Esmeralda Santiago

WHEN I WAS PUERTO RICAN

Esmeralda Santiago's work has appeared in The New York Times, The Boston Globe, The Christian Science Monitor, and Vista magazine. She is a graduate of Harvard University and has an MFA from Sarah Lawrence College. With her husband, director Frank Cantor, she owns CANTOMEDIA, a film production company. They have two children, Lucas and Ila. This is Ms. Santiago's first book. She continues the story of her life in Almost a Woman.
CONTENTS

PROLOGUE: HOW TO EAT A GUAVA 1
JIBARA 5
FIGHTING NAKED 19
SOMEONE IS COMING TO TAKE YOUR LAP 35
THE AMERICAN INVASION OF MACUN 61
WHY WOMEN REMAIN JAMAICA 85
MAMI GETS A JOB 105
EL MANGLE 131
LETTERS FROM NEW YORK 153
CASÍ SENERITA 171
DREAMS OF A BETTER LIFE 197
ANGELS ON THE CEILING 211
YOU DON'T WANT TO KNOW 241
A SHOT AT IT 255
EPilogue: One of these Days 267
Glossary 271
ANGELS ON THE CEILING
Abi fue donde la puerca entorchó el rabo.

That's where the sow's tail curled.

Uniformed women with lacquered hair, high heels, and fitted skirts looked down on us, signalled that we should fasten our safety belts, place parcels under the seat in front of us, and sit up.

"Stewardesses," Mami said, admiring their sleek uniforms, pressed white blouses, stiff navy ribbons tied into perfect bows in their hair. None of them spoke Spanish. Their tight smiles were not convincing, did not welcome us. In our best clothes, with hair combed, faces scrubbed, the dirt under our nails gouged out by Mami's stiff brush, I still felt unclean next to the highly groomed, perfumed, unwrinkled women who waited on us.

"Someday," Mami mused, "you might like to be a stewardess. Then you can travel all over the world for free."

The stewardesses minced up and down the narrow aisle, glancing from side to side like queens greeting the masses. I tried to read in their faces where else they'd been, if their travels had taken them to places like Mongolia, Singapore, Timbuktu. That's where I'd want to go if I were a stewardess.

Not New York, Paris, or Rome. I'd want to go places so far away that I couldn't even pronounce their names. I'd want to see sights so different that it would show on my face. None of the stewardesses seemed to have been anywhere that exotic. Their noncommittal smiles, the way they seemed to have everything under control was too reassuring, too studied, too managed to make me comfortable. I would have felt better had there been more chaos.

"Do these planes ever just fall from the sky?" I asked Mami, who sat across the aisle from me.

The woman sitting in front of her shot me a fearful look and crossed herself. "Ay, nena, don't say such a thing," she said in a hoarse whisper. "It's bad luck."
Mami smiled.

We were high over thick clouds, the sky above so bright it hurt my eyes. In the window seat, Edna pressed her face flat against the pane. She looked up, eyes shining. “There’s nothing there!” She stretched over my lap and reached out her hand to Mami. “I’m hungry.”

“They’ll serve us dinner soon,” Mami said. “Just wait.”

The stewardesses brought us small trays filled with square plates filled with sauce over chicken, mushy rice, and boiled string beans. It all tasted like salt.

The sky darkened, but we floated in a milky whiteness that seemed to hold the plane suspended above Puerto Rico. I couldn’t believe we were moving; I imagined that the plane sat still in the clouds while the earth flew below us. The drone of the propellers was hypnotic and lulled us to sleep in the stiff seats with their square white doilies on the back.

“Why do they have these?” I asked Mami, fingering the starched, piqué-like fabric.

“So that people’s pomade doesn’t stain the seat back,” she answered. The man in front of me, his hair slick with brilliantine, adjusted his doily, pulled it down to his neck.

I dozed, startled awake, panicked when I didn’t know where I was, remembered where we were going, then dozed off again, to repeat the whole cycle, in and out of sleep, between earth and sky, somewhere between Puerto Rico and New York.

It was raining in Brooklyn. Mist hung over the airport so that all I saw as we landed were fuzzy white and blue lights on the runway and at the terminal. We thudded to earth as if the pilot had miscalculated just how close we were to the ground. A startled silence was followed by frightened cries and alewys and the rustle of everyone rushing to get up from their seats and out of the plane as soon as possible.

Mami’s voice mixed and became confused with the voices of other mothers telling their children to pick up their things, stay together, to walk quickly toward the door and not to hold up the line. Edna, Raymond, and I each had bundles to carry, as did Mami, who was loaded with two huge bags filled with produce and spices del pais. “You can’t find these in New York,” she’d explained.

We filed down a long, drafty tunnel, at the end of which many people waited, smiling, their hands waving and reaching, their voices mingling into a roar of hellos and how are you’s and oh, my god, it’s been so long’s.

“Over there,” Mami said, shoving us. On the fringes of the crowd a tall woman with short cropped hair, a black lace dress, and black open-toed shoes leaned against a beam that had been painted yellow. I didn’t recognize her, but she looked at me as if she knew who I was and then loped toward us, arms outstretched. It was my mother’s mother, Tata. Raymond let go of Mami’s hand and ran into Tata’s arms. Mami hugged and kissed her. Edna and I hung back, waiting.

“This is Edna,” Mami said, pushing her forward for a hug and kiss.

“And this must be Negi,” Tata said, pulling me into her embrace. I pressed against her and felt the sharp prongs of the rhinestone brooch on her left shoulder against my face. She held me longer than I expected, wrapped me in the scratchy softness of her black lace dress, the warmth of her powdered skin, the sting of her bittersweet breath, pungent of beer and cigarettes.

Behind her loomed a man shorter than she, but as imposing. He was squarely built, with narrow eyes under heavy eye brows, a broad nose, and full lips fuzzed with a pencil mustache. No one would have ever called him handsome, but there was about him a gentleness, a sweetness that made me wish he were a relative. He was, in a manner of speaking, Mami introduced him as “Don Julio, Tata’s friend.” We shook hands, his broad, fleshy palm seeming to swallow mine.

