plants, and french weed studded with tiny blue flowers. Mami hummed softly, the yellow and orange flowers of her dress blending into the greenness: a miraculous garden with legs and arms and a melody. Her hair, choked at the nape with a rubber band, floated thick and black to her waist, and as she bent over to pick up sticks, it rained across her shoulders and down her arms, covering her face and tangling in the twigs she cradled. A red butterfly circled her and flew close to her ear. She gasped and swatted it into a bush.

“It felt like it was going right into my brain,” she muttered with an embarrassed smile.

Delsa and Norma toddled through the underbrush. “Mami, come see what I found,” Delsa called.

A hen had scratched out a hollow and carpeted its walls and floor with dry grass. She had laid four eggs, smaller and not as white as the ones our neighbor Doña Lola gave us from time to time.

“Can we eat them?” Delsa asked.

“No.”

“But if we leave them here a snake will get them,” I said, imagining a serpent swallowing each egg whole. Mami shuddered and rubbed her arms where tiny bumps had formed making the fine hairs stand straight up. She gave me a look, half puzzled, half angry, and drew us to her side.

“All right, let’s get our sticks together and bring them to the kitchen.” As she picked hers up, she looked carefully around.

“One, two, three, four,” she chanted. “One, two, three, four.”

We marched single file into our yard, where Papi stacked floorboards.

“Come look,” he said.

The dirt was orange, striped in places where crumbs had slipped through the cracks when Mami swept. Papi had left a few boards down the center of the room and around his and Mami’s bed, to stand on until the ground was swept and flattened. Mami was afraid to come into the house. There were small holes in the dirt, holes where snakes and scorpions hid. She turned around swiftly and threw herself off balance so that she skipped toward the kitchen shed.

“Let’s go make supper!” She singsang to make it sound like fun. Delsa and Norma followed her in a skirt, but I stared at the dirt, where squiggly lines stretched from one wall to the other. Mami waited for me.

“Negi, come help in the kitchen.”

I pretended not to hear but felt her eyes bore holes in the back of my head. Papi stepped between us.

“Let her stay. I can use the help.”

I peered between his legs and saw her squint and pucker her lips as if she were about to spit. Papi chuckled, “Heh, heh,” and she whirled toward the kitchen shed, where the fire in the *fogón* was almost out.

“Take these boards and lay them on the pile for the cooking fire,” Papi said. “Careful with the splinters.”

I walked a broad circle around Mami, who looked up from her vegetable chopping whenever I went by. When I passed carrying a wide board, Mami asked to see it. Black bugs, like ants, but bigger and blacker, crawled over it in a frenzy.

“Termites!” she gasped.

I was covered with them. They swarmed inside my shirt and panties, into my hair, under my arms. Until Mami saw them, I hadn’t felt them sting. But they bit ridges into my skin that itched and hurt at the same time. Mami ran me to the washtub and dunked me among my father’s soaking shirts.

“Pablo!” she called, “Oh, my God! Look at her. She’s being eaten alive!”

I screamed, imagining my skin disappearing in chunks into the invisible mouths of hundreds of tiny black specks creeping into parts of my body I couldn’t even reach. Mami pulled off my clothes and threw them on the ground. The soap in the washtub burned my skin, and Mami scrubbed me so hard her fingernails dug angry furrows into my arms and legs. She turned me around to wash my back and almost fell out of the tub.

“Be still,” she said. “I have to get them all.”

She pushed and shoved and turned me so fast I didn’t know what to do with my body, so I flailed, seeming to resist, while in fact I wanted nothing more than to be rid of the creepy crawling things that covered me. Mami wrapped me in a towel and lifted me out of the tub with a groan. Hundreds of black bugs floated between the bubbles.

She carried me to the house pressed against her bosom, fragrant of curdled milk. Delsa and Norma ran after us, but Papi scooped them up, one on each arm, and carried them to the rope swing. Mami balanced on the floorboards to her bed, lay me beside her, held me tight, kissed my forehead, my eyes, and murmured, “It’s all right. It’s over. It’s all right.”

I wrapped my legs around her and buried my face under her chin. It felt good to have Mami so close, so warm, swathed by her softness, her smell of wood smoke and oregano. She rubbed circles on my back and caressed the hair from my face. She kissed me, brushed my tears with her fingertips, and dried my nose with the towel, or the hem of her dress.

“You see,” she murmured, “what happens when you don’t do as I say?”

