Bluebonnet Learning
K–5 Reading Language Arts

ENGLISH

PERSONAL NARRATIVES AND CONTEMPORARY FICTION



GRADE 4 | ANTHOLOGY

EDITION 1

Grade 4

Personal Narratives and Contemporary Fiction

Anthology

Acknowledgement:

Thank you to all the Texas educators and stakeholders who supported the review process and provided feedback. These materials are the result of the work of numerous individuals, and we are deeply grateful for their contributions.

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Contents
Personal Narratives and Contemporary Fiction Anthology

Introduction 1

Personal Narratives 3

Small Steps: The Year I Got Polio

Chapter 1: The Diagnosis (Part 1) 6

Chapter 1: The Diagnosis (Part 2). 10

Chapter 3: An Oxygen Tent and a Chocolate Milkshake 14

Chapter 7: Star Patient Surprises Everyone (Part 1) 18

Chapter 7: Star Patient Surprises Everyone (Part 2) 23

Chapter 13: The Great Accordion Concert 27

Chapter 14: Good-bye, Silver; Hello, Sticks 32

Chapter 18: Back to School 34

Contemporary Fiction

Excerpts from *Letters From Heaven* by Lydia Gil 37

"Café con Leche" 40

“Cangrejitos de Guayaba y Queso” 44

“Synchronized Eating” 48

“Congrí” 52

“Mariquitas” 56

“Ropa Vieja, Part 1” 62

“Ropa Vieja, Part 2” 66

“Ropa Vieja, Part 3” 70

“Misunderstandings” 76

“Asking for Help, Part 1” 80

“Asking for Help, Part 2” 84

“Flan” 88

“Family Dinner” 92

Biography 97

Glossaries 99

Glossary: Personal Narratives 101

Glossary: Contemporary Fiction. 107

Introduction



Greetings, fourth grader!

You are about to embark on an exciting adventure into reading, learning about and studying Personal Narratives and Contemporary Fiction. In the Personal Narratives unit, you will read true stories written by the people who experienced them. The authors will share their most interesting, important, or fun memories about a meaningful time in their life. In the Contemporary Fiction unit, you'll read and examine short passages from a fiction book titled *Letters From Heaven* written by Lydia Gil. Through these short passages you will explore a young girl's journey to preserve traditions, memories, and relationships. There's also a glossary at the end of the book to help with words. As you set forth on this adventure, what are you excited to read about? What do you wonder about these texts? Which of these types of texts would you like to know more about? Keep these questions, and others, in mind as you begin reading.

Now, let's get started!

Personal Narratives

From SMALL STEPS: THE YEAR I GOT POLIO by Peg Kehret,
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Small Steps: The Year I Got Polio

Chapter 1: The Diagnosis (Part 1)

by Peg Kehret

Peg Kehret is an award winning author of books for children. When she was 12 years old she contracted polio, which resulted in a long hospital stay and rehabilitation, but she finally made an almost complete recovery. Small Steps *is her memoir of that time in her life.*

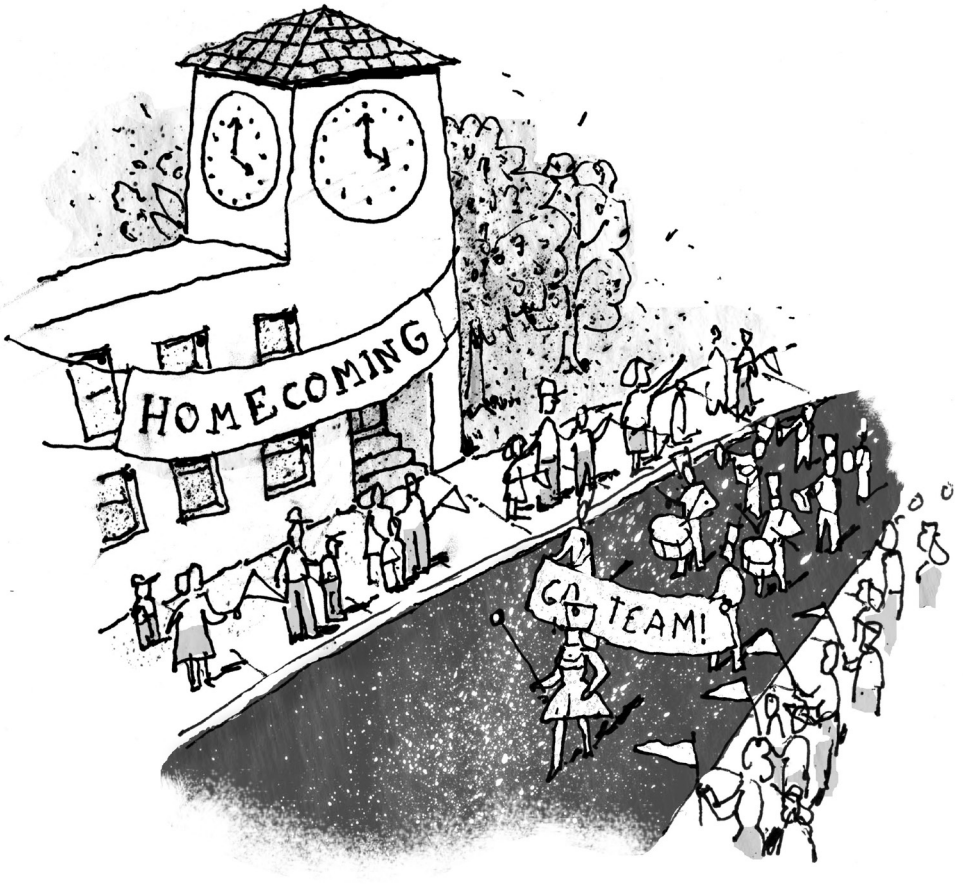
You will read several excerpts from Small Steps. *"The Diagnosis" is the first chapter in the book and subsequent chapter numbers reflect those in the original text.*

I never thought it would happen to me. Before a polio **vaccine** was developed, I knew that polio killed or **crippled** thousands of people, mainly children, each year, but I never expected it to invade my body, to paralyze *my* muscles.

Polio is a highly **contagious** disease. In 1949, there were 42,033 cases reported in the United States. One of those was a twelve-year-old girl in Austin, Minnesota:

Peg Schulze. Me.

My ordeal began on a Friday early in September. In school that morning, I glanced at the clock often, eager for the **Homecoming**



parade at four o'clock. As a seventh-grader, it was my first chance to take part in the Homecoming fun. For a week, my friends and I had spent every spare moment working on the seventh-grade **float**, and we were sure it would win first prize.

My last class before lunch was chorus. I loved to sing, and we were practicing a song whose lyrics are the inscription on the Statue of Liberty. Usually the words "Give me your tired, your poor …" brought goosebumps to my arms, but on Homecoming day, I was distracted by a twitching muscle in my left thigh. As I sang, a section of my blue skirt popped up and down as if jumping beans lived in my leg.

I pressed my hand against my thigh, trying to make the muscle be still, but it leaped and jerked beneath my fingers. I stretched my leg forward and rotated the ankle. Twitch, twitch. Next I tightened my leg muscles for a few seconds and then relaxed them. Nothing helped.

The bell rang. When I started toward my locker, my legs **buckled** as if I had nothing but cotton inside my skin. I collapsed, scattering my books on the floor.

Someone yelled, "Peg fainted," but I knew I had not fainted because my eyes stayed open and I was conscious. I sat on the floor for a moment.

"Are you all right?" my friend Karen asked as she helped me stand up.

"Yes. I don't know what happened."

"You look pale."

"I'm fine," I insisted. "Really."

I put my books in my locker and went home for lunch, as I did every day.



Two days earlier, I'd gotten a sore throat and headache. Now I also felt weak, and my back hurt. What rotten timing, I thought, to get sick on Homecoming day.

Although my legs felt wobbly, I walked the twelve blocks home. I didn't tell my mother about the fall or about my headache and other problems because I knew she would make me stay home.

I was glad to sit down to eat lunch. Maybe, I thought, I should not have stayed up so late the night before. Or maybe I'm just hungry.

When I reached for my milk, my hand shook so hard I couldn't pick up the glass. I grasped it with both hands; they trembled so badly that milk sloshed over the side.

Mother put her hand on my forehead. "You feel hot," she said. "You're going straight to bed."

It was a relief to lie down. I wondered why my back hurt; I hadn't lifted anything heavy. I couldn't imagine why I was so tired, either. I felt as if I had not slept in days.

I fell asleep right away and woke three hours later with a stiff neck. My back hurt even more than before, and now my legs ached as well. Several times I had painful muscle **spasms** in my legs and toes. The muscles tightened until my knees bent and my toes curled, and I couldn't straighten my legs or toes until the spasms passed.

I looked at the clock; the Homecoming parade started in fifteen minutes.

"I want to go to the parade," I said.

Mother stuck a thermometer in my mouth, said, "One hundred and two," and called the doctor. The seventh-grade float would have to win first place without me. I went back to sleep.

Small Steps: The Year I Got Polio

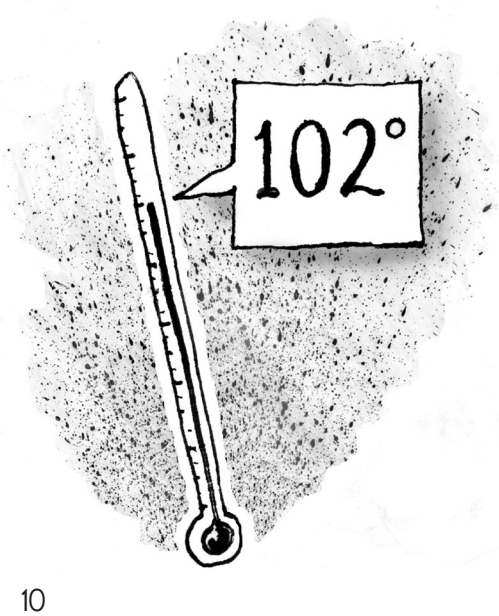
Chapter 1: The Diagnosis (Part 2)

by Peg Kehret

Dr. Wright came, took my temperature, listened to my breathing, and talked with Mother. Mother sponged my forehead with a cold cloth. I dozed, woke, and slept again.

