

TALK TO ME, MILAGROS

On the day Milagros Bustos and her family arrived from the Philippines, my mother ran around the house with a dish towel, shooing us into action. Vacuum this, she ordered, dust that, sweep here, pick-up, pick-up, pick-up! It was Saturday, our day of rest, our cartoon morning, and Mom refused to give us any peace. Dad was at the hospital making rounds, which meant we had dibs on the television at least until lunch. My twin brothers hung upside down from the leather loveseat, punching and tickling each other at once, while my baby sister lay flat on her tummy with her favorite blanket smashed up into her face. She was still sucking her thumb then. This would not do for Mom, and when she came through the TV room waving that rag, we scattered like chicks across a barnyard.

“Your Uncle Victor and Auntie Nita will be here tonight,” Mom told us. “There are nine of them in all. We need to get organized.”

“What’s the name of the girl my age?” I asked.

“Milagros.”

Victor and Nita Bustos were not blood relatives, but they came from Dad’s town, so that made them as good as family. People from Dad’s province often made Peoria their first American

experience, stopping in for months at a time until they could settle into homes of their own. The families were usually small in number and young. We never had this many people come over at once and I was glad to hear that there was a girl my age. I had always wanted a sister to play with. Len, my own sister, was too young to be anything but a pest. To my annoyance she followed me around, slow like a shadow turtle, repeating my words like a parrot. I liked the idea of having someone who was mature like me, who knew how to get along in the company of fifth and sixth graders.

We would talk about clothes and rock stars—I liked David Cassidy from the Partridge Family. We would talk about how to get along with our mothers and how to boss our younger siblings. I had great plans for me and Milagros.

At six that evening, my father arrived and brought with him the sounds of many feet shuffling through our kitchen door, foreign tongues speaking voice over voice, mixing orders with salutations. The Bustos clan carried leather suitcases and brown carton boxes wrapped with hemp and marked in big black letters: USA.

Auntie Nita was a short woman with a round and generous face. She kissed each of my brothers, my sister, and me, zealously, leaving heavy lipstick prints on our cheeks. She squeezed the breath out of us and rolled us in the cavity of her bosom. She smelled of fading perfume—islands and salt water drifting from her along with the musty scent of travel. She placed her seven girls before us naming them as she did.

"This is Milagros," she told us. "She is like you, Nelda," she said, pushing her slightly towards me. Milagros was small. Her skin was dark brown and her elbows stuck out at her sides like stick-figure arms. Her bald knees were dry and white. Her hair was long, a shiny blue-black midnight that covered her back like a satin curtain. I could tell that luck lived with Milagros, for above her right eye was a giant black dot. My mother had once told me that moles were a sign of good fortune. Special people with special gifts were marked by moles, and Milagros' mole was big, flashing "Lucky" like a neon sign.

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"Hi," I said, but she only stared at me. Her mother told us she was shy and went on rattling off introductions. Besides Milagros there was Myette, Melina, Malu, Maritess, Maya and Monette.

"Look, Nelda," my mother said. "You and Milagros will have your hands full, babysitting all these girls as well as your own brothers and sister."

That night I brought her to my room and introduced her to my things. "Do you have your own room in the Philippines," I asked her, "or do you have to share?" Milagros sat in my rocking chair, legs drawn to her chest, head up. Her long hair shifted from her shoulders to her face as she rocked, never looking at me, never saying one word. When she didn't answer me, I went on. "You probably don't know any English, so that's okay. You'll figure it out." I walked about my room, picking up objects and explaining them to her. "These are my favorite stories," I told her, pointing to my collection of Beverly Cleary books. "Henry's a boy and Ribsy's a dog—they're friends with Ellen Tibits and Ramona the pest." I showed her my favorite pair of platform shoes, a paper flower from last summer's fair, my painted stones from the beach. Milagros sat in my chair and rocked past my show-and-tell, never looking up to see my treasures.