“Let’s get our things,” Mami said, pulling us into a knot near her. “You kids, don’t let go of each other’s hands. It’s crazy here tonight.”

We joined the stream of people claiming their baggage. Boxes filled with fruit and vegetables had torn, and their contents had
spilled and broken into slippery messes on the floor. Overstuffed suitcases tied with ropes or hastily taped together had given way, and people’s underwear, baby diapers, and ratty shoes pushed through the stressed seams where everyone could see them. People pointed, laughed, and looked to see who would claim these sorry belongings, who could have thought the faded, torn clothes and stained shoes were still good enough for their new life in Brooklyn.

“That’s why I left everything behind,” Mami sniffed. “Who wants to carry that kind of junk around?”

We had a couple of new suitcases and three or four boxes carefully packed, taped at the seams, tied with rope, and labelled with our name and an address in New York that was all numbers. We had brought only our “good” things: Mami’s work clothes and shoes, a few changes of playclothes for me, Edna, and Raymond, some of them made by Mami herself, others bought just before we left. She brought her towels, sheets, and pillowcases, not new, but still “decent looking.”

“I’ll see if I can find a taxi,” Don Julio said. “You wait here.”

We huddled in front of the terminal while Don Julio negotiated with drivers. The first one looked at us, counted the number of packages we carried, asked Don Julio where we were going, then shook his head and drove along the curb toward a man in a business suit with a briefcase who stood there calmly, his right hand in the air as if he were saluting, his fingers wiggling every so often. The second driver gave us a hateful look and said some words that I didn’t understand, but I knew what he meant just the same. Before he drove off, Mami mumbled through her teeth “Charamanbiche.” Don Julio said it was illegal for a driver to refuse a fare, but that didn’t stop them from doing it.

Finally, a swarthy man with thick black hair and a flat cap on his head stopped, got out of his taxi, and helped us load our stuff. He didn’t speak Spanish, none of us spoke English, and, it appeared, neither did he. But he gave us a toothy, happy smile, lifted Raymond into Mami’s lap, made sure our fingers and toes were inside the taxi before he closed the doors, then got in with a great deal of huffing and puffing, as his belly didn’t fit between the seat and the steering wheel. Tata and Don Julio sat in the front seat with the driver, who kept asking questions no one understood.

“He wants to know where we’re from,” Mami figured out, and we told him.

“Ah, Porto Reeco, yes, es hot,” he said. “San Juan?”

“Yes,” Mami said, the first time I’d ever heard her speak English.

The driver launched into a long speech peppered with familiar words like America and President Kennedy. Mami, Tata, and Don Julio nodded every once in a while, uh-huhed, and laughed whenever the taxi driver did. I wasn’t sure whether he had no idea that we didn’t understand him, or whether he didn’t care.

Rain had slicked the streets into shiny, reflective tunnels lined with skyscrapers whose tops disappeared into the mist. Lampposts shed uneven silver circles of light whose edges faded to gray. An empty trash can chained to a parking meter banged and rolled from side to side, and its lid, also chained, flipped and flapped in the wind like a kite on a short string. The taxi stopped at a red light under an overpass. A train roared by above us, its tiny square windows full of shapes.

“Look at her,” Tata laughed from the front seat, “Negi’s eyes are popping out of her head.”

“That’s because the streets are not paved with gold, like she thought,” Mami teased.

The taxi driver grinned. I pressed my face to the window, which was fogged all around except on the spot I’d rubbed so that I could look out.

It was late. Few windows on the tall buildings flanking us were lit. The stores were shuttered, blocked with crisscrossed grates knotted with chains and enormous padlocks. Empty buses glowed from within with eerie gray light, chugging slowly from one stop to the next, their drivers sleepy and bored.

Mami was wrong. I didn’t expect the streets of New York to
be paved with gold, but I did expect them to be bright and cheerful, clean, lively. Instead, they were dark and forbidding, empty, hard.

We stopped in front of a brick building. Here, too, battered trash cans were chained to a black lamppost, only these were filled with garbage, some of which had spilled out and lay scattered in puddles of pulpy hash. The door to the building was painted black, and there was a hole where the knob should have been.

Mami had to wake up Edna and Raymond. Tata picked one up, and Mami the other. Don Julio helped the taxi driver get our stuff.

"This way," Tata said.

We entered a hallway where a bare dim bulb shed faint blue light against green walls. Tata led us past many doors to the other end of the hall, where she pushed against another black door and led us into a cobblestoned courtyard with a tree in front of another, smaller building.

"Watch the puddles," Tata said, too late. Cold water seeped into my right shoe, soaking my white cotton socks. We went in another door without a knob, into a smaller hallway with steps leading up to a landing.

Tata pushed the first door on our left with her foot. We entered a small room with a window giving onto the courtyard. As we came in, a tall man got up from a cot near the window and weaved toward us. His long hair was gray. Round hazel eyes bulged from their sockets; the whites were streaked with red and yellow. He hugged Mami and helped her settle Raymond on the cot he'd just left. Tata lay Edna next to Raymond and tucked a blanket around them.

"So this is Negi," the tall man said.

"This is your uncle Chico, Tata's brother," Mami said. "You remember him, don't you?"

I remembered the name, but not this bony scarecrow with the stale smell of sweat and beer.

"She was just a little kid when I last saw her," he said, his hands on my shoulders. "How old are you now?"

"Thirteen," I croaked.

"Thirteen!" He whistled.

Don Julio came in. He took a key from a nail by the door and went out again.

"Give me a hand with this stuff, can you, Chico?"

"Oh, of course, of course." He shuffled off after Don Julio.

"How about something to eat?" Tata said. "Or a beer?"