I turned away from her and curled into a tight ball of shame. Mami rolled off the bed and went outside. I lay on her pillow, whimpering, wondering how the termites knew I’d disobeyed my mother.

☞ We children slept in hammocks strung across the room, tied to the beams in sturdy knots that were done and undone daily. A curtain separated our side of the room from the end where my parents slept in a four-poster bed veiled with mosquito netting. On the days he worked, Papi left the house before dawn and sometimes joked that he woke the roosters to sing the *barrio* awake. We wouldn't see him again until dusk, dragging down the dirt road, his wooden toolbox pulling on his arm, making his boots list sideways. When he didn't work, he and Mami rustled behind the flowered curtain, creaked the springs under their mattress, their voices a murmur that I strained to hear but couldn't.

I was an early riser but was not allowed out until the sun shot in through the crack near Mami's sewing machine and swept a glistening stripe of gold across the dirt floor.

The next morning, I turned out of the hammock and ran outside as soon as the sun streaked in. Mami and Papi sat by the kitchen shed sipping coffee. My arms and belly were pimpled with red dots. The night before, Mami had bathed me in *alcoholado*, which soothed my skin and cooled the hot itch.

"Ay *bendito*," Mami said, "here's our spotty early riser. Come here, let me look." She turned me around, rubbing the spots. "Are you itchy?"

"No, it doesn't itch at all."

"Stay out of the sun today so the spots don't scar."

Papi hummed along with the battery-operated radio. He never went anywhere without it. When he worked around the house, he propped it on a rock, or the nearest fence post, and tuned it to his favorite station, which played romantic ballads, *chachachás*, and a reading of the news every half hour. Papi delighted in stories from faraway places like Russia, Madagascar, and Istanbul. Whenever the newscaster mentioned a country with a particularly musical name, he'd repeat it or make a rhyme out of it. "*Pakistán. Sacristán. ¿Dónde están?*" he sang as he mixed cement or hammered nails, his voice echoing against the walls.

Early each morning the radio brought us a program called "The Day Breaker's Club," which played the traditional music and poetry of the Puerto Rican country dweller, the *jíbaro*. Although the songs and poems chronicled a life of struggle and hardship, their message was that *jíbaros* were rewarded by a life of independence and contemplation, a closeness to nature coupled with a respect for their intractability, and a deeply rooted and proud nationalism. I wanted to be a *jíbaro* more than anything in the world, but Mami said I couldn't because I was born in the city, where *jíbaros* were mocked for their unsophisticated customs and peculiar dialect.

"Don't be a *jíbaro*," she scolded, rapping her knuckles on my skull, as if to waken the intelligence she said was there.

I ducked away, my scalp smarting, and scrambled into the oregano bushes. In the fragrant shade, I fretted. If we were not *jíbaros*, why did we live like them? Our house, a box squatting on low stilts, was shaped like a *bohío*, the kind of house *jíbaros* lived in. Our favorite program, "The Day Breaker's Club," played the traditional music of rural Puerto Rico and gave information about crops, husbandry, and the weather. Our neighbor Doña Lola was a *jíbaro*, although Mami had warned us never to call her that. Poems and stories about the hardships and joys of the Puerto Rican *jíbaro* were required reading at every grade level in school. My own grandparents, whom I was to respect as well as love, were said

to be *jíbaros*. But I couldn't be one, nor was I to call anyone a *jíbaro*, lest they be offended. Even the tender age when I didn't yet know my real name, I was puzzled by the hypocrisy of celebrating people everyone looked down on. But there was no arguing with Mami, who, in those days, was always right.

👁 On the radio, the newscaster talked about submarines, torpedoes, and a place called Korea, where Puerto Rican men went to die. His voice faded as Papi carried him into the house just as Delsa and Norma came out for their oatmeal.

Delsa's black curly hair framed a heart-shaped face with tiny pouty lips and round eyes thick with lashes. Mami called her *Muñequita*, Little Doll. Norma's hair was the color of clay, her yellow eyes slanted at the corners, and her skin glowed the same color as the inside of a yam. Mami called her *La Colorá*, the red girl. I thought I had no nickname until she told me my name wasn't Negi but Esmeralda.

"You're named after your father's sister, who is also your godmother. You know her as Titi Merín."

"Why does everyone call me Negi?"

"Because when you were little you were so black, my mother said you were a *negrita*. And we called you *Negrita*, and it got shortened to Negi."