She walked over to her little brown suitcase and pulled something out. She stretched out her hand and offered me a photograph. The picture was black and white. It had white scalloped edges that were rough and uneven like waves in the ocean. "Who are these girls?" I asked her. The photo was taken in front of a white clay building. On the edge of the picture you could see the trunks of palm trees and huge ferns. In the middle of the picture were three rows of girls dressed in white cotton sailor dresses. They were all small like Milagros and they all had long hair tied up or brushed back in some neat fashion. "These your friends?" I asked her. She nodded.

"Here are my dolls," I said. "Crissy's my favorite 'cause you can make her hair short or long by pressing a button in back." I fingered Crissy's blond hair, which felt dry like straw. "I wish I

could make my hair long or short that fast—don't you?" I pulled Milagros from the rocking chair and brought her to my vanity mirror.

In the mirror I could see that I was much taller than she, and while my skin had always been milk chocolate, I seemed pale and yellow next to Milagros. "Is that your natural skin color, or are you tan?" I asked her. I told Milagros that in the summertime all the kids on the block would lay out on the Ozowski's porch and sunbathe. I told her how my mother never let me join them, saying I was already too brown. Milagros stood perfectly still, staring at our reflection. "I think you're pretty," I said. I touched the ends of her hair which were even coarser than the doll's. "Mom keeps cutting mine." There was a gold glimmer, a sparkle, buried underneath her mane of hair, near the nape of her brown neck. I remember thinking she was a lucky girl, for she had pierced ears with two tiny pearls set in gold.

I played my Partridge Family records for her and showed her how to dance to them. I moved about my room and utilized all the floor space, weaving around the bed and rocking chair, flailing my arms like a giant bird. "Want to dance?" I asked her, but she sat back down and rocked in the chair.

During the next few weeks, she grew to like my records too. Sometimes Milagros would pull me through the house by the wrist, leading me to the bedroom. She'd point at the records underneath my turntable and I would put on the Partridge Family. Then she would sit on that chair by the window and rock. She'd rock a little faster when the needle got to songs like "I Think I Love You" and "Point Me in the Direction of Albuquerque." Sometimes I danced around the room or I stretched my body across the bed. Milagros always sat in my chair, sometimes staring out the window or down at the floor, sometimes pulling out that picture of the girls. Every now and then, I'd catch her looking at me and we'd lock eyes. I'd smile at her. She'd smile back. We always listened to the same side of the album. We listened long and hard and even though Milagros never spoke, she learned to mouth the lyrics on that record. We'd

sit there until we were called to set the table or get the younger children ready for bed.

Once I asked my mother why Milagros was always so quiet.

"She never talks," I complained. "She's kind of boring."

My mother told me to be patient. "It's not easy," she said as she ran her fingers through my hair. "Milagros has just left her home and all her friends. Be patient, Nelda."

My mother distributed the Bustos family into different parts of the house: Uncle Victor and Auntie Nita and the two babies slept in the extra bedroom below the kitchen. The three older Bustos girls, Milagros, Myette and Melina, stayed on the floor in my bedroom. Malu and Maritess shared the bed in Len's room.

I liked the way things were set up. At night my floors were covered with blankets, pillows, and sleeping bags. It was always a slumber party, what with bodies on the floor and giggling in the dark and secrets between Myette and Melina. Every night the ritual was the same. We bathed the children, two at a time, dried them thoroughly with mother's heavy white towels, and then dusted each one in talcum powder. My brothers and sister and the rest of the Bustos girls would meet in my bedroom where Milagros and I would lead the nightly prayers. After the prayers, just when we all should have been quieting down for sleep, came a serious round of tickling fits and pillow fights—Bustos girls against the Carreros kids.

Sometimes, after the little ones were in bed, Milagros and I sat on the stairs and watched the grown-ups. Since Uncle Victor and Auntie Nita had come over, my parents had been acting like teenagers. The four of them would sit up late at night, talking and laughing as they played many rounds of mah-jongg. They would sit at a card table, rolling the marble tiles about, building them into walls and telling jokes in *Taglish*—their own brand of *Tagalog* mixed with English.

Uncle Victor was excited to be in America. "Nita and I will build a house soon, and the girls will go to a nice Catholic school. Next year, we'll vacation in Florida."