Mami shook her head. Tata took a Budweiser from the small refrigerator and opened it. She drank from the can.

"Are you hungry?" Mami asked me.

"Yes."

Tata put her beer down and turned on the hot plate next to the refrigerator.

"Chico made some *asopao*. I'll make some coffee."

"Where's the bathroom?" Mami asked.

"Across the hall," Tata pointed to the door. Next to it there was a curtained-off area. On her way out, Mami peeked inside. The curtain hid a large bed and clothes on wire hangers lining the wall.

"That's our bedroom," Tata said. "Your apartment is upstairs. Two big rooms. And you don't have to share a bathroom like we do."

"I'll go take a look," Mami stepped out then turned around to find me right behind her. "Negi, you wait right here."

"But I want to see too."

"Have something to eat and keep still. You'll have plenty of time later."

I leaned against the door and watched Tata.

Even though she was quite tall, Tata was not cramped by the small room. Her hands, with long tapered fingers and wide nails, grasped pots and cooking spoons from shelves above the stove and placed them soundlessly on the glowing hot-plate burner. Her back was wide, straight, and she carried her head as if she had something on it that she couldn't let fall. Her hair was black streaked with silver, cut short and curled away from her face. Her large brown eyes were outlined with long black lashes under arched brows. She smiled
mischievously as she put a bowl of *asopao* on the table opposite the cot and dragged one of the two chairs from its place against the wall.

"Here you are," she said. "Chico makes good *asopao*, but not as good as mine."

It was delicious, thick with rice and chunks of chicken, cubed potatoes, green olives, and capers. She tore off a chunk of bread from a long loaf on top of the refrigerator, spread it thick with butter, and put the bread on a napkin in front of me.

"Monín told me you like bread. This is fresh from the bakery down the street."

It was crunchy on the outside and soft on the inside, just the way I liked it.

Don Julio and Chico came back, followed by Mami, her eyes bright.

"What a great place! Wait till you see it, Negi. It's twice the size of this one, with windows in the front and back. And there's a huge bathtub, and a gas stove with four burners!"

"And your school is only five blocks from here," Don Julio said. "Just beyond *la marketa*."

"What's a *marketa*?" I asked. Everyone laughed.

"It's a big building with stalls where you can buy anything," Mami said.

"Like the plaza in Bayamón," Tata added.

"Only much bigger," Chico said.

"Look at her. She's excited about it already," Tata said, and they all stared at me with broad smiles, willing me to give in to their enthusiasm. I ran into Mami's arms, unable to admit that a part of me was looking forward to the morning, to the newness of our life, and afraid to let the other part show, the part that was scared.

---

There were angels on the ceiling. Four fat naked cherubs danced in a circle, their hands holding ivy garlands, their round buttocks half covered by a cloth swirling around their legs. Next to me, Mami snored softly. At the foot of the bed,

Edna and Raymond slept curled away from each other, their backs against my legs. The bedroom had very high ceilings with braided molding all the way around, ending in a circle surrounded by more braid above the huge window across from the bed. The shade was down, but bright sunlight streaked in at the edges. The cherubs looked down on us, smiling mysteriously, and I wondered how many people they had seen come in and out of this room. Slowly I crawled over Mami, out of bed.

"Where are you going?" she mumbled, half asleep.

"To the bathroom," I whispered.

The bed was pressed into the corner against the wall across from the window, next to a wide doorway that led into the next room. A long dresser stretched from the doorway to the window wall, leaving an aisle just wide enough to open the drawers halfway out.

It was six in the morning of my first day in Brooklyn. Our apartment, on the second floor, was the fanciest place I'd ever lived in. The stairs coming up from Tata's room on the first floor were marble, with a landing in between, and a colored glass window with bunches of grapes and twirling vines. The door to our apartment was carved with more bunches of grapes and leaves. From the two windows in the main room we could look out on the courtyard we had come through the night before. A tree with broad brown leaves grew from the middle of what looked like a well, circled with the same stones that lined the ground. Scraggly grass poked out between the cracks and in the brown dirt around the tree. The building across from ours was three stories high, crisscrossed by iron stairs with narrow landings on which people grew tomatoes and geraniums in clay pots. Our building was only two stories high, although it was almost as tall as the one across the courtyard. We, too, had an iron balcony with a straight ladder suspended halfway to the ground. It made me a little dizzy to look down.

The main room of our apartment was large and sunny and decorated with more braided molding. The whole apartment
was painted pale yellow, except for the ceilings, which were smoky gray. The floor was covered with a flat rug whose fringes had worn away into frayed edges where they met the wood floor. A fireplace had been blocked up with a metal sheet. More cherubs, grapes, and vines decorated the mantel. One of the cherubs was missing a nose; another had lost both hands and a foot. Next to the fireplace there was a small stove with four burners close together, a narrow counter with shelves underneath, and a deep sink. A door next to the sink led to the toilet, which was flushed by pulling a chain attached to a wooden box on the wall above the seat. On the other side of the toilet room door, on the wall opposite the windows, there was a huge, claw-foot bathtub covered by a metal sheet. In the middle of the room was a formica table and four chairs with plastic seats and backs that matched the tabletop. A lopsided couch and lumpy chair covered in a scratchy blue fabric faced the tub as if bathing were a special event to which spectators were invited.

The windows and door were locked, and Mami had warned the night before that I was not to leave the apartment without telling her. There was no place to go anyway. I had no idea where I was, only that it was very far away from where I'd been. Brooklyn, Mami had said, was not New York. I wished I had a map so that I could place myself in relation to Puerto Rico. But everything we owned was packed and stacked against the yellow walls. Not that there was a map in there, either.

There was nothing to do, nowhere to go, no one to talk to. The apartment was stifling. Inside the closed rooms, the air was still. Not even dust motes in the sunlight. Outside the windows, a steady roar was interrupted by sharp sirens or the insistent crash and clang of garbage cans, the whining motors of cars, and the faint sound of babies crying.