At midnight, I began to vomit. Mother and Dad helped me to the bathroom; we all assumed I had the flu.

Dr. Wright returned before breakfast the next morning and took my temperature again. "Still one hundred and two," he said. He helped me sit up, with my feet dangling over the side of the bed. He tapped my knees with his rubber mallet; this was supposed to make my legs jerk. They didn't. They hung **limp** and unresponsive.



I was too **woozy** from pain and fever to care.

He ran his fingernail across the bottom of my foot, from the heel to the toes. It felt awful, but I couldn't

pull my foot away. He did the same thing on the other foot, with the same effect. I wished he would leave me alone so I could sleep.

"I need to do a **spinal tap** on her," he told my parents. "Can you take her to the hospital right away?"

When Dr. Wright got the results, he asked my parents to go to another room. While I dozed again, he told them the **diagnosis**, and they returned alone to tell me.

Mother held my hand.

"You have polio," Dad said, as he stroked my hair back from my forehead. "You will need to go to a special hospital for polio patients, in Minneapolis."

Polio! Panic shot through me, and I began to cry. How could I have polio? I didn't know anyone who had the disease. Where did the **virus** come from? How did it get in my body?

I didn't want to have polio; I didn't want to leave my family and go to a hospital one hundred miles away.

As we drove home to pack, I sat slumped in the back seat. "How long will I have to stay in the hospital?" I asked.

"Until you're well," Mother said.

When we got home, I was not allowed to leave the car, not even to say good-bye to Grandpa, who lived with us, or to B.J., my dog. We could not take a chance of spreading the deadly virus. Our orders were strict: I must **contaminate** no one.

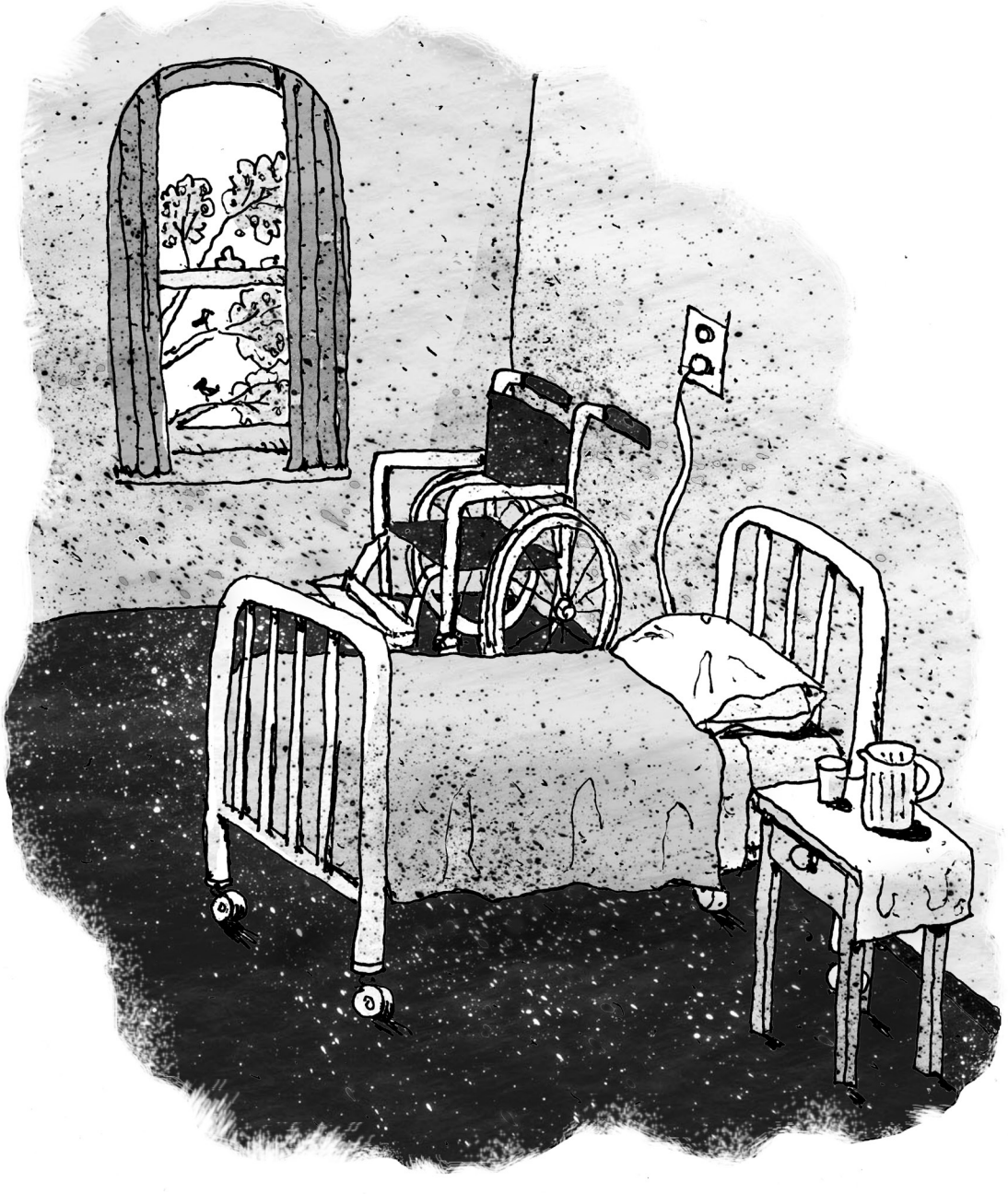
"Karen called," Mother said when she returned with a suitcase. "The seventh-grade float won second prize."

I was too sick and frightened to care.

Grandpa waved at me through the car window. Tears **glistened** on his cheeks. I had never seen my grandfather cry.

Later that morning, I walked into the **isolation ward** of the Sheltering Arms Hospital in Minneapolis and went to bed in a private room. No one was allowed in except the doctors and nurses, and they wore masks. My parents stood outside on the grass, waving bravely and blowing kisses through the window. Exhausted, feverish, and scared, I fell asleep.

When I woke up, I was paralyzed.



Small Steps: The Year I Got Polio

Chapter 3: An Oxygen Tent and a Chocolate Milkshake

by Peg Kehret

*After Peg is rushed to the hospital at the end of "The Diagnosis," she grows sicker and her **paralysis** continues. She is placed in an oxygen tent to help her breathe, and has trouble eating and drinking, until her parents take a risk and take things into their own hands.*

Because of my fever, it was important for me to drink lots of liquid. I tried to drink some ice water each time my parents and the nurses held the glass for me. I was also given apple juice, grape juice, and 7-Up, but they were no easier to swallow than water. I was not offered milk even though I drank milk at home. Because milk creates **phlegm**, or **mucus**, in the throat, patients with **bulbar polio** were not allowed any milk or ice cream for fear it would make them choke.

One evening, a particularly patient nurse **coaxed** me to drink some 7-Up. She put one hand behind my head and lifted it gently, to make it easier for me to swallow. "Just take little sips," she said.

I wanted to drink the 7-Up, to please her and because I was thirsty. I sucked a mouthful through the straw, but when I tried to swallow, my throat didn't work and all the 7-Up came out my nose. As the fizzy liquid stung the inside of my nose, I sputtered and choked.

The choking made it hard to get my breath, and that frightened me. If I couldn't breathe, I would be put in the **iron lung**.

After that, I didn't want to drink. I was afraid it would come out my nose again; I was afraid of choking. Only the constant urging of my parents and the nurses got enough fluids into me.

Eight days after my polio was **diagnosed**, my fever still stayed at one hundred two degrees. My breathing was shallow, the painful muscle spasms continued, and every inch of my body hurt. It was like having a bad case of the flu that never ended. My only bits of pleasure in the long hours of pain were the brief visits from my parents and looking at the little teddy bear that Art had sent.

On the afternoon of the eighth day, Mother said, "We can't go on like this. You need more **nourishment**. You'll never get well if you don't swallow something besides water and juice. Isn't there anything that sounds good? Think hard. If you could have anything you wanted to eat or drink, what would it be?"

"A chocolate milkshake," I said.

NO MILK, my chart stated. NO ICE CREAM.

Mother told a nurse, "Peg would like a chocolate milkshake."

"We can't let her have a milkshake," the nurse replied. "I'm sorry."

"She needs nourishment," Mother declared, "especially liquid. She thinks she can drink a milkshake."

"She could choke on it," the nurse said. "It's absolutely against the doctor's orders." She left the room, muttering about interfering parents.

"You rest for a bit," Mother told me. "We'll be back soon." She and Dad went out.

They returned in less than an hour, carrying a white paper bag. The nurse followed them into my room.

"I won't be responsible for this," she said, as she watched Dad take a milkshake container out of the bag. "Milk and ice cream are the worst things you could give her."

Dad took the lid off the container while Mother unwrapped a paper straw.

"We know you have to follow the rules," Dad said, "but we don't. This is our daughter, and she has had nothing to eat for over a week. If a chocolate milkshake is what she wants, and she thinks she can drink it, then a chocolate milkshake is what she is going to have."

He handed the milkshake to Mother, who put the straw in it.

"What if she chokes to death?" the nurse demanded. "How are you going to feel if you lose her because of a milkshake?"

"If something doesn't change soon," Dad replied, "we're going to lose her anyway. At least this way, we'll know we tried everything we could."

Mother thrust the milkshake under the oxygen tent and guided the straw between my lips.

I sucked the cold, thick chocolate shake into my mouth, held it there for a second, and swallowed. It slipped smoothly down my throat. For the first time since I got sick, something tasted good.

I took another mouthful and swallowed it. I had to work at swallowing, but the milkshake went down. The next mouthful went down, too, and the one after that. I drank the whole milkshake and never choked once, even though I was lying flat on my back the whole time.

When I made a loud slurping sound with my straw because the container was empty, my parents clapped and cheered. The relieved nurse cheered with them.

Within an hour, my temperature dropped. That chocolate milkshake may have saved my life.