"With what money?" Auntie Nita always wanted to know. She called her husband *ma ya bang*, which meant he was a talker, a showoff, a Mr. Big Shot. Dreamer.

My father let Uncle Victor talk, but sometimes warned him, "It's true, if you save, you can have a much better life here, Victor, but first you have to find work."

"No problem," Uncle Victor said, laughing. "This is America."

Every morning, Uncle Victor woke up at five. He showered, shaved, and slapped his face with pine-smelling aftershave. He slicked his hair back with a dab of pomade. I can still see him sitting at the edge of the sofa, dressed in his fancy grey suit, buffing the tops of his black oxford shoes as he read the morning paper. When Auntie Nita and my mother would wake up, he'd serve them coffee and eggs, with onions and fried rice. Then, waving the paper at them, he'd set off to find a job.

In the Philippines, Uncle Victor was an attorney in the city of Pitogo. His practice was strong and he had the respect of the whole community. Auntie Nita said he was famous for grand speeches in the court house and that he had won many cases solely on his wit.

"Is he looking for a job in the court house?" I asked her. But she said that he couldn't be an attorney here, not yet, since the laws back home were different from those in America. When I told Auntie Nita that I didn't understand why he left such a great job, she told me that he had done it for the girls. "They will have better opportunity here, Nelda," she assured me. "They'll have the chance to be more than wives," she told me.

Milagros looked up from her basket of laundry, tossed a cloth diaper down and shaking her head, she grumbled something in *Tagalog*. I couldn't catch all the words.

"*Ay anak*," Auntie Nita sighed. "Child, I've told you before, it's for your own good. We know what we're doing, trust, *anak*."

So Uncle Victor interviewed for jobs at department stores and restaurants. He called on small businesses.

Whenever he came home at the end of the day, he would be whistling and smiling, bearing chocolate candy bars for all the

children. His baby girls would climb up his torso and my brothers would leap on to his back and chant, "Uncle Victor, Uncle Victor!" We'd cover him like ants on sugar and he would tickle us all.

"Did you find work?" I'd ask him and he would shake his head and say, "Not yet, *hija*, not yet, but soon."

Milagros was the only one who never came running. She would stand at the end of the hall and wait for the children to climb off him. Then she'd approach him, kiss him on the cheek, and hand him his slippers.

Every night when my dad got home from the hospital, he and Uncle Victor had the same conversation. They sat under the lamp in our living room, my father sinking back into the leather of his reclining chair and Uncle Victor leaning forward on the edge of the sofa. They always initiated these talks with idle banter and as the conversation took a solemn turn, the men's voices grew softer and each man perched himself closer to the end of his seat, resting his weight forward, nearly whispering into the other's ear. My dad would always get around to Uncle Victor's job hunt and Uncle Victor would lighten the conversation again. "I think that any day now, I will find something. I think that soon I will have a great job." My father always assured Uncle Victor that it was still early and that he shouldn't be discouraged if he didn't find work right away, but Uncle Victor interrupted him every time, saying, "Don't worry, this is America, I'll be working soon." Uncle Victor would not listen to negative talk, would not hear of discrimination.

Once everyone went to sleep and all you could hear was the slow methodical tumble of the washer-dryer, the whir of the dishwasher, and the occasional hum of our refrigerator, Uncle Victor would pull out his law books and spread them carefully underneath the lamp that hung over the kitchen table. While we rested, Uncle Victor murmured American laws and rules and cases to himself. Once I got up to get a glass of water and I saw him at the table, reverently whispering the Constitution out loud. Like a child memorizing prayers during Mass, he uttered every syllable. Then, checking himself for accuracy, he peered over the bridge of his glasses, into stacks of white-papered books.

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After three weeks, things were still not clicking for me and Milagros. Sometimes I thought it was because we were too busy executing chores or watching over our siblings. It seemed we never had time to talk or get to know each other as friends were supposed to do. Every night after we rinsed the dishes and swept the kitchen floor, after we wiped the counters and before we gave the children their baths, we went to my room where I would write out my homework or read a book. Milagros had a pen pal. She wrote a letter every night. Then every day she'd check the mailbox for letters and slip the one she wrote into the silver box.