La marketa took up a whole block. It was much bigger and more confusing than the plaza in Bayamón, although it carried pretty much the same types of things. It was a red brick building with skylights in the high ceiling, so that whatever sun made it in lit up the dusty beams and long fluorescent light fixtures suspended from them. The floor was a gritty cement and gravel mix, sticky in places, spotted with what looked like oil slicks. Stalls were arranged along aisles, the merchandise on deep shelves that slanted down.

On the way to la marketa we had passed two men dressed in long black coats, their faces bearded. Ringlets hung from under their hats alongside their faces.

"Don't stare," Mami pulled on my hand.
"Why are they dressed so strange?"
"They're Jewish. They don't eat pork."
"Why not?"
"I don't know. They all live in the same neighborhood and only buy food from each other."

In la marketa almost all the vendors were Jewish, only they didn't wear their coats and hats. They wore white shirts and little round doilies on their heads. Many of them spoke Spanish, which made it easy for Mami to negotiate the price of everything.

"You never pay the first price they tell you," she instructed. "They like to bargain."

We went from stall to stall, arguing about every item we picked out. The vendors always made it seem as if we were cheating them, even though Mami said everything was overpriced.

"Don't ever pay full price for anything," Mami told me. "It's always cheaper somewhere else."

It was a game: the vendors wanting more money than Mami was willing to spend, but both of them knowing that eventually, she would part with her dollars and they would get them. It made no sense to me. It took most of the day to buy the stuff we needed for our apartment. Had she spent less time shopping around, she might have bought more. As it was, she only had half the things we needed, and we were exhausted and irritable by the time we got home. I had spent my entire first day in New York hunting for bargains.
The second day was no different. “We have to buy your school clothes, and a coat,” Mami said.

Winter would be coming soon, Tata said, and with it, chilly winds, snowstorms, and short days.

“The first winter is always the worst,” Don Julio explained, “because your blood is still thin from living in Puerto Rico.” I imagined my blood thickening into syrup but didn’t know how that could make me warmer.

“I can’t wait to see snow,” Edna chirped.

“Me neither,” said Raymond.

Two days in Brooklyn, and they already loved everything about it. Tata cared for them while Mami and I shopped. She sat them down in front of a black-and-white television set, gave each a chocolate bar, and they spent the entire day watching cartoons, while Tata smoked and drank beer.

“What good kids they are,” she complimented Mami when we came back. “Not a peep out of them all day.”

Graham Avenue in Williamsburg was the broadest street I’d ever seen. It was flanked by three- and four-story apartment buildings, the first floors of which contained stores where you could buy anything. Most of these stores were also run by Jewish people, but they didn’t speak Spanish like the ones in la marketa. They were less friendly, too, unwilling to negotiate prices. On Graham Avenue there were special restaurants where Mami said Jewish people ate. They were called delis, and there were foreign symbols in the windows, and underneath them the word kosher. I knew Mami wouldn’t know what it meant, so I didn’t bother asking. I imagined it was a delicacy that only Jewish people ate, which is why their restaurants so prominently let them know you could get it there. We didn’t go into the delis because, Mami said, they didn’t like Puerto Ricans in there. Instead, she took me to eat pizza.

“It’s Italian,” she said.

“Do Italians like Puerto Ricans?” I asked as I bit into hot cheese and tomato sauce that burned the tip of my tongue.

“They’re more like us than Jewish people are,” she said, which wasn’t an answer.

In Puerto Rico the only foreigners I’d been aware of were Americanos. In two days in Brooklyn I had already encountered Jewish people, and now Italians. There was another group of people Mami had pointed out to me. Morenos. But they weren’t foreigners, because they were American. They were black, but they didn’t look like Puerto Rican negros. They dressed like Americanos but walked with a jaunty hop that made them look as if they were dancing down the street, only their hips were not as loose as Puerto Rican men’s were. According to Mami, they too lived in their own neighborhoods, frequented their own restaurants, and didn’t like Puerto Ricans.

“How come?” I wondered, since in Puerto Rico, all of the people I’d ever met were either black or had a black relative somewhere in their family. I would have thought morenos would like us, since so many of us looked like them.

“They think we’re taking their jobs.”

“Are we?”

“There’s enough work in the United States for everybody,” Mami said, “but some people think some work is beneath them. Me, if I have to crawl on all fours to earn a living, I’ll do it. I’m not proud that way.”

I couldn’t imagine what kind of work required crawling on all fours, although I remembered Mami scrubbing the floor that way, so that it seemed she was talking about housework. Although, according to her, she wouldn’t be too proud to clean other people’s houses, I hoped she wouldn’t have to do it. It would be too embarrassing to come all the way from Puerto Rico so she could be somebody’s maid.

The first day of school Mami walked me to a stone building that loomed over Graham Avenue, its concrete yard enclosed by an iron fence with spikes at the top. The front steps were wide but shallow and led up to a set of heavy double doors that slammed shut behind us as we walked down the shiny
corridor. I clutched my eighth-grade report card filled with A's and B's, and Mami had my birth certificate. At the front office we were met by Mr. Grant, a droopy gentleman with thick glasses and a kind smile who spoke no Spanish. He gave Mami a form to fill out. I knew most of the words in the squares we were to fill in: NAME, ADDRESS (CITY, STATE), and OCCUPATION. We gave it to Mr. Grant, who reviewed it, looked at my birth certificate, studied my report card, then wrote on the top of the form "7-18."

Don Julio had told me that if students didn't speak English, the schools in Brooklyn would keep them back one grade until they learned it.

"Seven gray?" I asked Mr. Grant, pointing at his big numbers, and he nodded.

"I no guan seven gray, I eight gray, I teeneyer."

"You don't speak English," he said. "You have to go to seventh grade while you're learning."

"I have A's in school Puerto Rico. I lern good. I no seven gray girl."