Small Steps: The Year I Got Polio

Chapter 7: Star Patient Surprises Everyone (Part 1)

by Peg Kehret

After successfully swallowing the milkshake Peg starts to improve. She has an easier time eating, her pain lessens, and breathing is easier. Eventually she is transferred to another room, where her roommate is an eight year old boy named Tommy, who is also paralyzed with polio, and needs the help of an iron lung to breathe. Peg and Tommy enjoy listening to the Lone Ranger radio program together. Peg also begins intense physical therapy, in the hopes that it will eventually relieve her paralysis.

On October first, I lay in bed with my eyes closed, rehearsing a new joke. As I imagined Dr. Bevis's laughter, my leg itched. Without thinking, I scratched the itch. Then, as I realized what I had done, my eyes sprang open.

Had I really used my hand? After three weeks of **paralysis**, I was almost afraid to believe it, for fear I had dreamed or imagined the movement. Holding my breath, I tried again. The fingers on my left hand moved back and forth.

"I CAN MOVE MY HAND!!" I yelled.

Two nurses rushed into the room.

"Look! I can move my left hand!" I wiggled my fingers **jubilantly**.

"Get Dr. Bevis," said one of the nurses. She smiled at me as the other nurse hurried out of the room.

"Can she really do it?" asked Tommy. "Can she move her hand?"

"Yes," said the nurse. "Her fingers are moving."

"Hooray!" shrieked Tommy. "The Lone Ranger rides again!"

Dr. Bevis came bounding in. "What is all this shouting about?"

Feeling triumphant, I moved my fingers.

"Try to turn your hand over," he said.

I tried. The hand didn't go all the way, but it moved. It definitely moved. It was Christmas and my birthday and the Fourth of July, all at the same time. I could move my hand!

Dr. Bevis turned my hand palm up. "Try to bend your arm," he said.

My hand lifted an inch or so off the bed before it dropped back down.

"What about the other hand?" he asked. "Is there any movement in your right hand?"

To my complete astonishment, my right hand moved, too. Bending at the elbow, my lower arm raised several inches and I waved my fingers at Dr. Bevis.

By then, I was so excited I felt as if I could jump from that bed and run laps around the hospital.

"This is wonderful," Dr. Bevis said. "This is terrific!"

I agreed.

"When your mother makes her daily phone call," Dr. Bevis said, "she is going to be thrilled."

In the next few days, I improved rapidly. Soon I could use both hands, then my arms. I was able to sit up, starting with two minutes and working up to half an hour. Movement returned to my legs, too. My arms were still extremely weak, but I learned to feed myself again, which did wonders for both my attitude and my appetite. I was no longer totally helpless.

With my bed cranked up, I could balance a book on my stomach and turn the pages myself. I had always liked to read, and now books provided hours of entertainment. The hospital had a small library; day after day, I lost myself in books.



I began reading aloud to Tommy. I quit only when my voice got hoarse, but even then he always begged me to read just one more page. I preferred reading silently because it was faster, but I felt sorry for Tommy who was still stuck in the iron lung, unable to hold a book. I was clearly getting better; he was not. Each day, I read to him until my voice gave out.

Dr. Bevis continued to praise and encourage me. Mrs. Crab bragged about my progress. The nurses called me their star patient. I realized that no one had thought I would ever regain the use of my arms and legs.

A week after I first moved my hand, Dr. Bevis said he wanted to see if I could stand by myself. First, he helped me sit on the edge of the bed. Then, with a nurse on each side, I was eased off the bed until my feet touched the floor. Each nurse had a hand firmly under one of my armpits, holding me up.

"Lock your knees," Dr. Bevis instructed. "Stand up straight."

I tried to do as he said.

"We're going to let go," he said, "but we won't let you fall. When the nurses drop their arms, see if you can stand by yourself."

Tommy, my iron lung cheerleader, hollered, "Do it, kemo sabe! Do it!"

It was wonderful to feel myself in an upright position again. I was sure I would be able to stand alone. I even imagined taking a step or two.

"All right," Dr. Bevis said to the nurses. "Let go."

As soon as they released me, I toppled. Without support, my legs were like cooked spaghetti. The nurses and Dr. Bevis all grabbed me to keep me from crashing to the floor.

Disappointment filled me, and I could tell the others were disappointed, too. The strength had returned so quickly to my arms and hands that everyone expected my legs to be better also.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I tried."

"It will happen," Dr. Bevis said.

They helped me back into bed, and I was grateful to lie down again. Standing for that short time, even with help, had exhausted me and made my backache.

The twice-daily hot packs and stretching continued, and so did my progress. Each small achievement, such as being able to wiggle the toes on one foot, was **heralded** with great joy. I had to keep my feet flat against a board at the foot of my bed to prevent them from drooping forward permanently, and I longed to lie in bed without that board.

Small Steps: The Year I Got Polio

Chapter 7: Star Patient Surprises Everyone (Part 2)

by Peg Kehret

Although I was delighted with every small accomplishment, I wondered why I got better and some of the other patients did not. Tommy might spend the rest of his life in the iron lung. It didn't seem fair.

I mentioned this to Dr. Bevis. "Some cases of polio are severe, and some are mild," he said. "When the polio virus completely destroys a nerve center, the muscles controlled by that center are **paralyzed** forever. If the damage is slight rather than total, the paralysis is temporary. Your muscles were severely weakened, but the nerve damage wasn't total. It's possible for weak muscles to gain back some of their strength."

"So Tommy's polio is worse than mine," I said.

"That's right. It also helped that your parents took you to the doctor right away. You were already here and diagnosed when you needed oxygen; some people who have **respiratory** polio are not that fortunate."

I remembered how hard it had been to breathe, and how much the oxygen tent had helped.

Dr. Bevis continued, "Most people think they have the flu and don't get medical help until paralysis sets in. By the time they learn they have polio, and get to a hospital that's equipped to treat them, the respiratory patients often have to go straight into an iron lung. They don't get hot packs or physical therapy until they can breathe on their own again, which might be several months later. The sooner the Sister Kenny treatments are started, the more they help." He smiled at me. "You are one lucky girl."

But it wasn't all luck, I thought; it was quick action by my parents. They helped create my good luck.

"I've been wondering something else, too," I said. "How did I get polio when not one other person in my town got it?"

"Many people have polio and never know it," Dr. Bevis said. "They are highly contagious, but because their symptoms are so slight, they don't see a doctor. There are probably thousands of cases of polio every year that are so mild they are never **diagnosed**."

"So I caught it from someone who didn't know they had it," I said. It seemed unbelievable to me that anyone could have polio and not realize it.

Mail was delivered every afternoon, and I looked forward to a daily letter from my mother. Most of her letters were signed, "Love, Mother and Dad," but a few were signed with a muddy paw print.

Those were from B.J., telling me he had chased a cat or buried a bone. Grandpa depended on Mother to tell me any news, but he sent a gift each week when my parents came to visit.

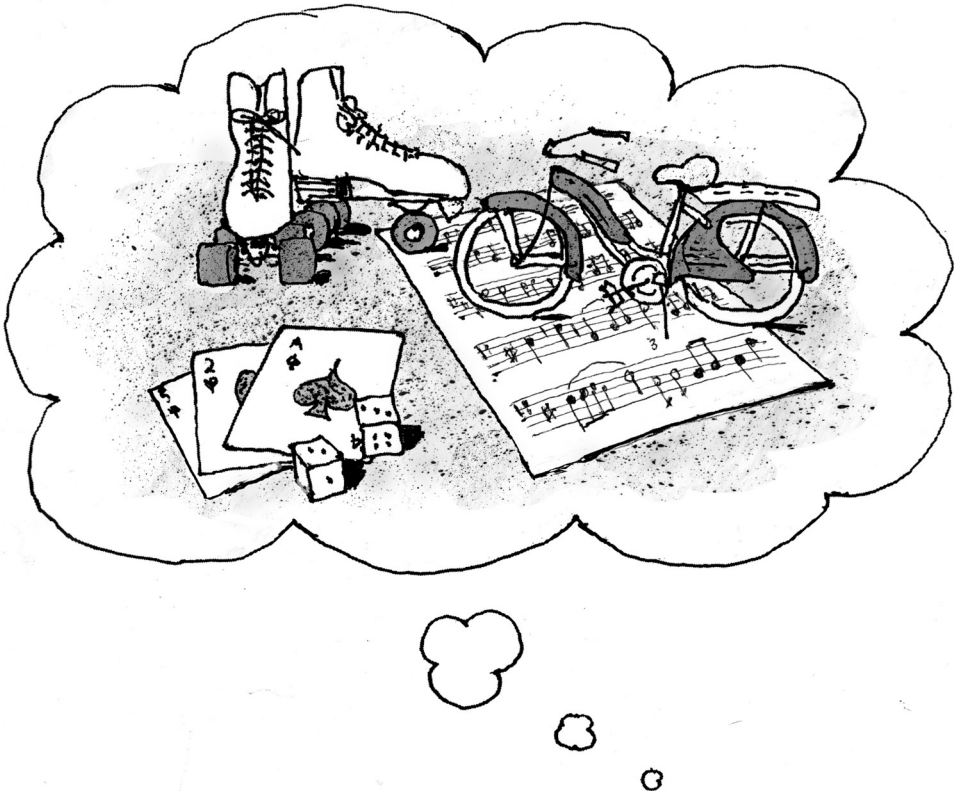
Art wrote about college life and sent me a new teddy bear just like the one that got burned.

One mail delivery included a big brown packet from my school in Austin. When I opened it, dozens of letters from my classmates tumbled out. Karen wrote about a student petition to change the rules so girls could wear pants to school instead of the required dresses. Another girl complained that her new haircut was too short; a third was outraged at the basketball referee.

I had the strange feeling that I was reading about a different lifetime. The other kids were upset about such unimportant things.

Just a few weeks earlier, I, too, had worried about clothes and hair and the basketball team. Now none of this mattered. I had faced death. I had lived with **excruciating** pain and with loneliness and uncertainty about the future. Bad haircuts and lost ball games would never bother me again.

Even the petition to allow girls to wear pants to school, a cause I supported, failed to excite me. I would happily wear a **gunnysack**, I thought, if I could walk into the school.



"Be glad you aren't here," one boy wrote. "You aren't missing anything but hard tests and too much homework."

