

Solito

A Memoir

"I have waited decades for
a memoir like *Solito*."

—Sandra Cisneros



HOGARTH



JAVIER ZAMORA

S O L I T O



A M E M O I R

Javier Zamora



H O G A R T H

L O N D O N • N E W Y O R K

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Epigraph

April 5, 2021

Dedication

Acknowledgments

Also by Javier Zamora

About the Author

The events and the people depicted in this book are real. To protect the identity of some, I've changed their names or used nicknames.

Our bodies are the texts that carry the memories and therefore remembering is no less than reincarnation.

—KATIE CANNON

(QUOTED IN *The Body Keeps the Score*)

Both boys and girls for example, made references to the time lost and particularly to the uniqueness of a mother's love. More than one also described feeling as if they had a hole in their heart due to their mothers' absence. In this way, they were always enveloped by a sense of longing.

—LEISY J. ABREGO

Sacrificing Families

CHAPTER ONE

La Herradura, El Salvador

MARCH 16, 1999

Trip. My parents started using that word about a year ago—“one day, you’ll take a trip to be with us. Like an adventure. Like the one Simba goes on before he comes home.” Around that same time they sent me *Aladdin*, *Jurassic Park*, and *The Lion King*, alongside a Panasonic VHS player for my eighth birthday.

“Trip,” they say now as I’m talking to them at The Baker’s, where Abuelita Neli, Grandpa, and I go to call them—we don’t have a phone at home, but we do have a color TV, a brand-new fridge, and a fish tank.

“¡Javiercito!” Abuelita Neli waves her hand at me. She’s always called me that. I think my nickname, Chepito, reminds her too much of what the town calls Grandpa: Don Chepe.

“Your parents say you’ll soon be with them,” Abuelita says, and smiles, showing off her two top middle teeth lined in gold. Her dimples dig deeper into her round face. Tía Mali, who also has a round face, isn’t here, because she’s working at the clinic. She and Abuelita have been using the word more and more. Trip this, trip that. Trip trip trip. I can feel the trip in the soles of my feet. I see it in my dreams.

In some dreams I’m Superman, or I’m Goku, flying over fields, rivers, over El Salvador, over all the countries, over the people, towns, all the way to California, to my parents. I ring their bell. They open their huge door, tall

and wide, made from the brownest wood, and I run to them. They show me their living room. Their huge TV. Their backyard with a swimming pool, a lawn, fruit trees, a mini soccer field, a white fence. I climb their marañón trees, eat their mangos, play in their garden...

Every night, between praying and sleeping, I lie in bed and think about them. ¿What type of bed do they sleep on? ¿Is it big? ¿Is it a waterbed like in the movies? ¿Are the sheets soft? I imagine cuddling right in the middle. The comfiest white sheets. Mom to my left, Dad to my right, a mosquito net like a crown covering all of us.

Whenever a plate breaks, whenever I find an eyelash, whenever I see a shooting star, I wish to be in that bed with both of them in La USA, eating orange sherbet ice cream. I never tell anyone—if I tell anyone my wish it won't come true.

I have bad dreams también. Bad dreams of growing a beard with my parents still not here. Bad dreams where I'm not up there with them—¡and I'm thirty years old! Bad dreams of being chased by pirates, or running down a hill during a mudslide.

“The bad dreams, those you have to tell first thing in the morning so they don't stay in your mind. And never in the kitchen, or else they get in your stomach. That's how you get indigestion,” Mom told me, and I never forgot.

Trip. I've started using the word at school. I began telling my closest friends: “Fijáte vos, one day I'm taking a trip. Like a real-real game of hide-and-seek.”

In first grade, I was the only one who didn't have both parents with me. Mali says they left because before I was born there was a war, and then there were no jobs. Now, most of my friends don't have their dad or mom here either. A few lucky friends have left to be with their parents in La USA. Most left inside giant planes.

At recess, my friends and I talk about eating our first pepperoni pizza like the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, eating lasagna like Garfield, eating McDonald's, watching the new Star Wars inside a theater with air-

conditioning, eating “popcorn” with butter. I’ve never tried any of these things except for pizza from Pizza Hut, and that was last Christmas.

“¿But will you miss me? ¿Will you?” my friends ask.

“Puesí,” I say, but I don’t really know.