Mami stared at me, not understanding but knowing I was being rude to an adult.

"What's going on?" she asked me in Spanish. I told her they wanted to send me back one grade and I would not have it. This was probably the first rebellious act she had seen from me outside my usual mouthiness within the family.

"Negi, leave it alone. Those are the rules," she said, a warning in her voice.

"I don't care what their rules say," I answered. "I'm not going back to seventh grade. I can do the work. I'm not stupid."

Mami looked at Mr. Grant, who stared at her as if expecting her to do something about me. She smiled and shrugged her shoulders.

"Meester Grant," I said, seizing the moment, "I go eight gray six mons. Eef I no lern inglish, I go seven gray. Okay?"

"That's not the way we do things here," he said, hesitating.

"I good studen. I lern queek. You see notes." I pointed to the A's in my report card. "I pass seven gray."

So we made a deal.

"You have until Christmas," he said. "I'll be checking on your progress." He scratched out "7-18" and wrote in "8-23." He wrote something on a piece of paper, sealed it inside an envelope, and gave it to me. "Your teacher is Miss Brown. Take this note upstairs to her. Your mother can go," he said and disappeared into his office.

"Wwow!" Mami said, "you can speak English!"

I was so proud of myself, I almost burst. In Puerto Rico if I'd been that pushy, I would have been called mal educada by the Mr. Grant equivalent and sent home with a note to my mother. But here it was my teacher who was getting the note, I got what I wanted, and my mother was sent home.

"I can find my way after school," I said to Mami. "You don't have to come get me."

"Are you sure?"

"Don't worry," I said. "I'll be all right."

I walked down the black-tiled hallway, past many doors that were half glass, each one labelled with a room number in neat black lettering. Other students stared at me, tried to get my attention, or pointedly ignored me. I kept walking as if I knew where I was going, heading for the sign that said STAIRS with an arrow pointing up. When I reached the end of the hall and looked back, Mami was still standing at the front door watching me, a worried expression on her face. I waved, and she waved back. I started up the stairs, my stomach churning into tight knots. All of a sudden, I was afraid that I was about to make a fool of myself and end up in seventh grade in the middle of the school year. Having to fall back would be worse than just accepting my fate now and hopping forward if I proved to be as good a student as I had convinced Mr. Grant I was. "What have I done?" I kicked myself with the back of my right shoe, much to the surprise of the fellow walking behind me, who laughed uproariously, as if I had meant it as a joke.
Miss Brown's was the learning disabled class, where the administration sent kids with all sorts of problems, none of which, from what I could see, had anything to do with their ability to learn but more with their willingness to do so. They were an unruly group. Those who came to class, anyway. Half of them never showed up, or, when they did, they slept through the lesson or nodded off in the middle of Miss Brown's carefully parsed sentences.

We were outcasts in a school where the smartest eighth graders were in the 8-1 homeroom, each subsequent drop in number indicating one notch less smart. If your class was in the low double digits, (8-10 for instance), you were smart, but not a pinhead. Once you got into the teens, your intelligence was in question, especially as the numbers rose to the high teens. And then there were the twenties. I was in 8-23, where the dumbest, most undesirable people were placed. My class was, in some ways, the equivalent of seventh grade, perhaps even sixth or fifth.

Miss Brown, the homeroom teacher, who also taught English composition, was a young black woman who wore sweat pads under her arms. The strings holding them in place sometimes slipped outside the short sleeves of her well-pressed white shirts, and she had to turn her back to us in order to adjust them. She was very pretty, with almond eyes and a hairdo that was flat and straight at the top of her head then dipped into tight curls at the ends. Her fingers were well manicured, the nails painted pale pink with white tips. She taught English composition as if everyone cared about it, which I found appealing.

After the first week she moved me from the back of the room to the front seat by her desk, and after that, it felt as if she were teaching me alone. We never spoke, except when I went up to the blackboard.

"Esmeralda," she called in a musical voice, "would you please come up and mark the prepositional phrase?"

In her class, I learned to recognize the structure of the English language, and to draft the parts of a sentence by the position of words relative to pronouns and prepositions without knowing exactly what the whole thing meant.

The school was huge and noisy. There was a social order that, at first, I didn't understand but kept bumping into. Girls and boys who wore matching cardigans walked down the halls hand in hand, sometimes stopping behind lockers to kiss and fondle each other. They were Americanos and belonged in the homerooms in the low numbers.

Another group of girls wore heavy makeup, hitched their skirts above their knees, opened one extra button on their blouses, and teased their hair into enormous bouffants held solid with spray. In the morning, they took over the girls' bathroom, where they dragged on cigarettes as they did their hair until the air was unbearable, thick with smoke and hair spray. The one time I entered the bathroom before classes they chased me out with insults and rough shoves.

Those bold girls with hair and makeup and short skirts, I soon found out, were Italian. The Italians all sat together on one side of the cafeteria, the blacks on another. The two groups hated each other more than they hated Puerto Ricans. At least once a week there was a fight between an Italian and a moreno, either in the bathroom, in the school yard, or in an abandoned lot near the school, a no-man's-land that divided their neighborhoods and kept them apart on weekends.

The black girls had their own style. Not for them the big, poufy hair of the Italians. Their hair was straightened, curled at the tips like Miss Brown's, or pulled up into a twist at the back with wispy curls and straw straight bangs over Cleopatra eyes. Their skirts were also short, except it didn't look like they hitched them up when their mothers weren't looking. They came that way. They had strong, shapely legs and wore knee socks with heavy lace-up shoes that became lethal weapons in fights.

It was rumored that the Italians carried knives, even the girls, and that the morenos had brass knuckles in their pockets and steel toes in their heavy shoes. I stayed away from both.
groups, afraid that if I befriended an Italian, I'd get beat up by a *morena*, or vice versa.