He's wrong, I thought. I miss my own room and playing with B.J. and helping Grandpa in the garden. I miss my piano lessons and roller-skating and licking the pan when Mother makes fudge. I miss visiting my aunts and uncles. I miss riding my bike with Karen and playing Monopoly with Richard.

I put the letters aside, knowing I was changed forever. My world was now the hospital. Would I have anything in common with my classmates when I went home? I felt closer now to Tommy, whose head was the only part of him I had ever seen, than I did to the kids who used to be my dearest friends. Tommy understood what it was like to have polio; my school friends could never know.

Small Steps: The Year I Got Polio

Chapter 13: The Great Accordion Concert

by Peg Kehret

After Peg regains movement, she is transferred to Sheltering Arms, a rehabilitation hospital. There she lives with a group of other girls her age who are also recovering from polio. Peg begins to use a wheelchair and works hard in physical and occupational therapy to get stronger so that she can walk and move easily again. Her parents come to visit every week and she and her roommates have fun together, even as they face the challenges of polio.

Although I had not yet mastered the fine art of moving the pile of marbles from spot to spot with my toes, I received a new challenge in **O.T.** I was going to learn to play the accordion.

Certain muscles of the arms and hands are used when pushing an accordion in and out, and it happened that I needed help with those particular muscles. The Sheltering Arms owned an accordion, and Miss Ballard knew I'd had two years of piano lessons. She said the accordion was the perfect exercise for me.

From my very first attempt, I hated the accordion. It was heavy and awkward, and pushing it in and out made my arms ache. The trick of playing a **melody** on the keyboard with one hand, pushing

the proper chord buttons with the other hand, and at the same time pushing and pulling on the accordion itself was completely beyond me.

"It would be easier if you asked me to juggle and tap dance at the same time," I said.

"You just need practice," Miss Ballard replied. "Try a little longer."

I did try however, even when I got the correct right-hand note with the proper left-hand chord and pushed air through the bellows at the same time, I didn't care for the sound. I had never liked accordion music, and my efforts during O.T. did nothing to change my mind.

When my parents heard about the accordion, Mother said, "What fun! You've always loved your piano lessons."

"That's different," I said. "I like the way a piano sounds."

"You already know how to read music," Dad pointed out. "You will master that accordion in no time."

I insisted I would never be **adept** on the accordion, and Dad kept saying it would be a breeze.

I finally said, "Why don't *you* play it, if you think it's so easy?"

"All right. I will," said Dad, and off he went to the O.T. room to borrow the accordion.

He came back with the shoulder straps in place and an eager look on his face. My dad played piano by ear, so he didn't need sheet music. Even so, the sounds he produced could only be called squawks and squeaks.



He pushed and pulled. He punched the buttons. He grew red in the face. Beads of perspiration popped out on his bald spot. Something vaguely resembling the first few notes of "Beer Barrel Polka" emerged from the accordion, but they were accompanied by assorted other sounds, none of which could be called musical.

We girls covered our ears, made faces, and booed. We pointed our thumbs down. Mother laughed until tears ran down her cheeks.

Finally, Dad admitted defeat. Temporary defeat.

"I'll try again next week," he said. "Meanwhile, I want you to keep practicing."

"It will sound just as terrible next week," I said, but I agreed to work on my accordion technique awhile longer.

The following Sunday, we could hardly wait to tease Dad about his musical fiasco.

"When do we get the accordion concert?" Renée asked the minute my parents arrived.

"Wait!" exclaimed Alice. "I want to put in my earplugs."

We teased until Dad reluctantly agreed to try it again.

We snickered and tee-heed as he brought the O.T. accordion into the room. He sat on a chair and carefully adjusted the straps.

"Quit stalling," I said.

"What's the rush?" said Renée as she put her fingers in her ears.

Dad began to play. Instead of squeaks and squawks, he played "Beer Barrel Polka" **flawlessly**, from start to finish.

Our jaws dropped. We **gazed** at him and at each other in astonishment. When he finished the song, our questions exploded like a string of firecrackers. "How did you learn to play?" "Who taught you?" "Where did you get an accordion?" He simply smiled, while Mother applauded.

Then they told us the whole story. He had rented an accordion from a music store and practiced every spare second in order to surprise us with his concert.

"Can you play any other songs?" I asked.

"It took me all week to learn that one," Dad said.

"And he stayed up until midnight every night, practicing," Mother added.

After that, I didn't dare complain about my accordion sessions. I never did get as good at it as Dad got in just seven days, but I managed to produce a few recognizable tunes, and the effort did help strengthen my arm muscles and my fingers.

Small Steps: The Year I Got Polio

Chapter 14: Good-bye, Silver; Hello, Sticks

by Peg Kehret

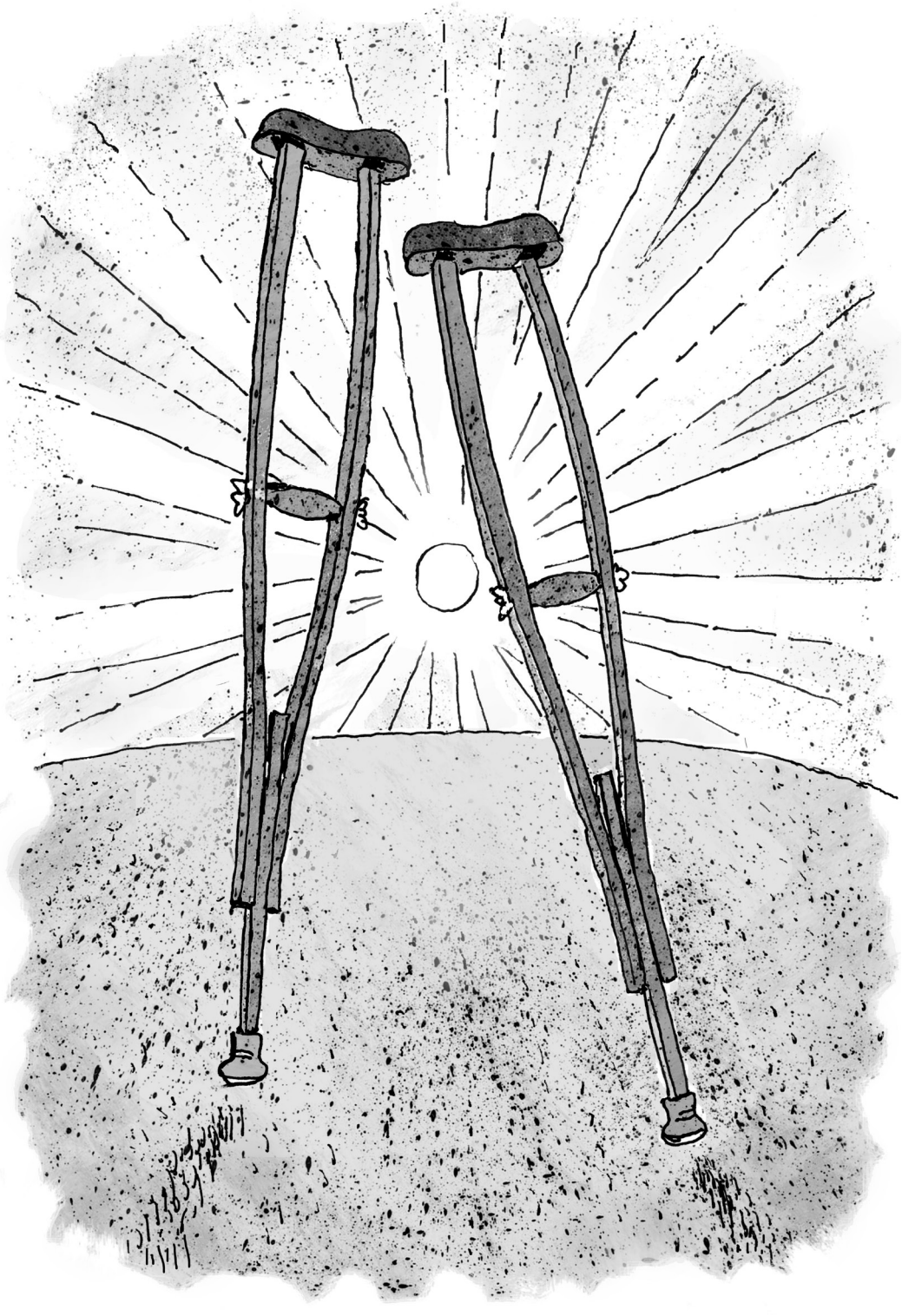
After weeks of intensive therapy, Peg is finally ready to walk again with her newly-arrived walking sticks.

Two weeks after I got my sticks, Miss Ballard told me I was strong enough to use them exclusively. I didn't need Silver anymore.

"You gave me a lot of good rides," I whispered as I patted Silver's side for the last time. I blinked back tears, feeling foolish. I had looked forward to this day for months, and now that it was here, I was all weepy about leaving my wheelchair behind.

Silver had carried me to school, distributed countless treats, and taken me safely to O.T., my sessions with Miss Ballard, visits with other patients, and special events in the sunroom. I'd had many fine times, including my thirteenth birthday, in that wheelchair. As I thought about them, I realized that even if I had never grown strong enough to leave Silver, I still would have been able to lead a happy life.

I took Silver for a farewell trip, which ended with a high-speed dash down the hall, a screech of brakes, and a final shout of "Hi, yo, Silver! Awa-a-ay!," Teetering on the two rear wheels, I tipped farther back than I had ever gone before. It was a terrific last ride.



Small Steps: The Year I Got Polio

Chapter 18: Back to School

by Peg Kehret

In April, after months in hospitals and therapy at home, Peg is finally allowed to go back to school.

"Did the new braces work?" I asked.

Dorothy shook her head, no. "My brothers are building a ramp so I can get in and out of our house."

I was glad that she was going home, and sad that she would always need the wheelchair.

When it was time for us to leave, I hugged Dorothy; wondering if I would ever see her again. We promised to write often, and that promise held back my tears.

We had good intentions, but letters between me and my roommates slowed, in both directions. There were two new girls in 202 now.

About two weeks after she was discharged, I got a letter from Dorothy. "I wanted to leave Sheltering Arms more than anything," she wrote, "but now sometimes I wish I could go back. Isn't that silly?"