I ask them if they will miss *me*. “Absolutely,” they say, because no one who’s left to La USA has ever come back to visit. Sometimes their grandma or grandpa will walk by on the street and we’ll ask them how So-and-So is, and they respond, “So-and-So says hi”—that’s the closest they come to remembering us. “Oh, gracias, doña, gracias, don. Tell them we say hi.” But we never hear from them again.

The Baker is still here. His wife and all six of his kids también. They look happy. I want what The Baker’s family has: everyone in the same room. All my friends and I want to be with our parents, where everything is new, fresh, where garbage is collected by trucks, where water comes out of silver faucets, where it snows the whitest snow, where people have snowball fights and cut real pine trees for Christmas—not spray-paint cotton branches in white like we do here.

It’s because our parents are not here and we’re not there that Mays and Junes are sad. For most of us, our grandparents are the ones who show up for Mother’s and Father’s Day assemblies. It’s not that we don’t love them. We do. I love Abuelita so much. I love her cooking. The way my face gets stuck in her curly, frizzy hair that she dyes black, her short hair that makes her look like a microphone, her hair that smells like pupusas when she hugs me. I love her two dimples when she smiles. Her wide and flat nose with its dark-brown mole in the middle that she has to check at the hospital every year to see it doesn’t get too big. And I love her fake eyebrows she draws thin with a pencil first thing in the morning.

I love my mom, también. I’ve never met my dad—or I have, but I don’t remember him. I was about to turn two when he left. He sounds nice over the phone. His voice is deep and raspy, but it’s still soft, like a sharp stone skipping over water. I always talk to him second, after I talk to Mom. I remember everything about her. Her harsh voice like a wave crashing when she got mad at me. Her breath like freshly cut cucumbers.

Now I talk to her first, and then she hands the phone to Dad. Sometimes I'm so shy with Dad, Mom has to be on the phone at the same time. Other times Tía Mali whispers things I've done that week to tell him.

They send pictures every few months, and in the pictures Dad looks kind and strong. I like his thick mustache. His thick black hair. His big teeth. The gold chain he wears over his shirt, his muscles showing. Everyone in town tells me stories about him, but I haven't really asked him anything because I get shy when I hear his voice.

Now Grandpa is talking to them, trying to whisper something into the phone, trying to make it so I won't hear. But I do hear. I've been listening. My hearing is good. It's *really* good. I hear him whisper, "Don Dago," then something else I can't make out, then he blurts out, "By Mother's Day."

Don Dago is the coyote who took Mom to La USA four years ago. He's been coming around the house more often. I can put two and two together. I'm my grade's valedictorian; I get a diploma every year for being the best student.

Mother's Day. Since kindergarten the nuns have made us embroider handkerchiefs with *Feliz Día de la Madre* or *Feliz Día del Padre* in blue or red thread. Every. Single. Year. At least the *P*'s are easier than *M*'s. In second grade, my friends and I started writing our grandparents' names instead. It's easier.

But this Mother's Day will be different. ¡This is finally the year I see my parents! This year I will embroider Mom's name on a handkerchief and deliver it to her—in person.

"He'll get there before summer. He won't be cold like you were in the mountains," Grandpa tries to whisper, like I don't know they're talking about me. I hide my happiness, my smile, but it's hard not to run around The Baker's living room. Hard not to knock the tables over. Hard not to run the four blocks home. Hard not to run into the clinic where Tía Mali is working. I don't know if I'll be able to pretend once she gets off work at six p.m. But I do, I pretend, I walk back at Abuelita's pace, holding her hand. Clutching it. Squeezing it until both our hands sweat and the sweat says: *It's happening. It's finally happening.*

TÍA MALI RUSHES INTO our room, through the bedsheet hanging from a wire we use for a door, screaming, “¡Chepito! ¡Chepito! ¡I just talked to them!” She throws the black purse Mom sent her a few Christmases ago on top of the wooden dresser next to her bed.

“¿Who?”

“Your parents, tontito.” I like it when she calls me that. The word sounds like rain slipping through holes in our roof, falling into tin buckets we place on the floor so the room won’t flood.

“They’ve chosen the date. The month—”

She doesn’t know I overheard Grandpa.

“¡Get excited! ¿You want to know how they chose?”

I smile because I want to know, but also because she’s managed to untie one of her black flamenco shoes and is struggling with the other one.

“Your mom’s co-worker at Toys ‘R’ Us said you should get there before August, so you can learn English before school starts.” Mali sits on her bed as she reaches for the lemon half inside a small plastic bowl on top of her dresser—the half she didn’t use this morning that’s gathered fruit flies. She squeezes the juice on her feet then dries them with a towel.

