

## Kid Diaper Meets Mystery Girl

**M**y mother is cooking my father. He is trapped, immobilized, with his knees pressed up against his chin in the kitchen tub as she moves back and forth from a nearby stove pouring hot water over his soapy head. A dark little girl comes into the room and they send her away.

Some days or nights later I hear a symphony of yelling and screaming and body shoves and slaps. When I crawl into the kitchen the door opens and the little girl enters between two big white policemen. My father tries to get un-drunk by standing tightly; my mother tries smiling.

“No *problema*, officer,” says my father.

“*Todo bien*,” adds my mother, turning away so the cop won’t see the mark on her face. She wipes down the metal panel top of the tub she had cooked my father in, like their fight was nothing special. Once the policemen are gone my mother and father yell at the little girl, whoever she is. From then on out it seems she is sometimes there and sometimes not.

She is *not* there on the night my grandmother, livid about something, punches a wall and my finger gets caught in a door in the confusion. “*Duele, duele*,” I cry, telling Ma that it hurt, and she

makes it all better with her magic warm breath—but I still look for the little girl. How should I know where she is? I'm still in diapers.

We move to the Bronx and before I can turn around the little girl is in our new place standing against the far wall between windows that face the street. She is wearing dark dungarees, a black T-shirt, and a skullcap pulled down to her eyebrows. The hair sticking out from under is thick. I want to get a better look but feel shy—besides, the light is coming into my eyes.

“It's not *pelo malo*,” I hear a neighbor woman whispering to Ma in the kitchen.

“No,” says Ma. “Not bad hair at all. Just that my aunt, who I left her with in Puerto Rico, washed it with detergent. What can you do? They lived in El Fanguito.”

“Oh . . . *terrible* . . . what a terrible place to have to live. God knows how many babies drowned in the rivers of shit that flowed under the houses,” the neighbor answers.

They have a moment of silence for all the dead babies, then the neighbor goes on, “So washing her hair in detergent was what made it kinky; it's not that she's . . .”

She stops talking again. I wait for more but only hear heavy silence.

They come into the living room. The neighbor is tall and thin and looks like she smells something bad. My mother holds a hairbrush like a weapon.

“Aurea, *ven acá*.”

Ah! Some information. The little girl's name is Aurea!

“Come, I'll fix your hair,” Ma says. But Aurea turns away angrily. She is always angry.

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I am walking through a dark, wet room.

“This way,” says Pops.

“I can’t see,” says Ma, and then adds, alarmed, “Sonia, don’t go near the wall!”

I jump back just in time. The walls are dripping with water. Was it raining inside? It smells funny down here, too—like the sidewalk, but here there is a thin layer of dirt on the ground as well. I know because I keep kicking it up as Ma drags me farther and farther toward a yellow light in the distance. We pass a big round machine that shimmers and shakes and burps and coughs heat, and continue dodging the cement columns holding up the building above us until we reach another door that Pops pushes open.

“This way,” he says again.

“*Ay, Dios mío,*” moans Ma.

It’s a space for people to live in with a bed and table and chairs, but the room is not much different from the basement we just crept through. A man and a woman with hollow eyes look up at us as we enter. There are two little boys about my size wrestling in the corner. One isn’t wearing pants and I stare at something tiny and dangling between his legs. He has snot hanging out of his nose that stops at his upper lip. There is a girl a few years older whose coughing fits whip around her stringy hair. She stares at me between hacks as the grown-ups greet and talk. Suddenly Ma screams.

“Oh my God.”

The little boy with the dangling thing is taking a poop on the table. The woman giggles and the man yells, “Mickey, what the hell are you doing?” Ma picks me up. By the time they find something to clean up his mess he is done dumping. I can feel Ma’s anger through

her dress. She keeps saying, “*Ave María Purísima*, there are bathrooms here!” as she paces up and down the tiny space.

“Don’t worry, Franco,” says Pops. “There might be a real apartment available on Fulton Avenue later. For now just live here and *búscate la vida*.”

“Look for your life”? My father had just told him to “look for his life.” What does that mean?

“*Sí, seguro*. I’m ready to work and make money right away,” says Franco.

“You’ll come with me tomorrow. I got a roofing job you can help with.”

“Okay!”

“And what about me?” says the woman. “I can sew a little.”

“There’s piecework all over the city you can do, Iris,” says Ma irritably. “We’ll find something for you tomorrow . . .”

I can tell Ma wants to get out of there so after a short while we say good-bye. Out in the street Ma says “*Terrible, terrible*,” over and over again.

“All I could find for them,” says Pops. “They weren’t supposed to come so quick. I just told your brother Franco two weeks ago he should *think* about coming to New York. How could I know he was just going to show up so quickly? Did you want him to move in with *us*? I didn’t think he was going to get airline tickets and come right away.” He stops for a minute before saying, “Things must be worse in Puerto Rico than I thought.”

Those two words, *Puerto Rico*, make me listen for more, but there is no more coming. Ma keeps quiet as we trudge up Third Avenue as I hear the train rumbling into the station above my head.

“Franco is *your* brother,” says Pops, rubbing it in.