There were two kinds of Puerto Ricans in school: the newly arrived, like myself, and the ones born in Brooklyn of Puerto Rican parents. The two types didn't mix. The Brooklyn Puerto Ricans spoke English, and often no Spanish at all. To them, Puerto Rico was the place where their grandparents lived, a place they visited on school and summer vacations, a place which they complained was backward and mosquito-ridden. Those of us for whom Puerto Rico was still a recent memory were also split into two groups: the ones who longed for the island and the ones who wanted to forget it as soon as possible.

I felt disloyal for wanting to learn English, for liking pizza, for studying the girls with big hair and trying out their styles at home, locked in the bathroom where no one could watch. I practiced walking with the peculiar little hop of the *morenas*, but felt as if I were limping.

I didn't feel comfortable with the newly arrived Puerto Ricans who stuck together in suspicious little groups, criticizing everyone, afraid of everything. And I was not accepted by the Brooklyn Puerto Ricans, who held the secret of coolness. They walked the halls between the Italians and the *morenos*, neither one nor the other, but looking and acting like a combination of both, depending on the texture of their hair, the shade of their skin, their makeup, and the way they walked down the hall.

One day I came home from school to find all our things packed and Mami waiting.

"Your sisters and brothers are coming," she said. "We're moving to a bigger place."

Tata and I helped her drag the stuff out to the sidewalk. After it was all together, Mami walked to Graham Avenue and found a cab. The driver helped us load the trunk, the front seat, and the floor of the rear seat until we were sitting on our bundles for the short ride to Varet Street, on the other side of the projects.

I'd read about but had never seen the projects. Just that weekend a man had taken a nine-year-old girl to the roof of one of the buildings, raped her, and thrown her over the side, down twenty-one stories. *El Diario*, the Spanish newspaper, had covered the story in detail and featured a picture of the building facing Bushwick Avenue, with a dotted line from where the girl was thrown to where she fell.

But Mami didn't talk about that. She said that the new apartment was much bigger, and that Tata would be living with us so she could take care of us while Mami worked. I wouldn't have to change schools.

The air was getting cooler, and before Delsa, Norma, Héctor, and Alicia came, Mami and I went shopping for coats and sweaters in a secondhand store, so that the kids wouldn't get sick their first week in Brooklyn. We also bought a couch and two matching chairs, two big beds, a chiffoniere with a mirror, and two folding cots. Mami let me pick out the stuff, and I acted like a rich lady, choosing the most ornate pieces I spotted, with gold curlicues painted on the wood, intricate carving, and fancy pulls on the drawers.

Our new place was a railroad-style apartment on the second floor of a three-story house. There were four rooms from front to back, one leading into the other: the living room facing Varet Street, then our bedroom, then Tata's room, then the kitchen. The tub was in the bathroom this time, and the kitchen was big enough for a table and chairs, two folding racks for drying clothes washed by hand in the sink, and a stack of shelves for groceries. The fireplace in the living room, with its plain marble mantel, was blocked off, and we put Tata's television in front of it. The wood floors were dark and difficult to clean because the mop strings caught in splinters and cracks. The ceilings were high, but no cherubs danced around garlands, and no braided molding curled around the borders.

On October 7, 1961, Don Julio, Mami, and I went to the airport to pick up Delsa, Norma, Héctor, and Alicia. Papi had sent them unescorted, with Delsa in charge. The first thing I noticed was that her face was pinched and tired. At eleven
years old Delsa looked like a woman, but her tiny body was still that of a little girl.

In the taxi on the way home, I couldn't stop talking, telling Delsa about the broad streets, the big schools, the subway train. I told her about the Italians, the morenos, the Jewish. I described how in Brooklyn we didn't have to wear uniforms to school, but on Fridays there was a class called assembly in a big auditorium, and all the kids had to wear white shirts.

Tata prepared a feast: asopao, Drake's cakes, Coke, and potato chips. The kids were wide-eyed and scared. I wondered if that's the way I had looked two months earlier and hoped that if I had, it had worn off by now.

All my brothers and sisters were sent back one grade so they could learn English, so I walked to the junior high school alone, and my sisters and brothers went together to the elementary school on Bushwick Avenue. Mami insisted that I take the long way to school and not cut across the projects, but I did it once, because I wanted to find the spot where the little girl had fallen. I wondered if she had been dead when she fell, or if she had been still alive. Whether she had screamed, or whether, when you fell from such a great height, you lose air and can't make a sound, as sometimes happened to me if I ran too fast. The broad concrete walkways curved in and around the massive yellow buildings that rose taller than anything else in the neighborhood. What would happen to the people who lived there in case of fire? I imagined people jumping out the windows, raining down onto the broad sidewalks and cement basketball courts.

The walls of the projects and the buildings nearby were covered with graffiti. I didn't know what LIKE A MOTHER FUCKER meant after someone's name. Sometimes the phrase would be abbreviated: SLICK L.A.M.F. or PAPOTE L.A.M.F. I had heard kids say "shit" when something annoyed them, but when I tried it at home, Mami yelled at me for saying a bad word. I didn't know how she knew what it meant and I didn't, and she wouldn't tell me.

"Mami, can I get a bra?"
"What for, you don't have anything up there." She laughed.
"Yes, I do. Look! All the girls in my school..."
"You don't need a bra until you're señorita, so don't ask again."

"Mami," I said a couple of weeks later as she changed out of her work clothes. "I'm going to need that bra now."
"What?" she stared at me, ready to argue, and then her face lit up. "Really? When?"
"I noticed it when I came home from school."
"Do you know what to do?"
"Sí."
"Who told you?" Her face was a jumble of disappointment and suspicion.
"We had a class about it in school."
"Ah, okay then. Come with me, and I'll show you where I keep my Kotex." We walked hand in hand to the bathroom. Tata was in the kitchen. "Guess what, Tata," Mami said. "Negi is a señorita?"
"Ay, that's wonderful!" She hugged and kissed me. She held me at arms length, her eyes serious. Her voice dropped to a grave tone. "Remember, when you're like that, don't eat pineapples."
"Why not?"
"It curdles the blood."