It wasn't silly to me. We were safe at the Sheltering Arms, cocooned in Room 202, where everyone understood what it was like to have polio. Getting around in the normal world, even in our own homes, was more difficult than hospital life.

In April, I got permission to return to school. I was still on my walking sticks, but I could go up and down stairs if I held the railing with both hands and had someone carry my sticks for me. I was slow because both feet had to touch every step, but I could make it.

Dad bought me a backpack for my books. I was to start by attending only in the mornings. If I could manage that, I would gradually work up to a full day.

On my first day back, I was so nervous my hands began to sweat and I was afraid the sticks would slip out of my grasp. What if people never quit staring? What if no one would carry my sticks up and down stairs for me? What if I couldn't get around in the crowded halls, and fell? Worst of all, what if I discovered that I was hopelessly behind the other kids in every class?

When I walked into my first-period class, which happened to be English, the students whistled and clapped and cheered, welcoming me back. All morning, kids begged for a turn to carry my sticks up or down the stairs. They offered to help me with the backpack. They walked ahead of me in the halls, clearing space.

Without knowing it, I had become a celebrity. Since I was the only person in Austin to get polio that year, the whole town had followed my progress while I was in the hospital. It seems all of Austin had been pulling for me, hoping I would walk again.

Rather than falling behind in my classes, it quickly became clear that I had remained equal or even pulled slightly ahead. By the end of the morning, I felt sure that I would pass the final exams.

My last class of the morning was chorus practice.

Thanks to all those songs in the dark, my singing voice was improved, even though I now used my stomach muscles rather than my diaphragm.

As I found my seat and placed my sticks on the floor beside me, I remembered how my skirt had jumped because of my twitching thigh muscle on Homecoming day; and how I had collapsed in the hall when chorus ended.

I had been gone seven months. I had been gone a lifetime. Although I returned on walking sticks, moving slowly and taking small steps, I knew that in many ways, I was stronger than when I left.

I opened my music and began to sing.

Contemporary Fiction
Excerpts from *Letters from Heaven*
by Lydia Gil



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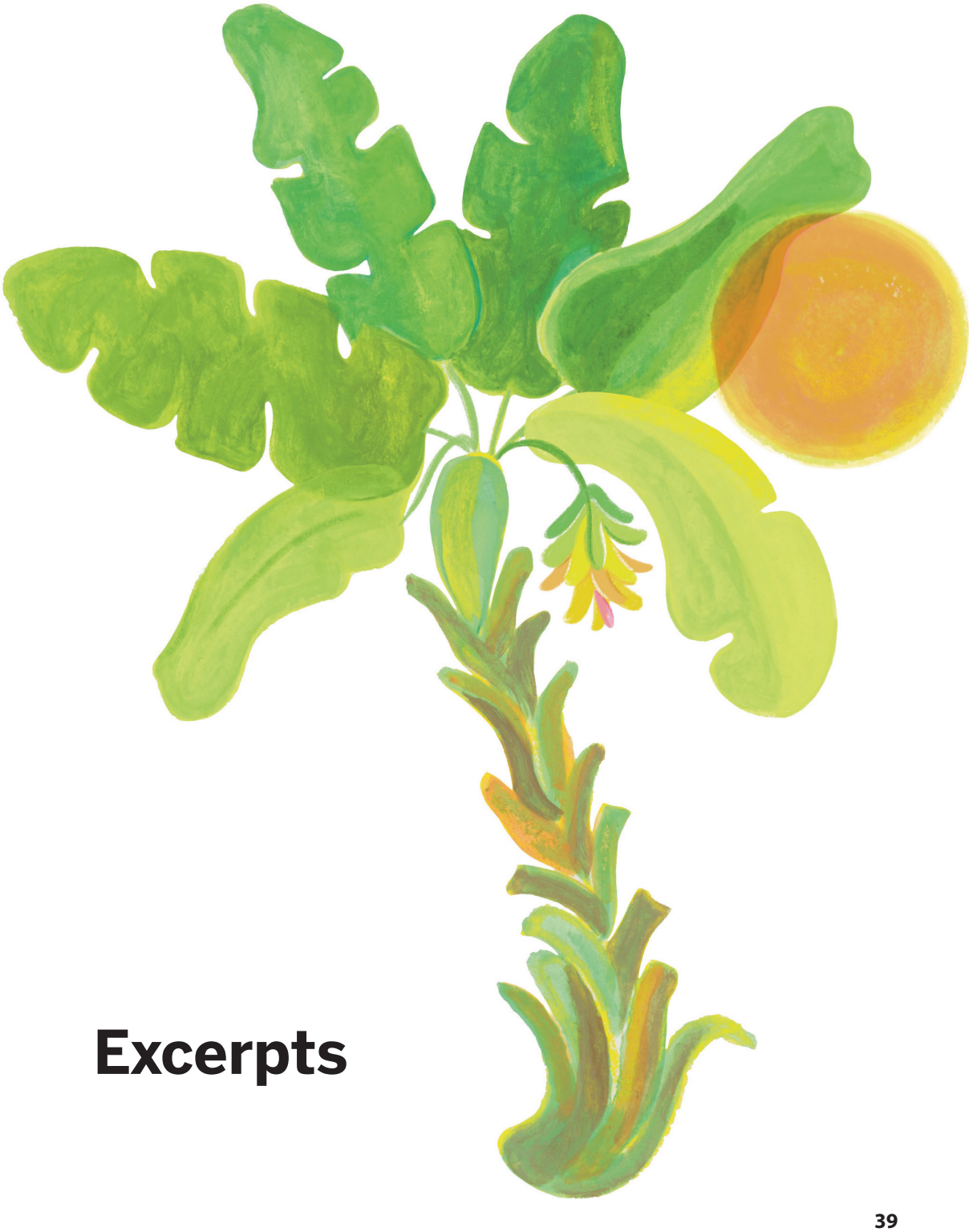


Excerpts



EXCERPT 1

Café con Leche

The day feels like it's never going to end. Math, Science, English, Social Studies, it all blurs together in my head and the only thing I can think about is my grandmother's green dress. Such a bright green, like grass after a good rain. Green was her favorite color.

"Green, how I want you green," she used to tell me so I'd eat my vegetables. [. . .]

"If your face isn't turning green, then you need to eat some more vegetables!" she'd add.

But I always licked the plate clean. Because my grandma's cooking, no matter what she made, was always the best in the world. At least for me it was.

The bell finally rings, so I run outside even though I'm not sure if anyone will be out there waiting for me. I stand at the corner looking in all directions, waiting to see who's going to pick me up today. Yesterday it was Doña Esperanza, our next door neighbor. On Tuesday it was Lisa, my mom's friend with the long hair and no make-up—sometimes she even goes around barefoot! Ugh! Lisa picks me up on Tuesdays and Fridays, but sometimes she switches with Doña Esperanza. Mami, on the other hand, never comes. Well, she did come on Monday, because she was still off work for the funeral. But she had to go back the next day. Like she always says: "If you don't work, you don't eat." Although now that grandma's gone, you might say we don't eat much at all . . .



"Celeste, cross the street, m'ija!" Doña Esperanza yells at me from across the street.

"I'm coming," I say, but I cross the street slowly, as if my feet ached.

"What happened? Did you get hurt dancing or something?"

"I'm just tired," I tell her. "And I'm not in dance anymore."

"Eat some **tostaditas** when you get home and you'll see how fast you feel better . ." she says. "Like your grandma Rosa always said, may she rest in peace, 'full belly: happy heart.'"

I keep walking as if I can't hear what she is saying. I want to talk to her, but nothing comes out.

When we get in the car, Doña Esperanza takes my hand and says: "I really miss her too . . . "

On the way home, I imagine that when I get there my after-school snack will be waiting on the kitchen table. Grandma always had a warm cup of **café con leche** and toast ready for me. But when she got sick, I had to learn to prepare it myself. She taught me how to make it by using measurements, so that it would come out right every time.

"You have to measure the ingredients and not just go by sight," she'd say. "Otherwise, one day you might have a great cup of coffee, but the next day it might taste just like laundry water . . . "

Grandma loved her café con leche, even after she got sick. I'd take it to her room and rather than saying "thank you," she'd say, "This coffee is ready to be entered in a contest." But the last time I brought it to her, she drank it slowly and in silence. At first I thought she didn't like it and wondered if I'd messed up the measurements. But when she finished, she said: "Now, this cup takes first place!"





EXCERPT 2

Cangrejitos de Guayaba y Queso



The doorbell rings. I walk over to the window upstairs very quietly, making sure my footsteps don't make noise. I take a peek around the curtain to see who it is. I'm only allowed to open the door to Doña Esperanza or Lisa, because they know that I'm home alone while Mami is at work. It's the mailman. He's left a small package next to the door. When I see the mail truck turn the corner, I run to get it.

It's **addressed** to me! Even though it doesn't have a return address, the handwriting looks familiar. The **script** is **elegant** and light, and the words lean slightly to the right. The package has a weird shape: it's long and thin and doesn't weigh much. For a second I wonder if I should wait for Mami before opening it. But since it's addressed to me, I decide not to wait.

Inside the package there is another box wrapped in a paper bag with a note folded inside. I **immediately** recognize the handwriting. It's from Grandma!

Dear Celeste,

I know you miss me as much as I miss you. Don't be sad. Where there is love, there is no sadness. Remember, just as everything comes, everything goes. It's the same with this sadness you are feeling.

While I may no longer be there with you, there's a way you can feel that we're still together. When you prepare the meals we used to enjoy, stop for a second and take in the ***aroma****. I promise you that the first bite will take you back to when we were together! Try this whenever you miss me. I know this will work.*

Remember me with love . . . and flavor!

Your grandma that loves you,

Rosa





I unwrap the box inside and find myself holding a bar of **guava** paste and a note. On it is Grandma's recipe for Cuban **croissants**, her **cangrejitos de guayaba y queso**! We used to make them every Sunday before lunch, or whenever company showed up **unexpectedly**. Because in our home, people show up unexpectedly all the time. My friends tell me that this doesn't happen at their houses. No matter how old or how young you are, you must call ahead and make an **appointment**. Grandma used to say that calling ahead was like going to the dentist instead of visiting a friend. But in Cuba, her island, half the fun of visiting friends was to surprise them. I asked her what happened when people came from far away and no one was home.