"Who are you writing to?" I asked her once. "One of your friends?" She covered up the note with her free hand and pressed her face close to the desk, scribbling her perfect tiny letters fast. Maybe she thought if she wrote small enough and fast enough, I wouldn't be able to see who she was writing to. She kept a stack of letters written on light blue paper in her purse. The handwriting was angular and jagged so that the L's looked like right triangles and the capital G's were rectangles with wings. I was jealous of the way she poured words onto the letters she wrote, of how she hoarded the ones from the Philippines as though she were all alone in America.

Her eyes, two big black dots glaring, seemed masked and disguised from me and my understanding. I often found her looking at me and it seemed she didn't care. She never looked away. She never seemed embarrassed or awkward like me.

Sometimes when Milagros and I babysat, she spoke to her sisters in *Tagalog*. She must have been telling them stories, for they would settle around her, hanging onto her sleeve or her leg. They'd braid the long black strands of her hair, responding to her words in sighs and gasps and brittle bits of laughter. Even Len, who couldn't understand a word Milagros said, fell victim to the rhythm of her voice, a voice that rose and fell like water running along the rocks of a river.

The funny thing was, I often heard Auntie Nita speak to

Milagros in English—"Change Monette's diaper" or "Make some rice" or "Tell your *tita* I'm here." Milagros always obeyed her, never speaking back, never asking her mother to repeat the words. Once when we were sitting on the steps, watching the children play a game of tag, I asked her why she wouldn't speak back in English.

She turned to look at me through strands of hair that fell into her brown face. She looked like an island girl to me, someone pretty and exotic. She pushed her hair away from her face and revealed her beautiful pearl earring. Shrugging, she said, "*Ay wong ko.*" She didn't know. Then one of the little ones fell and she was off, reprimanding them for playing so rough. "*Tama na!*" she told them, pulling one sister off of another. "Enough!"

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One Sunday, we had a barbecue in our backyard. My father invited people from his hometown who might know the Bustos family, as well as those he thought should know them. Many of these people had stayed with us at one time or another when they first got to the States. These events were practically a circus with many voices speaking at once, and bodies small and large moving about in circles.

We roasted a pig on a spit in the backyard. The men took turns spinning the pig while the women kept bringing food out to a long table in the shade. We had two card tables set up for poker or mah-jongg. The Reyes brothers brought an acoustic guitar and a set of bongo drums and sang Philippine love songs to our families. My parents had a way of encouraging talk from everyone, talk that happened at once, talk that often went unheard. For us, noise was a sign of happiness and *fiesta*.

Milagros and I wandered about the party, weaving in and out of people in silence. We went from table to table, watching the women rapidly flipping mah-jongg tiles to the center of the table, taking long drags from their unfiltered cigarettes, and blowing smoke from the corners of their painted mouths.

For a while we sat in front of the Reyes brothers and listened to them—their voices were soft, sliding from one note to the next like lounge singers crooning in an Elvis bar. Tony Reyes stood in front of us wearing a pair of bell-bottom denims and a flowered shirt that he left unbuttoned. His crucifix swung as he strummed and sometimes you could hear Jesus banging across the instrument's wood, echoing into the hollow of the guitar.

Sitting cross-legged in front of the Reyes brothers, I leaned into Milagros' ear and whispered, "Are they cute?"

She giggled back and said, "*Hindi naman!*" which meant, no way.

We watched the older men roasting the *baboy* on the spit. In the center of the circle, Uncle Joe, an old timer who first came to the U.S. in 1920, sat on an old tree stump. His legs were thrown apart and he leaned his elbows on the top of his thighs, shaking his pipe and nudging the brim of his straw cap.

"When I first came to this country," he told them, "I lived in San Francisco. There were restaurants that had signs on the doors: Absolutely No Filipinos. Back then they called us *Pinoys*, monkeys, you know. Work was hard to come by. *Ay naku*, it was really something."