Delsa was darker than I was, nutty brown, but not as sun ripened as Papi. Norma was lighter, ruddy colored, and not as pale as Mami, whose skin was pink. Norma's yellow eyes with black pupils looked like sunflowers. Delsa had black eyes. I'd never seen my eyes, because the only mirror in the house was hung up too high for me to reach. I touched my hair, which was not curly like Delsa's, nor *pasito* raised, like Papi's. Mami cut it short whenever it grew into my eyes, but I'd seen dark brown wisps by my cheeks and near my temples.

"So Negi means I'm black?"

"It's a sweet name because we love you, *Negrita*." She hugged and kissed me.

"Does anyone call Titi Merín Esmeralda?"

"Oh, sure. People who don't know her well—the government, her boss. We all have our official names, and then our nicknames, which are like secrets that only the people who love us use."

"How come you don't have a nickname?"

"I do. Everyone calls me Monin. That's my nickname."

"What's your real name?"

"Ramona."

"Papi doesn't have a nickname."

"Yes he does. Some people call him Pablito."

It seemed too complicated, as if each one of us were really two people, one who was loved and the official one who, I assumed, was not.

☞ The day he was to put in the new floor, Papi dragged our belongings out to the yard. Mami's sewing machine, the bed, her rocking chair, the small dresser where Papi kept his special things, baked in the sun, their worn surfaces scarred, their joints loose and creaky. A stack of new floorboards was suspended between cinder blocks near the door. Mami asked me and Delsa to find small stones to plug the holes in the dirt inside the house, so that snakes and scorpions wouldn't get out and bite us.

"Let's go see if the hen laid more eggs!" Delsa whispered.

We sneaked around the house to the path behind the latrine. On the way we picked up a few pebbles just in case Mami asked what we were doing. A brown hen sat on the nest, her wings fluffed around the eggs. As we came near, she clucked softly.

"We'd better not come too close, or she'll beak us," I whispered.

The hen watched us, cackling nervously, and when we walked around the bush, her beady eyes followed us.

"If we keep walking around her," Delsa said, "we'll make her dizzy."

We circled the bush. The hen turned her head all the way around, as if her neck were not attached to her body. Delsa looked at me with a wicked grin, and without a word, we looped around the bush again, then switched and went in the opposite direction. Possessive of her eggs, the hen kept her eyes fixed on us, no matter how fast we moved. We broke into a run. Her scared twitterings rose in pitch and had a human quality, like Mami's words when she swore we were driving her crazy. The hen's reproachful eyes followed us as we ran around the bush, her body aflutter, her head whirling on her neck until it seemed that she would screw herself into the ground.

"Negi! Delsa! What are you doing back here?" Mami stood in the clearing, hands on hips.

"We were looking at the hen," I said in a small voice. Delsa giggled. I giggled. Mami didn't. The hen buried her head into her feathers the way a turtle crawls into a shell. I wanted to slide under her wings and get away from Mami.

"Get back to the front yard and let that poor animal be."

"We just wanted to see the eggs."

"You've frightened her. Now she won't give us any more eggs."

We had to go by Mami to get to the front yard. Her eyebrows were scrunched together, the eyes under them as round and black and reproofing as the hen's, her lips stretched across her face so tight that all I could see was a dark line under her nose. "What are you waiting for? Didn't you hear me?" Her voice quivered with fury, her whole body enlarging with each breath.

Delsa hid behind me. I shuffled forward, and Mami stepped back to let me by. Delsa whimpered. Mami stared at me, immobile, hands on hips. I was very small. I took a deep breath, closed my eyes, and walked past her. As I did, she knuckled me hard on the head. I ran home, rubbing the bump that was forming under my hair. Behind me, Delsa screeched and ran past, covering her ear.

Papi raked the dirt in the house. He looked up when we came to the door, holding our heads and

crying.

“Don’t come bawling to me,” he said. “You both know better than to cross your mother.” He turned his back and pushed more dirt against the zinc walls.

Delsa sat on a stump and sobbed. I stared at his back, willing him to scold Mami, even though we had done something wrong. He heaped piles of dirt into the corners of the house and hummed a song under his breath. Mami stood at the mouth of the path, her fingers laced under her belly. She looked small against the thick green behind her. She too seemed to be waiting for Papi to do or say something, and when he didn’t, she walked to the kitchen shed, rubbing her stomach, a pained expression on her face.