“It’s weird that gringos start school late, ¿right, Chepito?”

I look up at our roof, then look out the window next to my bed. “¿Why don’t they start school in January like us?”

“Jaber,” she says with a shrug as she slips into her clean plastic sandals and walks to the kitchen to throw the used lemon half in the backyard. The bedsheet door swooshes behind her as she runs back into the room and jumps on her bed.

“I guess this way, you’ll be six months smarter than the gringuitos.” She *ito-es* everything. “And everyone is new the first day of school.” She taps her mattress with her right hand, the signal for me to walk across the cold tile floor. The smell of pata chuca is mostly gone; the lemon has helped more than anything else she’s tried. The talcum didn’t do anything, and the

weird concoction of vinegar, honey, and egg yolk backfired and made her feet stink even more.

We perform this ritual after she comes back from work at dusk. I lie next to her as she begins to tell me about the clinic's *chambre*: the sickness that each patient has, their test results, the new drama between doctors, or when it's slow, how bored she was.

We lean our feet against the wall, our heads almost off the edge of the bed. We look up at the glass tiles in the middle of the terracotta tiles that make up the house's roof. We look through the glass and spot the night's first stars, which means it's close to dinnertime.

Mali is only twenty-three, but she's heard placing your feet on the wall like this helps with "cel-u-li-tis." I like that word, *cel-u-li-tis*. Every woman at Abuelita's pupusa stand seems worried about it like it's the plague. Abuelita has been selling pupusas in front of the clinic since Mom was a kid. Mom helped her sell pupusas. Mali did as well, until she went to school and started working as a secretary at the clinic. So now it's Tía Lupe—the youngest of the three sisters—who helps Abuelita make and sell them.

With our feet above us and the *chambre* done, Tía Mali begins to tell me about her suitors. "Fijáte que The Dentist came to visit me today..."

I zone out and remember she was late again this morning. ¡Even though our front door is only a few meters from the clinic! Most mornings, she forgets lipstick and I have to remind her. Then she looks at her gold Casio watch with its thin black strap and shrieks, "¡Puya!" which means she's late. She runs out the door, almost knocking the bedsheet out of the string it's tied to, and she's off, click-clacking across the street, fumbling her keys, running past the people already lined up so they can be the very first patients of the day. But she never forgets to plant a kiss on my forehead—which I leave for a few minutes before I wipe it off.

When Mali forgets breakfast, Abuelita sends her a pupusa wrapped in foil, or pan dulce in a paper bag, and I have to walk across the dirt street to Tía Mali's desk right next to the clinic's front door. When I'm not in school, I sell the best horchata, ensalada, marañón, and chan. I'm a good salesman;

I learned from sitting on Mom's lap as she handed customers a plastic bag with whatever drink they ordered.

Every now and then, someone from the other end of town, near the pier where my dad is from, says to "tell Javierón I say hi." Dad has various nicknames, and I don't really know what they mean. Lelota is the most difficult one to decipher because it's not a real word. Then there are the obvious ones like Alacrán, but I still don't know how he got it, and of course I've never asked.

"So-and-So says hi," I tell Dad on the phone.

"Tell them I say hi back," he says, and asks about how many nines or tens I have at school and in what subjects. After we cover school, we cover my health, and then it's finally time to critique what they sent last time and discuss what new toy or clothes I want for next time they send me a package.

At the very end of our conversations, only then, when we say goodbye, I ask Dad when I'll finally meet him. It's the same routine with Mom. Other kids are already up there with their parents, or are about to leave. It feels like every month someone else disappears.

One day we're playing soccer at lunch, playing tag at recess, and then, poof, they never come back. They mostly leave by plane. ¿How? I don't know. Others leave by land in a car that picks them up. They go with a relative or the parent that was still here. At school, we only hear after the fact. They're here, and then they're not. No one ever lets it slip that they're leaving.

"Soon," my parents say. It's always "soon." But soon doesn't arrive, and I am still here selling pupusas to the same people Mom sold pupusas to.

"Be patient, Chepito," Tía Mali tells me every other dusk when I complain. But this time, today, it's different. After she's done telling me about another one of her suitors, she turns to me, looks me in the eyes, and says, "You'll be up there so soon, tontito, I'm so excited for you." I believe her.