"I don't believe it," Uncle Victor said.

"You see, I thought that too because that is what they tell us back home—America land of opportunity." He shook his head, clicking his tongue, and confessed, "I was so homesick, I almost gave up twice—once in 1937 and then again in forty-two. I just wanted to get back home."

When we had enough of the hoopla, Milagros and I wandered back into the house, me, to sit at the edge of my bed paging through my latest copy of *Teen Beat*, and Milagros to rock my chair.

I looked at her and thought of times in the middle of the night when I had heard her sniffing to herself. "Milagros," I'd call. "Are you okay?"

"*Hindi na bali*," she'd say. Never mind.

"Why?" I'd ask her. *Bakit?* She never had an answer.

I ran my hands along the pages of my magazine, pretending that

the photo of David Cassidy was real. I held the picture up to her. "Do you think he's handsome?" I asked her. "Do you think that he might like me, I mean if he met me?" She looked at me with that heart-shaped face, framed by her neatly parted hair, and smiled. "You don't think so?" I asked. I went to the mirror and examined myself. My pixie-cut hair stood up on its ends—down by my neck trailed little wisps of hair frayed and loose like David's own shag hairdo. My big teeth stuck out from under my lip, dressed in silver bands—braces that promised to mold my mouth into something pretty and petite. On the bridge of my nose, a pair of psychedelic plastic glasses helped me see far away. My body was stick straight, thin like a boy's, so thin that when I turned sideways, people said they couldn't see me. I was cloaked in cotton—a pair of pants with colorful prints like bright yellow pineapples and purple bananas, blue apples and orange watermelons. My shirt was a ribbed sleeveless turtleneck with blue piping around the armpit. Mom had bought it from the summer rack in the Ladies' department at Gimbel's. I was wearing a bra that my mother had bought—it was padded and much too big for my eleven year old body, but I wore it anyway. I turned to Milagros and told her I thought maybe David Cassidy would think she was the pretty one.

When she didn't answer me, I began to get annoyed. I walked over to the rocking chair and asked her, "Why won't you speak? Why won't you ever answer me?" I pushed the back of the chair, rocking her faster as I spoke. "Say something. Tell me to shut up. You're in America now, you know: we speak English here. What's the matter with you?"

Milagros drew her lips into a straight line and wrapped her fingers around the handles of the rocking chair. "Your mother speaks to you in English—she told me they teach English at your little convent school in the Philippines—why won't you talk it?" I shoved the chair harder, trying my best to make her answer me. I pushed again and again. But she stayed there, sitting, sturdy as ever.

Then I went to the closet where she hung her purse and I

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pulled out the stack of air-mail letters. She jumped up then, scratching at me, prying the letters from my hands. I threw them up and they sailed across the room like a flurry of giant snowflakes.

Milagros bit her lip, grabbed my hands, and leaned her weight against mine. We stood for a moment, pressing up against our invisible walls, tummy to tummy, palm against palm. I was tired of being the nice hostess. I was sick of having this girl in my house. Even though this was my house, she was the one who got all the attention now—"See how Milagros can cook? See how Milagros can bathe all her sisters? Isn't Milagros beautiful?" Milagros and her lucky mole or not, this was my house, not hers, the least she could do was talk to me. I locked my hands with hers and dug my nails into her cocoa-brown skin. Her hair tumbled into her face, strayed into the corners of her mouth, and stuck.

Milagros growled at me, tightened the muscles in her face. "*Bastus Americana!*" she said.

"What do you know about Americans," I asked. "You're the stupid one. You can't even talk English. You know what? I don't want to be your friend. Go back to your little group of girlfriends!"

Tears pooled in her black eyes, rolled down her face, and streaked across the slope of her cheek. "You cry baby," I said, "go back to the Philippines. Go back to where you belong!"

Just as Milagros began to fall, Len came toddling into the room. "Your mommy wants you," Len told Milagros. "She wants you to dance."

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Down in the backyard, Auntie Nita lined up five of her seven girls (Maya and Monette were still babies). They stood in a straight line, waiting for the music, and as the drone of the ukelele began, the Bustos girls twirled their hips and rotated their wrists. They shuffled their feet right then left and swayed to the strains of Don Ho's song, "Tiny Bubbles."