In the bathroom Mami showed me her Kotex, hidden on a high shelf under towels. "When you change them, wrap the soiled ones in toilet paper, so no one can see. Do you want me to help you put the first one on?"
"No!"
"Just asking." She left me alone, but I could hear her and Tata giggling in the kitchen. The next day Mami brought me a couple of white cotton bras with tiny blue flowers between the cups. "These are from the factory," she said. "I sewed the cups myself."
While Mami worked in Manhattan, Tata watched us. As
the days grew shorter and the air cooler, she began drinking
wine or beer earlier in the day, so it wasn't unusual for us to
come home from school and find her drunk, although she still
would make supper and insist that we eat a full helping of
whatever she had cooked.

"My bones hurt," she said. "The beer makes the pain less."

Her blood had never thickened, Don Julio explained, and
she had developed arthritis. Tata had been in Brooklyn more
than fifteen years, and if her blood hadn't thickened by then, I
worried about how long it would take.

We complained about being cold all the time, but Mami
couldn't do anything about it. She called "el lanlor" from
work, so that he would turn on the heat in the building, but he
never did.

On the coldest days, Tata lit up the oven and the four
burners on the stove. She left the oven door open, and we took
turns sitting in front of it warming up.

One evening as we all sat grouped around the stove I told
the kids a fairy tale I'd just read. Don Julio crouched in the
corner listening. Like my sisters and brothers, he frequently in-
terrupted the story to ask for more details, like what color was
the Prince's horse, and what did the fairy godmother wear?
The more they asked, the more elaborate the story became un-
til, by the end, it was nothing like what I had started with.

When it was over, they applauded.
"Tell us another one," Héctor demanded.
"Tomorrow."
"If you tell it now," Don Julio said, "I'll give you a dime."
"For a dime, I'll tell a story," Delsa jumped in.
"I'll do it for a nickel," challenged Norma.
"Everyone quiet! It's my dime. I'll tell it."

Edna and Raymond huddled closer to my feet. Delsa and
Norma, who had sprawled on the linoleum floor wrapped in
a blanket, argued about who had to move to give the other
more room.

"Let me get another beer," Don Julio said, and he lumbered
to the refrigerator.

Tata lay on her bed in the next room. "Get me one too, will
you Julio?" she called out. "Negi, talk louder so I can hear the
story."

"Would anyone like some hot chocolate and bread with but-
ter?" Mami offered.

There was a chorus of "Me, me, me, me."
"Do you want me to tell the story or not?"
"Yes, of course," Don Julio said. "Let's just get comfort-
able."

"Go ahead and start, Negi," Mami said. "The milk takes a
while to heat up, and I have to melt the chocolate bar first."
"All right. Once upon a time...

"One minute," Alicia interrupted. "I have to go to the bath-
room. Don't nobody take my place," she warned.

The fluorescent fixture overhead buzzed and flickered, its
blue-gray light giving our faces an ashen color, as if we were
dead. Don Julio's face looked menacing in that light, although
his small green eyes and childlike smile were reassuring. My sis-
ters and brothers were huddled together as close to the open
oven door as they could manage without getting in Mami's way
as she melted a bar of Chocolate Cortés and kept adjusting the
flame on the pan of milk so that it wouldn't boil over. The room
looked larger when we were all together like this, leaning to-
ward the warmth. The walls seemed higher and steeper, the
ceilings further away, the sounds of the city, its constant roar,
disappeared behind the clink of Mami's spoon stirring choco-
late, the soft, even breathing of my sisters and brothers, the light
thump each time Don Julio set his beer can on the formica
table. Brooklyn became just a memory as I led them to distant
lands where palaces shimmered against desert sand and paupers
became princes with the whush of a magic wand.

Every night that first winter we gathered in the kitchen
around the oven door, and I embellished fairy tales in which
the main characters were named after my sisters and brothers,
who, no matter how big the odds, always triumphed and always went on to live happily ever after.

“Come kids, come look. It’s snowing!” Mami opened the window wide, stuck out her hand, and let the snow collect on her palm. It looked like the coconut flakes she grated for arroz con dulce. The moment it fell onto our hands, it melted into shimmering puddles, which we licked in slurry gulps.

“Can we go down and play in it, Mami?” we begged, but she wouldn’t let us because it was dark out, and the streets were never safe after dark. We filled glasses with the snow clumping on the fire escape then poured tamarind syrup on it to make piraguas Brooklyn-style. But they tasted nothing like the real thing because the snow melted in the cup, and we missed the crunchy bits of ice we were used to.

The next day schools were closed, and we went out bundled in all the clothes Mami could get on us. The world was clean and crisp. A white blanket spread over the neighborhood, covering garbage cans and the hulks of abandoned cars, so that the street looked fresh and full of promise.

When schools opened again, kids ran in groups and made snowballs, which they then threw at passing buses, or at each other. But as beautiful as it was, and as cheerful as it made everyone for a while, in Brooklyn, even snow was dangerous. One of my classmates had to be rushed to the hospital when another kid hit him in the eye with a rock tightly packed inside a lump of snow.

Every day after school I went to the library and took out as many children’s books as I was allowed. I figured that if American children learned English through books, so could I, even if I was starting later. I studied the bright illustrations and learned the words for the unfamiliar objects of our new life in the United States: A for Apple, B for Bear, C for Cabbage. As my vocabulary grew, I moved to large-print chapter books.

Mami bought me an English-English dictionary because that way, when I looked up a word I would be learning others.

By my fourth month in Brooklyn, I could read and write English much better than I could speak it, and at midterms I stunned the teachers by scoring high in English, History, and Social Studies. During the January assembly, Mr. Grant announced the names of the kids who had received high marks in each class. My name was called out three times. I became a different person to the other eighth graders. I was still in 8-23, but they knew, and I knew, that I didn’t belong there.