"They'd wait around for a very long time to see if the family would come back," she said. "And if they didn't return by the time it got dark, then the visitors would leave a note saying that they'd stopped by. You see, the note was important, because even if you missed the visit, you'd still get to enjoy the surprise . . . To know that someone cared enough about you to come by."

I smile thinking that Grandma was doing the same thing to me now with her letter.



EXCERPT 3

Synchronized Eating

Mami gets home from the factory exhausted, like always. She opens the door, throws her bag on the floor, takes off her shoes and falls onto the couch.

"Mami, Mami! Close your eyes!" I say eagerly.

"Ay, **cielo**. I'm so tired that if I close my eyes I'll fall asleep right here."

"No, Mami, close your eyes for a second," I tell her, "and smell."

I watch her close her eyes and her lips slowly curl up into a little smile.

"Something smells wonderful," she says.

"Don't open your eyes just yet," I say, running to get the tray of cangrejitos.

"Now," I tell her.

When she sees them, the smile is erased from her face and she begins to cry. I start to cry too. I place the tray on the table so that they don't get wet with tears and I hug her. We stay like that for a while until we catch the scent of the cangrejitos again and we devour them in silence. I decide not to show her Grandma's letter. I don't want her to cry anymore. Besides, she wouldn't believe it was from her. I don't quite believe it myself . . .

The next day I pack three cangrejitos for school. One for Karen, one for Silvia and one for me.

"I have a surprise for you," I tell them.

They look at me as if I was speaking Chinese.

"Don't you want to see what it is?"

"It's not that," Silvia says. "You actually talked to us."

"Shhh, Silvia!" Karen elbows her. "Of course we want to see!"

I show them the cangrejitos and Silvia pretends to faint.

"How yummy!" she says. "Just like the ones your grandm . . . "

"Yeah, my grandma," I say. "It's okay. You can mention her. That isn't going to make me any sadder than I already am."

"I'm sorry," Karen says. "She's dumb."

"Alright, try them," I say.





The three of us synchronize ourselves so that we take our first bite at the same time. We close our eyes, spin around and raise our arms as if we're doing the sun **salutation** from gym class, and then say "Aaaaaaahhhhh!" with our mouths full. It isn't very polite, but it sure is fun.

"So, who made them?" Karen asks. "Surely it wasn't your mom . . . "

This time it's Silvia who elbows Karen. As if I didn't know that when Mami cooks, the plates taste better than the food . . .

"I made them," I tell them. "My grandma sent me a package with the guava paste and the recipe. I got it yesterday!"

Right away I realize that I've said something I shouldn't have. They look at each other and then at me. I know that look. [. . .] Understanding, but also full of pity.

"Don't pity me!" I tell them, **furiously**. I take my empty lunchbox and leave.





EXCERPT 4

Congrí

Lisa comes to pick me up. I'm not thrilled about it, because whenever it's her turn we have to walk. Lisa doesn't own a car. She says she doesn't need one, that with her own two feet she can walk or pedal to wherever she has to go. Even though I think she's a little weird, Mami really likes her. She says that Lisa is like her sister, even though they don't look anything alike. Mami likes to wear make-up, even if she's going outside to get the newspaper. Her hair is always fixed and her clothes match perfectly. And she always wears perfume! Lisa, on the other hand, is all natural. I've never seen her with a drop of make-up and the clothes she wears are a bit strange—although I have to admit, she looks very comfortable in her long flowery skirt and old T-shirt. Mami says that Lisa doesn't use make-up because she doesn't need it, and I think she's right. She's very pretty with that long black hair flowing all the way down to her waist. Instead of lipstick she wears a smile.

"Hi, beautiful!" she says **cheerfully** from the other side of the street.

I half-smile as I cross to meet her. I don't feel much like talking today.

We walk on, in silence. Lisa looks all around, smiling all the while. It's as if the trees and the birds were **broadcasting** messages that only she can hear.

"Your mami told me that you made some delicious cangrejitos . . . "

"Yeah." "Do you have any left? I'd die for one."

"No," I tell her. I think about challenging her just to see how she responds. "But since Grandma taught me how to make them yesterday, I can make them for you whenever."

I expect some sort of reaction to my madness, but Lisa doesn't say anything. She keeps smiling, as she always does.

"Well that's great," she says. "Your grandma really did know how to cook. It's such a shame your mami didn't inherit that talent . "

We both look at each other and burst out laughing. I think of the smell of burnt rice from the other night. Most of the rice stayed stuck to the bottom of the pot. Lisa had stopped by to see how Mami was holding up and after smelling the disaster, she turned around, got on her bike and came back with a **rotisserie** chicken and a loaf of bread. We ate it with such hunger that all that was left were the bones. There wasn't a bite to share with the neighbor's dogs!

At home, I make my tostaditas and café con leche. I ask Lisa if she wants any, but she says sh has a million things to do, and that she'll stop by later. [. . .] I fling myself onto a chair, exhausted, but the break doesn't last very long. Through the window I can see that the flag on top of the



mailbox is no longer sticking up, so I run to grab the mail. In between bills and catalogs, I spot an envelope . . . with Grandma's handwriting!

My Dearest Celeste,

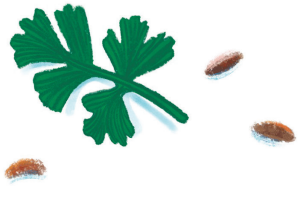
I hope that the cangrejitos you made came out delicious. Did your mami like them? She has loved them ever since she was a little girl . . . I never taught her how to make them, even though she always asked me to, because I was terrified she'd burn herself.

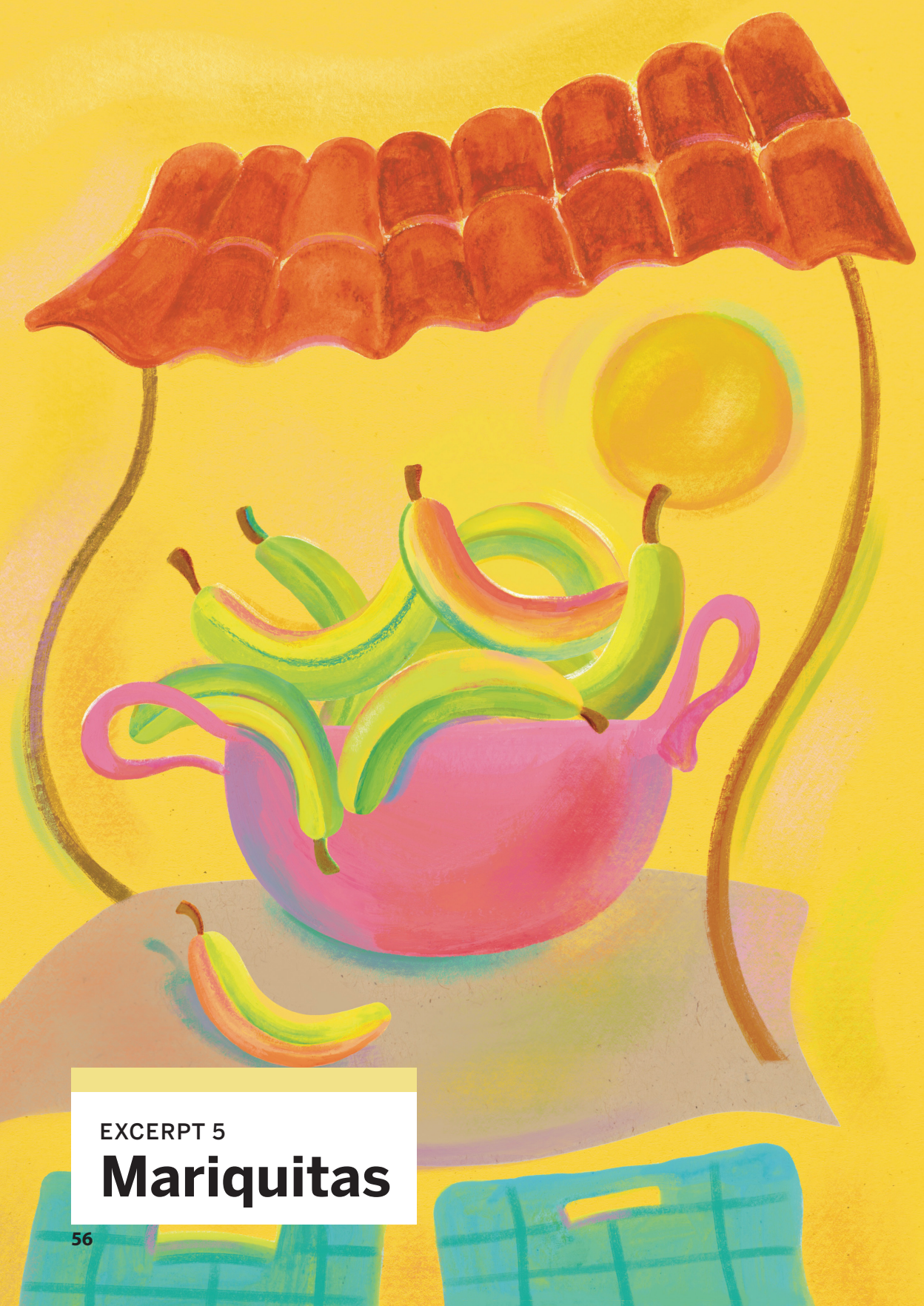
Or that she'd love to cook so much she'd quit school. I wanted her to have a career, because I never had that option. In the end,

I don't know if what I did was right or wrong. But then, when you asked me to teach you how to cook, it occurred to me that if I didn't, all the flavors of our history would be lost . . . My only regret is that this cursed illness didn't give me enough time. But at least you know the essentials: be patient and follow the recipe with measurements so that it comes out just as good, every single time. Soon you'll know when it's time to add your personal touch to these dishes. In the meantime, here is the recipe for ***congrí****, so that you will remember me.*

I love you always,

Your grandma Rosa





EXCERPT 5

Mariquitas

The congrí was marvelous. Mami and Lisa licked their fingers while they said how good it turned out. The only thing that felt strange was that Mami didn't ask me how I'd done it. I think she **suspects** that it was Grandma's recipe because it tasted almost exactly like the congrí she used to make. But Mami didn't say a word. Now that I think about it, she doesn't talk about Grandma at all! It's as if Grandma was still sitting in her room watching the **novela**. Or, even worse, as if she'd never even been here with us. Lisa talks about Grandma, but whenever she does, Mami changes the subject.