Milagros led her sisters in the dance, swaying up ahead of them to encourage them, remind them, show them how to do it.

She curled her fingertips, then stretched them out, allowing a wash of ukelele mixed with Don Ho's croon to move through her hand, then forearm and elbow and shoulder. The sisters moved together and stirred the air like gentle waves rippling onto sandy beaches. Milagros moved her hips in a circle.

"That's called around the island!" Auntie Nita told everyone.

Then Milagros' movements grew big and her arms stretched through space, rearranged the atmosphere, popped the tiny bubbles. The other sisters followed Milagros as they seemed to float among our guests and turn our Midwest garden into a tropical paradise.

I watched the eyes of our friends and neighbors. Everyone at the party had stopped to watch the Bustos girls. Conversations were traded for sighs and exclamations. "*Ganda!*" they gasped. And they were right, the five little island girls were beautiful. They told a story about Don Ho's tiny bubbles that made him feel happy, made him feel fine. Who cares? I thought. What a dumb song.

A few of the women tried coaxing me to join the sisters, but I had never taken a dance lesson in my life, much less hula lessons. There was no way I was going to dance up there next to Milagros and there was no way that I could ever forgive her for standing up in the middle of my backyard and dancing.

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That night, after everyone had gone, Milagros and her mother sat in the corner of the living room, talking quietly. Milagros fingered the photo of her friends and occasionally held it out to her mother. I watched their bodies cast giant silhouettes against our white walls, their shadows melting in and out of each other. Milagros cried, placed her head onto her mother's lap, while Auntie Nita clicked her tongue and sighed. "*Ay naku,*" she whispered. "You'll see, *hija*, things will get better. Don't worry, *naman.*" She kissed the top of Milagros' head and told her, "Enough now, daughter, *Tama na.*" And Milagros nodded, Okay.

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Whenever we were given a chore to do together, she would lead the work and I would follow. She knew how to do more than I did. Her mother let her fold the laundry and iron. She was allowed to use the stove. These were things my mother had always taken care of and so I let Milagros take the lead, since she seemed to know what she was doing.

I know these were only chores to Milagros, but for me it was like playing house. I was always amazed when the rice that we put in the pan and covered with water turned out fluffy and light. I loved that an article of clothing covered with mud from the garden could be whitened with bleach and come out new. Sometimes we stitched old pieces of fabric together and stuffed them with holey socks and nylons to make throw pillows. Before Milagros, I took all this for granted.

Sitting at the kitchen counter while my mother washed chicken parts, I asked her how come Milagros knew so much.

"It's different in the Philippines," she said. "Because life's harder back there, girls learn early how to do housework, how to help."

"I thought everyone had maids," I said.

"A lot of people do," my mother said. "But still, the Philippines is old-fashioned that way, you know. Girls learn how to do women's work and boys learn to do men's work."

"Why don't you want me to help?" I asked her as I doodled on the corner of my homework.

"Maybe I've spoiled you, ha, *hija?*"

"Maybe," I said. I thought about the way Milagros was always so serious, how she never seemed to want to play. Maybe, I thought, it's because they never gave her time to play in the Philippines. She was too busy working.

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Tuesday Uncle Victor came home, while Mom and Auntie Nita were at the grocery store. He came into the house whistling as he always did, giving us chocolate too. We went through the rituals we had established with him, the children crawling all over him,

the slipper thing with Milagros, everything. It had been two months since they had arrived.

"Where did you go today?" I asked.

"I went to the shopping mall," he told us. "I talked to the man at the shoe store, the lady at the dress shop, the book store. I spoke to somebody at a place where they sold little silver and gold trinkets with engravings."

"Did you go to the jewelry store?" I wanted to know.

Uncle Victor nodded his head. "I did."

"Did they need a lawyer?" my brother asked.

"Well, children," Uncle Victor announced. "It looks like someone needed a lawyer!"