That first winter, Mami fell in love with Francisco, who lived across the street. He had straight black hair combed into a pompadour, black eyes, and very pale skin. He looked at Mami the way I imagined Prince Charming looked at Cinderella, and she blushed when he was around. When he came to visit, he brought us candy, and once he brought Mami flowers.

We teased her. “Mami has a boyfriend. Mami has a boyfriend.”

“Stop that nonsense,” she’d say. “You’re being disrespectful.” But there was a secret smile on her face, and we knew she wasn’t angry.

Tata didn’t like Francisco. “He’s younger than you are,” she told Mami. “You should be ashamed.”

But Mami wasn’t. Evenings, after work, she visited across the street, where Francisco lived with his parents and brother. After dinner they played cards around the dining room table. Mami never stayed long, but she always came back from his house happy. That put Tata in a dark mood, especially when she’d been drinking.

“Everyone’s talking,” she’d say.

“I don’t care,” Mami would answer. “It’s my life.”

Once, Tata and Don Julio had been drinking all afternoon. We knew to stay away from the kitchen, where they argued about politics, the price of ham hocks, whether or not his
daughters were uppity, and which horse had won the trifecta. When Mami came home from work, she took her dinner to the living room and ate in front of the television while we did our homework.

There was a knock on the door and when Mami opened it, Francisco stood in the hall, a shy smile on his lips.

“Who’s there?” Tata called from the kitchen in a challenging tone.

Mami didn’t answer, but stepped aside to let Francisco in. As soon as she saw him, Tata flew out of the kitchen like a witch toward the full moon and screamed insults at Francisco.

“Tata, please,” Mami begged, “behave yourself. He’s a guest. Don’t embarrass me.”

But Tata pushed against Don Julio, who held her back, as if she wanted to jump on Francisco and beat the daylights out of him. In tears, Mami let Francisco out, then she gathered us for bed while Don Julio dragged Tata back to the kitchen. We turned the lights out in our part of the apartment, but we could still hear Tata and Don Julio arguing about whether a thirty-year-old woman with seven children should encourage a man in his twenties.

“And what about your daughters?” Tata yelled. “What kind of an example are you giving them?” Mami just pulled the covers over her head.

A week later we moved down the street to a two-room apartment in front of a bottling company. Francisco came to visit every day. He could be counted on to play gin rummy and dominoes, to bring us candy and soda, and to make Mami smile like she hadn’t done in a long time. One day he came for dinner, and the next morning he was still there. After that, he lived with us.

That summer, Marilyn Monroe killed herself.

Across the street from our apartment trucks idled in the loading zone of the soft-drink warehouse at all hours while men loaded crates of cola, grape, and orange soda in to the backs of the trucks. I often leaned on the window sill and watched the huge garage doors groaning up and down, the forklifts whizzing in and out with pallets stacked with crates of delicious fizzy drinks.

I listened to the radio anecdotes about Marilyn and watched the activity across the street and down the block, where someone had opened a hydrant and children squealed in and out of the rushing water. No matter how hot it got, Mami wouldn’t allow us to cool off in the hydrant with the neighborhood kids, whom she considered a bad influence.

A truck pulled up, the driver went into the building across the street, came out, sat in his truck, and waited for it to be loaded. He waved at me, and when I looked, he dove his hand into his crotch and pulled out what looked like a pale salami. I couldn’t take my eyes off it as his hand pumped rhythmically to the loud rock and roll on his radio. He was at it a long time, and I lost interest, closed the venetian blind, and joined my sisters and brothers in front of the television set. But after a while I was curious, so I went back and lifted one of the blinds. He still sat there, but his hand now toyed around his crotch as if he’d lost something. He saw me and began rubbing again, a grimace on his face.

I’d changed enough diapers to know what happened if a boy was touched a certain way, but this man, touching himself and only coming to life if I watched, added a new dimension to my scanty knowledge of sex.

The fact that his penis had grown when I was looking meant something. I hadn’t done any of the things women did to get men interested. I’d been minding my own business at home, hadn’t dressed up, had not acted provocatively, had not flirted, had not, I was sure, smiled when he waved for me to look. It was alarming, and at once I realized why Mami always told me to be más disimulada when I stared at people, which meant that I should pretend I wasn’t interested.

Men only want one thing, I’d been told. A female’s gaze was enough to send them groping for their huevos. That was why
Marilyn Monroe always looked at the camera and smiled. Men only want one thing, and until then, I thought it was up to me to give it up. But that’s not the way it was. A little girl leaning out a window watching the world fulfilled the promises Marilyn Monroe made with her eyes. I who had promised nothing, who knew even less, whose body was as confusing as the rock and roll lyrics accompanying the trucker’s hand pumping up and down to words yelled, not sung.

I left the window and looked for Mami in the kitchen. She was in her at-home clothes, her hair not curled, her eyebrows not drawn in.

“What’s the matter?” she asked. “Why do you look so scared?”

“Nothing,” I said.

It had all been my fault. Somehow, my just being at the window had made it happen. I went back, opened the blinds all the way, and watched openly. He was having a great time, while I vacillated between fear and curiosity, between embarrassment and the knowledge that, like it or not, I was having my first sexual experience.

I smiled at him then, a wide, seductive, Marilyn Monroe smile that took him by surprise. His eyes veiled suspiciously, and he leaned over to see if anyone else was hanging out from the other windows in the building. But it was just the two of us, me smiling brazenly while inside I quaked in terror, and him, flustered beyond comprehension.

I wondered what I’d done, why he stuffed his now limp penis back into his pants, zipped himself up, leaned his left elbow on his window, and parked his chin on his hand, his eyes focused on the warehouse full of soft drinks, the bald circle on the back of his head as vulnerable as a baby’s soft spot. Whatever he’d wanted from me he didn’t want anymore, and I was certain it was because I’d been too willing to give it to him.