Yesterday I went to the supermarket with Doña Esperanza because Mami started working on Saturdays too. She says that without Grandma's social security check we no longer have enough to pay the bills. How I wish she didn't have to work so much! "What do you need, m'ija?" asks Doña Esperanza.

"Rice, beans, bread," I say, trying to remember the few dishes that I know how to prepare. "And green **plantains**."

"What about chicken? Or meat?" she asks. "Or has that Lisa turned you into vegetarians?"

"Lisa is not a vegetarian," I correct her. "She eats chicken."

"Well, I think a good piece of meat would do her some good," she says. "That woman is so thin that if a strong wind hit her, she'd end up miles away."

"I don't know how to cook anything with meat yet," I tell her.

"You'll get there," she says, while she puts some packs of meat into the cart.

Unlike my mom, Doña Esperanza loves to talk about Grandma. She told me that after Grandma moved here, she was the first person that my grandma met. Since Doña Esperanza is Puerto Rican, she felt the same sense of **nostalgia** for her island as Grandma did for hers. That's how they shaped their friendship; talking about the food and people that they'd left behind. And since they were neighbors, they'd talk all the time. They'd sit down on the front stoop, talking about the neighborhood, the novela, the news—everything except sad topics. At least they never seemed sad to me.

"I'm learning to fix Grandma's recipes," I tell Doña Esperanza.

"¡**Qué bueno**!" she says. "You know, your grandma promised she'd teach me how to make her famous ropa vieja.

But, between one thing and the next, she got sick, and we never got around to it."

"Well, if she sends me the recipe, I'll share it with you, Doña Esperanza," I tell her.

I stare at her to see if she'd look at me funny.

"Thank you, nena," she responds. "I'd love that."

I couldn't understand why all the adults seemed to think it was perfectly normal that Grandma was sending me letters from the beyond, but my friends, who spent their days reading books about fairies and wizards, were convinced that I'd completely lost my mind. It didn't make any sense.

When we get home I ask Doña Esperanza to teach me how to make fried plantains, because on her island this is also a popular dish.

"¡Amarillos" she says, "of course!"



At home we always had plantains. Green, yellow and black. One time, Karen and Silvia were at the house and Grandma took out a ripe plantain. Karen thought that it was spoiled and if she ate it she'd get sick. The dummy didn't say anything until Silvia was about to eat one of the fried plantains on the table. Karen grabbed at her hand very hard, so she couldn't eat it, but Silvia had already taken a bite. She nearly choked when Karen told her that it was a black banana and it would make her sick! When I translated to grandma what was going on, she laughed so hard she had to leave the kitchen to catch her breath. When she returned, she asked me to translate for her:

"When plantains are fried green, they turn crunchy and are eaten with salt," she said. "Like **mariquitas**—which happens to mean 'ladybugs' —and the tostones, that are just like mariquitas, but bigger. When plantains go from yellow to black, it's because they are very ripe. That means they will be very sweet when you fry them."

"Celeste, you're going to kill me," Karen said. "First you serve me a black plantain and then you tell me that the green ones are filled with ladybugs!"



Grandma thought the whole thing was **hilarious**. After having a nice laugh, she took out a green plantain and sliced it into little rounds. She pointed to the plantain's little black specks.

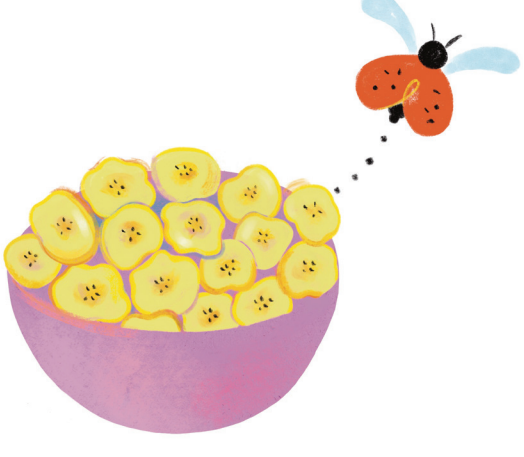
"Ma-ri-qui-ta," she said, slowly.

Karen and Silvia repeated after her.

"Ladybug," Silvia told Grandma.

And Grandma repeated, slowly: "Lei-di-bog."

The memory makes me change my mind, and I ask Doña Esperanza to make mariquitas instead. Even though I already know how to prepare them, Mami doesn't let me fry things by myself, because she's afraid the oil will splatter and I will get burned. Between the two of us, we cut the plantains into thin slices, and Doña Esperanza fries them. I think about my friends talking to Grandma and get a little sad. But Monday will be another day.





EXCERPT 6

Ropa Vieja, Part 1



On Monday, Mami and I wake up tired, as if the weekend never happened. We sit at the table to have breakfast—a bowl of cereal, café con leche and toast. Mami drinks her coffee slowly and tells me about her other job, the one she works on Saturdays.

"It's not bad," she says. "It's a fun group and we pass the time talking while we stuff letters into envelopes. It's easy and time goes by fast."

"Ay, Mami, I wish you didn't have to work so much!" I tell her.

"It's not forever, cielo," she says. "Just for a few more months so I can catch up on the bills. And so you can go back to dance class."

"I don't need classes, Mami," I say. "I'd rather be here with you."

"Patience, honey," she says in a tone that reminds me of Grandma. "Everything comes, and everything goes."



I tell my mom about a dream I had where a tiny **tornado** picked me up and lifted me inches off the ground.

"I was spinning around and around," I tell her. "Like I was dancing to a rhythm that gets faster and faster until it's out of control. Then, all of a sudden, the wind stopped blowing and, boom! I fell to the floor like a ripe mango . . . I couldn't get up and I started screaming, but nobody came. And then I woke up."

"Cielo," she says tenderly. "I'm always near you."

"I know."





When I get to school, I see Karen and Silvia down the hallway. From **afar**, they look like a perfect ten: tall and skinny Karen and Silvia, short and chubby. They say hi to me as if nothing had happened. Well, maybe nothing did happen.

"What did you do this weekend?" Karen asks.

"Cook, go to the supermarket and wash a never ending pile of dishes," I tell them.

All of a sudden, I realize I sound like an old lady. "And I also watched a couple of shows on TV," I add.

"And you didn't go to the studio?" Silvia asks.

"No," I say. "I don't think I'm going to dance anymore. I don't really like it that much."

They both look at me, shocked. I try to seem indifferent so that they won't notice that I'm lying. The truth is, I've loved to dance ever since I was born. They both know this because I can never wait in line without dancing. And if there's music playing, something inside me moves, even when I don't want it to.





EXCERPT 7

Ropa Vieja, Part 2

The following is excerpted from Chapter 3 in the novel.

[Amanda] walks over swinging her long blond braids from side to side.

"So the ghost of your grandma writes you letters," she tells me, mockingly. "Boooo! How scary!"

"Leave me alone!" I tell her and keep walking. [. . .]

"Don't bother her, Amanda!" Silvia yells from the other side of the room.

"Thank you, Silvia, but I can take care of myself," I tell her. "Amanda, I'm going to ask my grandma to show up in your room and scare the sleep out of you."

"Oh, I'm shaking," she says.

I walk away. I would've liked to say more, but that was all I could come up with. I want to go home, crawl into my bed and stay there until summer. If only I could hibernate, I'd be so happy. [. . .]

. . .

Teacher Note: *Excerpt 7 begins with a portion of text from Chapter 3, inserted in the excerpt to provide additional context about the characters and events. The rest of the text in Excerpt 7 comes from Chapter 6 ("Ropa Vieja") in the novel.*

The following is excerpted from Chapter 6 in the novel.

The rest of the day goes by in a fog. Between the neighbor's dogs that won't stop barking and my weird dreams, I haven't been sleeping very well. Now Silvia and Karen are in the corner whispering; probably talking about me. And to make things worse, Amanda is coming my way with a toothy smile **plastered** on her face.

"Celeste, you've missed the last three dance classes," she says, running her fingers through her long blond hair. "One more and you won't be dancing in the **recital**."





"I'm not going to dance anymore," I tell her. "So don't worry, you no longer have any competition."

"Competition? Seriously? You think you're my competition?" she says. "Oh, Celeste, you are so wrong."

"Get lost, Amanda," I tell her, trying to hide the fury in my voice. "No, Celeste, you're the one that has to go," she tells me. [. . .]





EXCERPT 8

Ropa Vieja, Part 3

"I spent the weekend reading one of the Secret Society books," Karen says. "It was so good I even skipped dinner . . . I forgot to eat!"

"That never happens to me," Silvia says, rubbing her round stomach. "Speaking of food, Celeste, did you bring anything good today . . . like cangrejitos?"

"Not today, sorry," I tell her. "Grandma hasn't written to me in the past few days, so I don't know what to make."

Silvia and Karen give each other a look.

"Celeste, you worry me," Silvia says. "You have to accept that your grandma died, forever . . . "

I feel a burst of anger inside of me and I know that I'm not in control of what I'm about to say.

"Look, Silvia, [. . .] I never tell you what to do. So do me a favor, and leave me alone!"

I immediately feel horrible about saying that. But I'm so sick of her comments. What does she know about what's happening to me?

. . .

I'm surprised to see that Lisa has come to pick me up. At least I can see one smiling face on this awful day. I run to greet her and she gives me a hug that nearly knocks me to the ground.

"Hey, beautiful," she says. "How was your day?"

Teacher Note: *Excerpt 8 consists of portions of text from Chapter 6 in the novel. The selected portions of text are placed in Excerpt 8 to provide additional context about the characters and events.*

"Don't ask," I tell her.

"Well, let's talk about something happy . . . What did you cook last night?"

"Chicken with mariquitas and a salad," I tell her. "Doña Esperanza showed me how to season the chicken and Mami helped with the frying."