Myette, Melina and Maritess danced around their father, pulling on his pants leg and kissing his hands.

"Really, Uncle Victor?" asked one of my brothers.

"Yes, *hijo*, really! Elroy's Easy Diner."

I looked at Milagros and smiled at her. "This is good, huh? Aren't you glad?" She smiled stiffly at me.

"Okay, *na*," she said.

Uncle Victor swooped down to cradle Milagros in his thick arms. "*Hija*," he said. "Aren't you gonna kiss me congratulations?" Milagros nodded her head, leaned into his cheek and kissed.

"Congratulations, Papa," she told him.

"Soon," Uncle Victor told her, "I will pass the law review and I can start my own practice. You and the girls will go to a nice school and have lots of pretty clothes. You'll see, *hija*, you'll see." He put his face against hers, and spun her around the room.

"Okay, Papa," she said. "Okay."

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A week later, Milagros and I decided to visit her father at Elroy's Easy Diner. We walked along the boulevard in silence. The sun was out, warming my face, and a spring breeze blew secrets past my ear. I was not in the mood to talk, so I kept my eyes fixed on the path in front of me. I dragged my toe, marking the dirt

behind me, scuffing my new red tennis shoe. I hummed under my breath, rattled lyrics to myself.

"Aren't you excited?" I asked her. "Aren't you excited to see your dad at work? They don't let kids in hospitals, so I've never seen my dad at work. Plus, your dad'll give us treats."

"It's okay," she said.

"Hey, Nelda!" called a voice. "Hey, you stuffer!"

There in the hollow of the creek stood Trent Collins, a neighborhood boy, and with him were Carrie Shamanski, Mark Checkolinski, Amy Owlrick, and Stanley Martin, the boy I had a crush on. Trent ran up to me and snapped my bra. "So you still stuffing?"

"I do not stuff!" I yelled. It wasn't my fault that this bra my mother bought didn't fit me, it had been on sale.

"What?" Stanley asked.

"Yeah," Trent said as he danced around me, "Nelda the Nerd, stuffs—look, can't you see?" He lurched forward, thrust the palm of his hand onto my chest.

The sun was glaring into the lens of my glasses, and so I had to squint. The children stood frozen like shadows in a game of statues, staring at me. I swung my arm, which was as thin as a sapling, at Trent. I heard them laugh at my attempt. Someone said something about my clothes. Someone said something about my nerdy little Chinky glasses that went with my nerdy little Chinky face—I don't know who because the sun had blurred their horrid little mouths—maybe they all said it. Maybe they said it at once, together, several times. I looked down at my chest and I could see the crinkled little cup-cakes of my padded bra smashed across my chest, my cotton pants ballooning out into the afternoon wind. I swung again. I missed.

Milagros leapt from behind me, tossed a stone at the group of children, broke the spell.

"Leave Nelda alone," she said as she rubbed her hands. "You are *bastus* for teasing my friend." She held up her fist, ready to fight, but I grabbed her sleeve, pulling her close to me.

"What?" Trent said laughing. The rest of the gang scattered, leaving him alone in the ditch.

One of the kids called to him, warning him, "Let's go, Collins. Let 'em alone all ready."

Milagros turned to me and smiled, "You know *bastus*?" she asked, steering me in the direction of the diner.

"Stupid?"

"Yes, he is stupid," she said.

We fell back into silent step, me with Milagros, or Milagros with me. I looked at her and for the first time, I felt I understood.

"You went to an all-girl school in the Philippines?" I asked her. She nodded.

"You were kind of lucky," I told her. "At least girls don't snap each other's bras."

"Oh, yes," Milagros said, smiling. "Sometimes."

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At the diner, Uncle Victor welcomed us, calling out our names as he wiped his hands off onto his apron. Uncle Victor was busy, but he brought us both a brownie and milk. I told Uncle Victor what had happened at the creek.

"Don't worry," he said. "Don't pay attention to those kids. They just don't understand."

"Do you know what they call me?" I asked him. "Nerdy Nelda."

"What is nerdy?" he wanted to know.