We stare at the ceiling. Maybe Tía Mali notices I'm excited, because she begins to tell me about Mom's trip to California. It's the only north-trip

experience Mali knows. No one knows how Dad got up there. Apparently, Mom made it in two weeks. “Fast. Quick,” Mali says, slashing the air with her palm as she speaks, raising her normally soft voice to emphasize how fast it was.

“She crossed through San Ysidro, jumped a murito, walked up a hill-ita, and ran into a car-ito that drove her up a long road, the biggest road she’s ever seen, past Los Ángeles, past San Francisco, to San Rafael, where your dad was waiting for her.” As Mali says this, she acts out the verbs with her hands. Two down-turned fingers moving forward and backward means Mom is running. A wave is Mom jumping. An air steering wheel is Mom riding inside a “car-ito.”

I’ve heard this story a thousand times, but never the details. I know the big picture: she left, got there in two weeks. She ran, she jumped, she hid, she drove. ¿Who drove her? I want to *see* the mountains she ran down, the trees that grow there. The fence. ¿Is it made of bricks? ¿Barbwire? ¿Is it tall? The roads, ¿are they dirt or asphalt? ¿Wide or narrow? I want details, but I don’t think Mali knows more than what she’s told me, and when she speaks, I stay quiet. It’s something I don’t like about myself. I’m too shy. At school, the cool kids make fun of me and I don’t say anything. I hide.

I know my parents wanted me to wait until I got older. I hope they don’t still think I’m too small. I’m not. I’m nine years old, but I can already jump the fence that separates our house from the neighbors’ pretty fast. And it’s made of barbwire. When our dog, La Bonita, chases one of the iguanas that live in our big avocado tree into Niña Yita’s land, I dive under it like she does, or climb the wooden poles the barbwire is wrapped around, and make it over. I’ve never gotten hurt. Not a single scratch.

“But it gets cold,” Mali says. “Your mom says she got sick in the hill-itas and stayed sick a few days after.”

“But she’s okay now,” I say. Mali plays with her wavy hair and looks at the skylight. She raises her black caterpillar-like eyebrows, something she always does when she’s thinking. She takes a while, so I ask, “¿Want to look at the new photos Mom sent?”

“Yes,” she says softly, and reaches for the album already on the bed, under her sweaty leg. Her skin sticks to the green plastic cover that’s left a mark on her thigh. I don’t get mad, because it’s not her stinky feet on the pictures.

Mom sent this album for my ninth birthday in February. My favorite photo is the one where she’s dressed up as one of the Toys “R” Us mascots. Not the big giraffe, Geoffrey—that costume is too tall for Mom. She’s short, a little bit taller than Abuelita, but shorter than Mali, who is one meter and sixty centimeters tall.

In the picture, Mom is inside a smaller giraffe, *Baby Gee* written on the bib, where you can see her face behind a black screen. I laugh every time I see it. It’s cute: Mom, a little baby giraffe.

My second favorite picture is of Mom facing the camera, dressed in an oversized blue polo shirt (maybe Dad’s), the Golden Gate in the background. The Golden Gate is a huge bridge, *the biggest bridge anyone has ever built*, she wrote on the back of the photo. I tell my friends at school that.

I love Mom’s black, straight hair. The bangs she used to hairspray into place in front of this mirror, and still does up there. I love when her hair is caught in the wind, like in this picture, and the bangs are frozen in place. She’s smiling. Mom never smiles with her teeth showing, but always tilts her heart-shaped face a little to the right, like she’s leaning in for a secret.

“See, it’s great up there,” I tell Mali, pointing at the mountains behind the Golden Gate Bridge. Her rounded face doesn’t disagree.

“I’m gonna walk across that bridge soon,” I say louder, like I just scored a goal. I point to the bridge’s red, thick towers. “I’ll send you a picture from right there, just like this one.”

“Yes, please, Chepito, don’t forget about me, ¿okay?”

I could never.

3-17-99

MOM AND DAD HAVE decided to use Don Dago, who visits our fishing town two to three times a year. Our town is not San Salvador, or even Zacatecoluca. It has one way in, one way out: a pothole-filled asphalt road that ends at the pier where fishermen leave hours before dawn and return around noon to auction the day's catch. In winter, when it doesn't stop raining, both the asphalt road and the only other road in town (the smaller dirt road we live on) flood. The entire town floods a few centimeters, and Mali and I go out to the street, where we cast off paper boats from Abuelita's flooded pupusa stand. We make boats from old school assignments or old newspapers, and I write the date in black Sharpie. Sometimes I name them weird things, like Mumra or Bulma. Other times I name them after one of my parents.