A bubble of rage built inside my chest and forced out a scream meant for Mami’s harshness and Papi’s indifference but directed at Delsa who was smaller. I pushed her off the stump, sending her small body sprawling on the dirt. For a moment she looked dazed, as she tried to figure out what she had done, but when she realized she’d done nothing, she fell on me, her tiny fists as sharp as stone. We tussled in the dusty yard, pulled each other’s hair, kicked and scratched and bit until our parents had to separate us and drive us away from one another, Mami with a switch, Papi with his leather belt. I ran to the bittersweet shade of the oregano bushes and wept until my chest hurt, each sob tearing off a layer of the comfort built from my parents’ love, until I was totally alone, defended only by the green, the scent of cooking spices, and the dry, brushed dirt under my feet.

☹ A few mornings later I awoke to Mami’s moans. I rolled out of my hammock and crossed to the other side of the curtain. Papi was gone, and Mami lay on her side, a wet rag on her forehead. She was sweaty, her hair stuck to her cheeks and down her neck. She pulled on the rails of the bedstead, as if she were stretching, but her knees were folded up to her belly.

“What’s the matter, Mami?” I was scared. She was never sick, but now she was suffering. “What’s wrong?”

She opened her eyes and smiled. Her face softened then darkened again, as if seeing me had made her forget her pain, but not for long. “I’m going to have a baby,” she moaned.

“Now?”

“Soon as I can,” she said with a pained chuckle.

“Does it hurt?”

“Not too much.” She winced and rubbed her belly. Tiny bubbles of sweat popped on her upper lip.

“Can you make us breakfast?” She gave me a harsh look between moans, and I felt bad for asking. Just then, Papi walked in, followed by our neighbors, Doña Lola and Doña Zena.

“You’re up already!” He said it as if it was unusual for me to be up with the roosters. The women grinned. Doña Lola set a bundle at the foot of the bed, and she and Mami mumbled to each other. Delsa and Norma scuffed in, rubbing their eyes.

“Dawn breakers, eh!” Doña Zena chortled and held out her arms to us. “Come with me, and I’ll make you breakfast.”

Delsa took one look at her, then at Mami, and her black eyes opened round and wide like those on a doll baby. “What’s wrong with Mami?”

“Nothing’s wrong,” Papi said as he nudged us out in front of him. “Mami’s going to have a baby, so Doña Zena will look after you today.” As he pushed us out of the house, sniffing and whining, Doña Lola took down the curtain that divided the room in two and rolled our hammocks out of the way.

Delsa wrapped herself around Papi’s leg and screeched. Norma ran back into the house and threw herself at Mami. Doña Lola pulled her down off the bed and carried her out dangling from one arm. “Someone is coming to steal your lap, Colorá,” she said, as she passed Norma to Doña Zena, who held on to her with an iron grip.

“Negi,” Mami whimpered from the bed, “take care of your sisters.”

Papi untangled Delsa from his leg and pushed her toward me. He went to the back of the house to light the *fogón*. I grabbed Delsa by one arm while Doña Zena took the other, and we struggled with Norma and Norma up the road.

“Shut your mouths. You’re waking up the neighbors.”

They didn’t pay any attention to me but continued wailing and kicking against the dirt. Halfway to Doña Zena’s house, I gave up trying to control them. I let go of Delsa, and Doña Zena jerked her and Norma along until they half walked, half hopped up the hill.

I didn’t understand why we had to leave our house when Mami looked so sick. No one had ever said anything about where babies came from, and I had never connected Mami’s swollen belly with my sisters. Until then, that was just the way she looked: black hair, pale skin, big belly, long legs.

Doña Zena dragged Delsa and Norma into her yard, while I straggled behind, fretting about what had just happened, jealous that, even though my lap had been stolen years ago by Delsa and the Norma, another baby was coming to separate me further from my mother, whose rages were not half so frightening as the worry that she would now be so busy with an infant as to totally forget me.

I crested the hill where Doña Zena’s house perched, commanding a view of the *barrio*. Mist hung just above the trees, burning off in patches where bright sun dulled the intensity of red hibiscus blossoms, yellow morning glories, the purple centers of passion fruit flowers. Mornings like this inspired much of *jíbaro* poetry, and in my fear over Mami I called up the few verses I’d memorized and repeated them like a prayer as I sat on Doña Zena’s steps, my eyes riveted on the slow ribbon of smoke ascending from our *fogón*, my feet buried in lemongrass, dew chilling my toes.

FIGHTING NAKED

Enamorado hasta de un palo de escoba.



He falls in love even with broomsticks.