Milagros explained it to him in *Tagalog*: To be a nerd is to be a geek, a hang-around-with-the-book-crowd kind of individual.

"Oh," he said as he rubbed my shoulder with the palm of his hand. "You know, Nelda, nerds do very important things—they invent gadgets and machinery, they discover great cures and write beautiful poems."

Looking into his face, the roundness of his cheeks and the soft and easy comfort of his dark eyes, I thought Milagros resembled her father. She had his eyes, his manner. "I know," I told him. "That's what my mother always says."

"Hey," someone called from the other side of the diner. "Could I get some coffee here, or what?" Uncle Victor looked around but the waiter was in back—he must have been in the bathroom. Two men sat on the other side of the diner. One was huge—two hundred-some pounds. He wore a checkered shirt underneath a black windbreaker with the word "Goodyear" painted in yellow-gold letters. His jeans were baggy and worn to almost white with splotches of dirt woven into its threads. The other man was smaller, older and full of wrinkles. He had on a pair of black plastic glasses.

Uncle Victor waved at the man and smiled. He got up to get the waiter at the back of the restaurant. "One minute, sir," Uncle Victor said.

Milagros grabbed onto my wrist, squeezed. She was holding her breath. I turned to the man, as if ready to say something, but Milagros pinched me and shook her head no.

The waiter came out from back, carrying a pot of coffee. "I got it, Victor," he said. "I'll take care of it."

Uncle Victor smiled weakly at the waiter and after that he went back to bussing tables.

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Later that night, Milagros and I stood on stools in my mother's kitchen, peeling potatoes. After a while I heard a heavy thumping sound that was constant and loud. It seemed to shake the walls and echo within the framework of our house.

"Where's your father?" Auntie Nita asked Milagros. "Is that him?" Without looking up from her work, Milagros nodded her head. "*Ay naku*," whispered Auntie Nita. "Not again." Then she calmly went to Uncle Victor. "Watch the kids, ha, Milagros?"

Soon I could also hear an occasional moan, like a wolf that had been trapped. I looked at Milagros who was intent on peeling her potatoes.

"Don't you hear that?" I whispered. "What is that?"

She picked up another potato and rinsed it. Taking the peeler

in her right hand she began to shave its skin off.

I shook her shoulder. "What's the matter with you?" I yelled. I put my work down and ran to the extra bedroom.

The drumming against the wall felt heavy and full of pain. I could hear my uncle crying, sobbing, sometimes quietly and at other times howling. Auntie Nita's voice sang in a dialect I could not comprehend. Her lullaby was low and soothing. Soon she hushed his muttering.

I stood at the door, wanting to peek, wanting to know what was the matter, but I couldn't move. I'd never heard a man cry like that. I thought everything was going well now. Hadn't he found what he had been looking for? A job? In America?

My mother hissed at me to get away from the door. "Leave them alone," she warned. "That is none of your business."

But the door cracked open just then and light shed onto the walls outside of their room. I stepped up to the door and peeked in.

Auntie Nita was rubbing Uncle Victor's shoulder, pulling him gently towards her, but he wouldn't let her hold him. Instead he was cracking his head against the wall, again and again and again. His face was red, swollen and washed with tears. Uncle Victor wailed and I heard a sound rising from some deep, dark place.

Milagros pushed passed me, opened the door. She helped her mother pull Uncle Victor from the wall, helped Auntie Nita place his head on her mother's lap, ran her small hand up and down the curve of his spine, kissed him, and pressed her cheek to his shoulder. Then Milagros stood and pulled me out the door. She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand, dragging tears across her face. "He will be okay," she said.

I studied the black at the center of her eye, how the color seemed to swirl deep into forever. I wanted to stay, so when she leaned her slight body against the heavy wooden door I reached out and tried to hold it open. I pushed. The door rocked between us, was suspended in mid-air for a few seconds, but she was stronger than I. "Don't worry, Nelda," she said. "Never mind."

Milagros
helped
her

Then she closed the door and I stood there and stared at the knots, at the faces that ran from the wood's swirling grain, at the eyes and teeth and giant sized moles, and I waited.