No one knows when Don Dago will come to town, but when he does, rain or shine, word spreads quickly and everyone knows where to find him: at Doña Argentina's cantina, drinking an ice-cold Suprema, smoking Marlboros with a glass ashtray next to him. People line up to ask if he delivers to Wa-ching-tón, to Jius-tón, to San Francisco, for the same price. If he delivers children, if he delivers women or men older than he is, if he can change all of our lives. Don Dago changed Mom's. Mali says she left because there are no jobs. Dad left because of "politics." "La USA is safer, richer, and there are so many jobs," Mali and Abuelita have told me.

Don Dago sits on a white plastic chair next to the white plastic table outside the cantina. The same cantina I ran to when Grandpa drank at home. I'd buy him the usual, a flask of El Muñeco, then I'd run the five blocks back home so he could drink it. When he finished the first flask, I'd run back to the cantina and buy him another one. We'd repeat until Grandpa passed out on the hammock. He always let me keep the change, which I stuffed into my Super Mario piggy bank I never cracked open, until last year when my parents said they didn't have enough money to bring me to them. Abuelita cried when I told her why I broke it. I cried because she was crying and because she told me it wasn't enough.

Grandpa quit drinking when Mom left, and Don Dago has been taking people from this town since before he took Mom, but now, when I walk by

Don Dago sitting in his white plastic chair, he takes a puff of his cigarette and waves at me. Always at his side is a small white electric fan that Doña Argentina brings out for him, a bright orange extension cord zigzagging its way into the cantina to the nearest plug. The fan sits there like an obedient dog trained to lick the sweat showing through Don Dago's neatly ironed polo, unbuttoned to show off a bit of his graying chest hair. I want to have chest hair like that: almost curly, almost white as salt, like Santa's beard in Coca-Cola commercials.

On his left hand, a gold watch. On top of his chest hair, three gold chains, thin, but each one thicker than the last. Black leather boots match his black leather belt. This outfit lets people know he's not from La Herradura, not even from El Salvador. He looks more like the rancheros in Mexican novelas, except he doesn't wear a sombrero; a baseball cap covers his bald spot, and dyed black hair protrudes from the sides.

The most surprising part of his outfit, the part that doesn't match the novelas, is Don Dago's small, black leather fanny pack. In it, he stores his Marlboros, Bic lighter, Bic pen, sunglasses, Chiclets—everything except the small brown notepad he keeps in his back pocket. His notepad is the tool he uses to pause for suspense when people ask him questions like “Don Dago, disculpe, ¿how much to California?”

“¿What city? Rate is different,” he responds, taking a sip of his Suprema.

“Los Ángeles,” I've heard them ask, shyly, like they're scared of him.

“¿Gender? ¿Age of person?”

With just this bit of information, Don Dago has the excuse to scoot a little bit forward in his chair, lift up his left butt cheek, and reach for the notepad. He flicks it open like a switchblade to the inside cover, where he's written numbers only he understands. Sometimes they're crossed out. And his one rule everyone in town knows about is: *no negotiation*.

“It's not my rate. Can't change it,” he says, showing customers his palms opened to the clouds, after pointing to the numbers, cigarette in hand.

“Can't change it,” he repeats when they tell him the various reasons why their child, their brother, themselves have to leave this country.

Grandpa says it's mostly poor people, often poorer than us, who need Don Dago but can't afford him. I overheard Abuelita say there's more violence now, so more and more people need coyotes. Just last October, Papel-con-Caca got shot in front of our house at dawn. "Because he had tattoos," Grandpa said. He was "bad people," a "marero," people say now, but he drove me on his bike whenever he got a chance. Then Pedro got shot in the market in November. And this past Christmas, Don Guayo shot someone in front of his pharmacy, then fled to La USA. Don Dago doesn't care about the reasons; he just repeats that he can't change the price, each time with a smile, showing the customers his perfectly straight teeth, big and a bit yellowed.

Don Dago was probably not lying when he told Grandpa, "I'm only one pearl in a long pearl necklace, Don Chepe." We were at home the second time he came over. Grandpa and Don Dago sat in plastic chairs under the mango trees in the backyard. "We all have to eat," he continued. I was playing by the marañón trees next to the mangos. Don Dago had visited us every time he was in town, ever since I turned eight. Before that, he'd only come here once.