My parents probably argued before Hector was born. Mami was not one to hold her tongue when she was treated unfairly. And while Papi was easygoing and cheerful most of the time, his voice had been known to rise every so often, sending my sisters and me scurrying for cover behind the annatto bushes or under the bed. But the year that Hector was born their fights grew more frequent and sputtered into our lives like water on a hot skillet.

“Where’s my yellow shirt?” Papi asked one Sunday morning as he rummaged through the clothes rack he’d put up near the bed.

“I haven’t ironed it yet.” Mami rocked on her chair, nursing Hector. “Where are you going?”

“Into town for some things.” Papi kept his back to her as he tucked a blue shirt into his pants.

“What things?”

“Plans for the new job.” He shook cologne into his hands and slapped it around his face and behind his ears.

“When will you be back?”

Papi sighed loud and deep. “Monin, don’t start with me.”

“Start what? I asked you a simple question.” She levelled her eyes and set her lips into a straight line.

“I don’t know when I’ll be back. I’ll stop in to see Mamá, so I’ll probably have dinner there.”

“Fine.” She got up from her chair and walked out of the house, Hector attached to her breast.

Papi brushed his leather shoes and stuffed them inside a plaid zippered duffel bag. He put on canvas loafers that had once been white but had yellowed with the dirt of the road. He unhooked his straw hat from the nail by the door and left without kissing us good-bye.

I went looking for Mami behind the house. She sat on a stump under the breadfruit tree, her back to me. Her shoulders bobbed up and down, and she whimpered quietly, every so often wiping her face with the edge of Hector’s baby blanket. I walked to her, tears stinging the rims of my eyes. She turned around with an angry face.

“Leave me alone! Get away from me.”

I froze. She seemed so far away, yet I sensed the heat from her body, smelled the rosemary oil she rubbed on her hair. I didn't want to leave her but was afraid to come closer, so I leaned against the mango tree and stared at my toes against the *moriviví* weed. Every so often she looked over her shoulder, and I turned my eyes to the front yard, where Delsa and Norma chased one another, a cloud of dust painting their legs up to their droopy panties.

"Here," Mami stood over me, holding a drowsy Hector, "put him to bed while I heat you kids some lunch."

Her face was swollen, her lashes clumped into spikes. I slung Hector over my shoulder, his baby body yielding onto mine. Mami raked her fingers through my hair with a sad smile then walked away, the hem of her dress swinging in rhythm to her rounded hips.

☞ Papi didn't come home for days. Then one night he appeared, kissed us hello, put on his work clothes, and began hammering on the walls. When he'd finished, he washed his hands and face at the barrel near the back door, sat at the table, and waited for Mami to serve him supper. She banged a plateful of rice and beans in front of him, a fork, a glass of water. He didn't look at her; she didn't look at him. While he ate, Mami told us to get ready for bed, and Delsa, Norma, and I scrambled into our hammocks. She nursed Hector and put him to sleep. Papi's newspaper rustled, but I didn't dare poke my head out.

I drifted into a dream in which I climbed a tall tree whose lower branches disappeared the moment I scaled the higher ones. The ground moved farther and farther away, and the top of the tree stretched into the clouds, which were pink. I woke up sweating, my arms stretched over my head and gripping the rope of my hammock. The *quinqué's* flame threw orange shadows onto the curtain stretched across the room.

Mami and Papi lay in bed talking.

"You haven't given me money for this week's groceries."

The bed creaked as Papi turned away from Mami. "I had to buy materials. And one of the men that works with me had an emergency. I gave him an advance."

"An advance?!"

Mami had a way of making a statement with a question. From my hammock on the other side of the curtain I envisioned her face: eyes round, pupils large, her eyebrows arched to the hairline. Her lips would be half open, as if she'd been interrupted in the middle of an important word. When I saw that expression on her face and heard that tone of voice, I knew that whatever I'd said was so far from the truth, there was no use trying to argue with her. Even if what I said was true, that tone of voice told me she didn't believe me, and I'd better come up with a more convincing story. Papi either couldn't think of another story or was too tired to try, because he didn't say anything. I could have told him that was a mistake.

"You gave him an advance?! An advance??"

Her voice had gone from its "I don't believe you" tone to its "How dare you lie to me" sound.

“Monin,” the bed creaked as Papi turned to her. “Can we talk about this in the morning? I need sleep.”

His voice was calm. When Mami was angry, she argued in a loud voice that reached higher pitches the more nervous she became. When Papi argued, he put all his energy into holding himself erect, maintaining a steady calm that was chilling to us children but had the opposite effect on Mami.

“No, we can’t talk about this in the morning. You leave before the sun comes up, and you don’t show up until all hours, your clothes stinking like that *puta*.”

Even when she was very angry, Mami rarely swore or used vulgar language. Papi knew this. It was a clue to how upset she was. He calmly got up and walked to the curtain separating our rooms. I ducked my head back inside my hammock.

“Monin, stop it. You’ll wake the children.”

“Now you’re worried about the children. Why is it that you don’t even think about them when it’s less convenient. When you’re partying with your women and your barroom buddies.” The bedspring creaked violently as she got up. “Do those *hijas de la gran puta* know you have children in this Godforsaken hellhole? Do they know your children go barefoot and hungry while you spend the misery you earn on them?”

“Monin!”

“Don’t think just because I’m stuck in this jungle all day long I don’t know what’s going on. I’m not stupid.”

Hector woke up with a wail. Papi raised the flame on the lamp while Mami reached into Hector’s hanging cradle and lifted him out. Delsa and Norma whimpered from their side of the room. I didn’t have to pretend to sleep anymore, so I sat up and watched their silhouettes through the curtain. Mami changed Hector’s diaper with such rough movements, I worried she’d stick a pin into him. Papi stood at the window, looking at where a view would have been if the window were open.

“Look, I don’t know who you’ve been talking to, but I don’t want to hear it anymore.”

He dressed. Mami lifted Hector to her shoulder and paced, bouncing him up and down to get him to go to sleep.

“You don’t come home until after dark ... if you come home at all. And weekends, instead of working on this hovel you call a house, you take off with one excuse or another. You have no shame. I’m sick of it.”

“Well, I’m sick of it too! Do you think I like hearing you complain all the time? Or that I want to hear about how much you hate it here, and how much better life was in San Juan, and how backward Macún is? I’m sick of it! I’m sick of you!”

He stomped out, probably just to give Mami time to cool off, which was his way of fighting her. But I thought he was leaving us. “Papi!! Don’t go. Please, Papi, stay!” I shrieked. When they heard me, Delsa and Norma joined in, and Hector, who was almost asleep in spite of my mother’s yelling near his ear, screeched.

“See what you’ve done!” Mami hollered into the dark yard. “Some father you are, running off your own children!”

She threw Hector into his cradle and tore Papi's clothes off their hangers by the bed. "Sick of me. Well, I'm sick of you too." She tossed his clothes out the door, grabbed a pitcher of water from the table, and splashed it on them. Then she bolted the door, took Hector out of his cradle, and sat on her rocking chair, nursing him. Tears streamed down her cheeks into the grooves at the corners of her lips. "You kids shut up and go back to sleep," she yelled. None of us dared get out of our hammocks. We hunkered into them, stifling our sobs. For a long time I listened for Papi. For his voice asking Mami to forgive him, or for his footsteps outside the house. But I fell asleep to the sound of Mami's rocking chair creaking, and her sobs, soft and low like the miaow of a kitten.

The next morning Papi's clothes were scattered in the front yard. They were damp, stained with the muddy tracks of toads and iguanas. As she waited for the coffee water to boil, Mami picked them up and took them to the tub under the avocado tree. That afternoon, when Papi came home, they'd all been washed.

☞ Another day they were arguing, and I heard Mami accuse Papi, as she often did, of seeing another woman behind her back when he said he was going to see *Abuela*.

"For God's sake, Monin. You know I have no interest in Provi. But how can you object to me wanting to see Margie?" Papi asked.

"I know it's not Margie you want to see. It's her mother."

"Monin, please. That's been over for years."

And on they went, Mami accusing Papi and Papi defending himself. When they'd reached a truce and I had a few moments alone with Papi, I asked him, "Who's Margie?"

He looked at me with a scared expression.

"She's my daughter," he said after a pause. My heart shrank. Having to share my father with Delsa, Norma, and Hector was bad enough. I waited for him to say more, but he didn't. He sat on a stump and stared at his hands, calloused where the hammer and saw handles rubbed against his skin. He looked so sad, it made me want to cry. I sat next to him.

"Where does she live?"

He seemed to have just remembered I was there. "In Santurce."

"How old is she?"

"Just a year older than you."

An older sister! I'd wondered what it would be like not to be the oldest, the one who set an example for the little ones.

"How come she's never been to see us?"

"Her mother and your mother don't get along."

That much I'd figured out. "You can just bring her sometime. Her mother doesn't have to come."

Papi sighed then chuckled. "That's a good idea," he said and stood up. "I have to get some work done."

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