I still remember that first time. It was days after my seventh birthday, after I'd gone to the U.S. embassy twice to get a visa and it became clear that leaving on an airplane wasn't gonna happen. Don Dago looked at me and announced, "He's too young." He was so tall. Taller than Grandpa, both of their polos tucked into their blue jeans. After Don Dago left, Grandpa said, "Apparently that coyote de mierda has a 'no one under ten' rule." Grandpa was pissed. His face turns pink and the veins in his temples pop out when he's pissed. I was sad. I had to wait once again.

"But ese cerote is still gonna take him, when the time is right," Grandpa said.

No one disrespects Grandpa. People in town are afraid of him. Mali says it's because Grandpa was in the military and he still owns a gun. I think it's because he's really good with his machete and whenever someone tries to steal our bananas, mangos, or oranges, Grandpa chases the robbers and shoots them with a slingshot. Kids or adults, doesn't matter. My friends'

older brothers are afraid, my friends are afraid, even the dogs don't walk in front of Grandpa. I'm a little scared of him también.

I hope Don Dago has changed his rule. Being nine won't stop me from seeing my parents this May. Don Dago is "the best coyote in the central coast of El Salvador," I've heard people say at the pupusa stand, which means he's expensive.

Mali says he promised my grandparents that Mom would drive on roads, take buses, maybe hide in a trunk, maybe hide in a trailer, then run up a hill, run into a car, then make it to Dad. And Don Dago did all that. He was with Mom the entire way. "He's a good coyote," everyone says. Two weeks it took. Very fast. Very safe.

The adults don't tell me much. Tía Mali is the only one I can get any information out of, but sometimes even she doesn't know what's happening.

"We're saving, we're almost there, you'll be with us soon," my parents have said over the phone or in letters, over and over. I know my parents are saving, but I don't know the exact number. I make one up and write it at the top of every page of my school assignments. I flick my notepad just like Don Dago does, like a switchblade, and write the made-up number right below the date on the top left corner of the page.

3-20-99

I'M IN MALI'S BED while she waits for her friend to pick her up for the dance at the pier. It's the Saturday before the week before Semana Santa, and the town is already celebrating. Mali is in her going-out dress: black with shiny beads at the hem and a cut that shows off the top part of her back. Her black heels are next to the bed, her legs trapped behind black leggings. The lemon has already been applied and dried off with a towel, and her heels sprayed with perfume.

I like it when she purposely curls her thick black hair. It's curly regardless, but when she adds a little mousse and hairspray, it's *really* curly. On her lips, her favorite lipstick—not the peach or light-pink ones she

wears for work. This one is red, but not too red. Looking like a bruja is always her biggest fear, so whenever she leaves the house for work or for parties, she stands in the mirror like she's doing now and asks me, "¿Do I look like a brujita?"

This time, she doesn't. I like this red, red like the red seen through my palm when I cover the end of the flashlight. I like doing that when I have to pee and have to walk to our outhouse at night. I like seeing all the blood flowing through me, trapped in there.

"The Dentist is pushy. He drinks. I don't want to run into him," Mali is saying, annoyed, her caterpillar eyebrows crunched together, causing her forehead wrinkles to show.

I look for stars through the skylight, only half paying attention to what Mali says.

"Your mom did her trip fast. Quick. It was a first-class mojado express," she says, laughing. Now she has my full attention. "You'll be safe. I'm not worried, Chepito."

Mali continues, says Mom called right after she crossed. I like that word: *cruzó*. I can see a crucifix. Maybe the fence is made up of a lot of little crosses.

"Your mom drank water from troughs, but she was fine," she says, now applying mascara, curling her eyelashes. When Mali says *troughs*, all I can see is Mom in the shape of a cow, then a horse, then in her giraffe costume, kneeling down, drinking dirty water.

"I'll be back soon, mijo, I'll come back, I promise," Mom said four years ago in this very room. The room was a pale indigo, the walls dark, the sun beginning to rise, light hitting the tops of the pink-and-white myrtle trees outside this window by the bed I shared with her.

My eyes were half-closed, but I remember Mom kissing the top of my head, then both my cheeks. She made a cross on my forehead with her fingers, whispered something to herself. Then she kneeled next to the bed and looked me right in my eyes and told me, "Te quiero mucho."

I regret not waking up for Mom. I liked watching her get ready when she went out. It's why I like watching Mali apply foundation, draw her