"How yummy!" she says. "Something told me I should've stopped by last night . . . "

"It wasn't anything special," I tell her. "Besides, we've been eating so much chicken lately, that I think we're going to start laying eggs."

"I'm sure your grandma will teach you how to make some new dishes soon," she says. "Look at how much you've learned already!"

My mouth drops open. How does she know? I think for a minute that maybe she's the one writing the letters . . . But it can't be. I'm sure they're in Grandma's handwriting.

"I believe in those things, Celeste," she says, sensing my surprise. "When people die, there's a part of them that stays here, with us . . . And they continue to talk to us and to teach us things."

I listen. But I'm not sure what to think.

I can hear the barking all the way from around the corner. I never really know if the neighbor's dogs are saying hi or warning me not to get too close. I look at them from a distance, but Lisa sticks her hand through the fence and pets them. They immediately calm down, as if by magic, and they lick her hands. Just in case, I stick my hands in my pockets. They are safe there.

When I get home I see that the mail has been delivered. In between the bills and **advertisements** there is a single white envelope, handwritten and without a return address. I don't have to open it to know it's from Grandma!

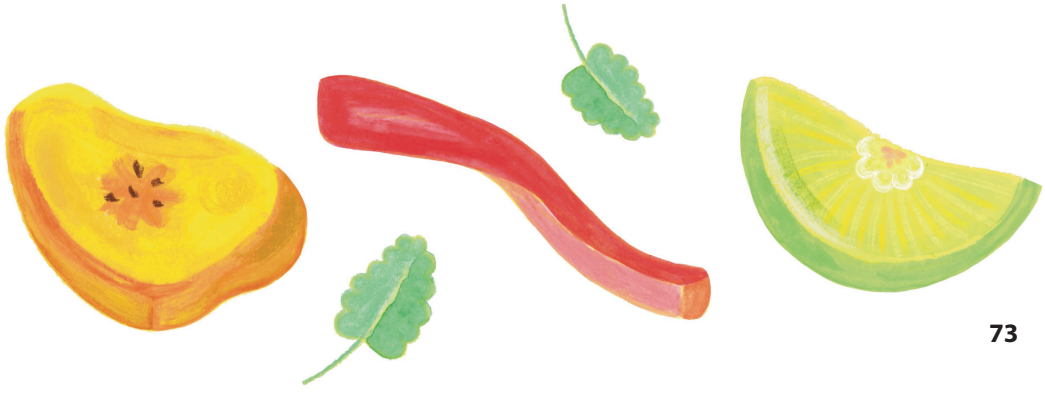
My Dear Celeste,

I'm a bit tired, but I know that soon I'll get the chance to rest. I don't want to say goodbye without first letting you know that you and your mother have made me so very happy. Your mother, so loyal and caring to me and so dedicated to you . . . Tell her I'm so proud of her. And of you, too, my beloved granddaughter. Of your good grades, your dedication to dancing, your interest in the stories of the past and, above all, your caring heart.

How I'd like to be there to help you prepare these recipes! But I know you can do it. And I also know that if you get stuck, you will know to ask for help. Never be afraid to ask for help! Most people like to help. Remember that, always. Here is my recipe for ropa vieja, the dish you love so much. You will see how easy it is to make. (And don't be scared of the pressure cooker, it's not going to explode!)

Your grandma that loves you,

Rosa





Grandma's letter leaves me feeling a bit sad. I wonder if this will be the last I receive. But I pull myself together and call Doña Esperanza to give her the news. After all, she's been waiting for this recipe for years.

"I got it!" I tell her. "I finally got it!"

"What did you get?" she asks, confused.

"Grandma's recipe," I say, "to make ropa vieja!"

"I'll be right over," she says and hangs up the phone.

In the kitchen, I start to hunt down the ingredients, but I'm missing so many! We don't even have skirt steak, the main ingredient. This really will be a poor person's meal.

In a short while, Doña Esperanza arrives with a mountain of things: meat, tomato sauce, peppers, garlic, cumin . . . She's like a walking supermarket!

"Let me see," she says, ripping the letter out of my hands.

I love seeing her almost as excited as I am.

Between the two of us we start chopping up the vegetables. I slice the onions and, like always, I start to cry. But this time my tears are not entirely caused by the onion. I cry for my grandma, because I miss

her, and for my friends, because they don't understand me. And for my mami, because she isn't here with us.

"What's wrong, m'ija?" Doña Esperanza asks me. "Is it the onion?"

"Yes and no," I tell her. [. . .] "I like that Grandma writes to me . . . but it is a bit weird."

"I wouldn't worry too much about it if I were you," she says, putting the knife aside for a second. "As your grandma used to say, 'everything comes and everything goes . . . ' If I were you, I'd enjoy the letters and not worry so much about how they got here."

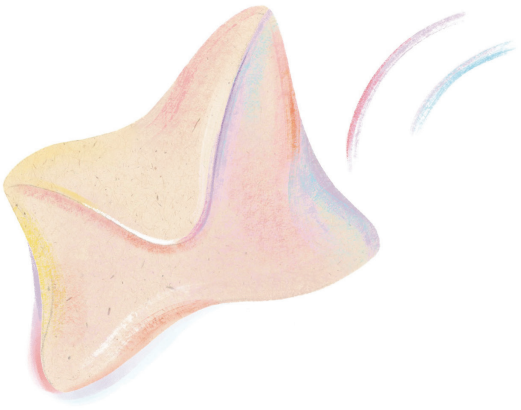
My eyes burn. This time it's because of the onion. Doña Esperanza finishes slicing it and I start chopping the garlic. It has a really strong smell, but it doesn't make me cry.





EXCERPT 9

Misunderstandings



Mami and I walk together to school. We don't talk. I walk slowly, looking down at my feet. Mami asked at work if she could start a little later today. She says she received a message from the principal saying that he needed to see us both as soon as possible. I think I know what it's all about, but I don't tell her. I'm a bit ashamed.

When we get to the principal's office, Silvia and her mom are already there. Now I'm sure I know why we are here. But Mami looks shocked.

"Hello, Rosa," Silvia's mom greets my mom in a somber tone. "I'm so sorry for your loss."

Mami thanks her for the **condolences** and sits down quietly.

The principal calls us into his office.

"Well, you both know why you are here," he says to Silvia and me. "However, your mothers don't . . . Who wants to tell them what happened?" [. . .]

"I just wanted to help her," Silvia responds. "I know that it's sad that her grandma died because they were so close, but she's been saying that her grandma has been writing her letters and teaching her how to cook."



I look at her as if she's just revealed the biggest secret in the universe. I wish I could strike her down with my eyes. Even though I don't turn around, I can feel my mom looking at me, full of questions.

"Cielo, did you really say that?" Mami asks.

"Yes," I say. "But it's true!"

All of a sudden everyone is looking at me as if I'd said aliens were taking over the school.

"Of course Grandma has been writing to me," I tell her in Spanish. "How else do you think I learned to make the cangrejitos and the congrí?"

"But, Celeste, honey, dead people can't write letters," Mami replies, switching back to English.

"I can show them to you when we get home," I tell her. "I have them all in my nightstand. I didn't tell you so you wouldn't get sad."

Nobody says anything. I think they're all waiting for me to apologize. I do, but only for what I said to Silvia. I can't apologize for the rest of it, because I haven't done anything wrong! If I'm in this mess, it's for having told the truth!

"I'm sorry," I say to Silvia. "I didn't mean to make you feel bad."

"It's fine," she says. "But quit with the ghost stories, they really scare me."

Silvia comes closer and we give each other a hug. I'll explain to her later that they aren't stories. For now, I only want to get out of here.

"Please let me know when you solve the mystery of the letters from the beyond," the principal says to us. "The story is fascinating. But now head back to class because the spirits aren't going to do your homework for you."

Mami kisses me goodbye, but I can see that she's confused. We're going to have a lot to talk about tonight.



EXCERPT 10

Asking for Help, Part 1

Lisa comes to pick me up and I tell her everything that happened. She says I have to show the letters to my mom. Even though Mami doesn't believe in spirits, the evidence will convince her. A bunch of white flowers have bloomed in front of one of the houses we pass on our way home. The bushes look like they are covered with butterflies. Lisa picks a small bunch and gives it to me.

"But, Lisa," I say, **protesting**, "they aren't yours!"

"Shhh!" she says, placing her finger on her lips. "Today you need these flowers more than they do. Besides," she adds, "if the people say anything, I'll explain it to them."

The flowers are beautiful.

"Wild and simple," I think, "just like Grandma."

Right at that moment, I feel a cold chill. And, for an instant, I think we are not walking alone.

Later that afternoon, I think about something that Grandma wrote in her last letter: "Most people like to help." Was she referring to Doña



Esperanza? To Lisa? Mami? Even Silvia had wanted to help me. And what if I don't want help? Nobody can help me with what I want: for Mami not to work so much and for me to go back to dance class. I can take care of the rest myself. I don't need to go around begging people for help. That's not me.

I hear the front door open and I get scared because Mami isn't supposed to get home until much later. Today, however, she came home early.

"Mami!" I scream and run to hug her.

"Cielo, how did the rest of your day go?" she asks me. It's been such a long time since she asked me that I don't know how to respond.

"Fine," I say. "No more drama."

Mami starts to prepare the café con leche, and I, without asking, start making some toast. It's almost like it used to be, with Grandma.

"We need to talk, Celeste," she says, without looking at me. She adds sugar to the coffee and stirs it very slowly as if she were casting a spell.

"I know," I tell her.

I go up to my room to fetch the letters. I'd placed them in an empty

chocolate box with the hope that someday it would be filled with them. But I have the feeling that I won't be receiving many more. I place the box on the kitchen table.

"This is all of them," I show her.

Mami opens the box very slowly and examines the first envelope. Tears begin to run down her cheeks. But I think she's also smiling.

"I don't know how she did it," I tell her, pointing out the postmark. "But the truth is that these letters took away some of the sadness I was feeling."

Mami takes out the first letter and reads it in silence. Without even taking a sip from her coffee, she does the same with the other letters. When she finishes, she puts them all away and looks at me.

"Do you think there will be more letters?" she asks me.

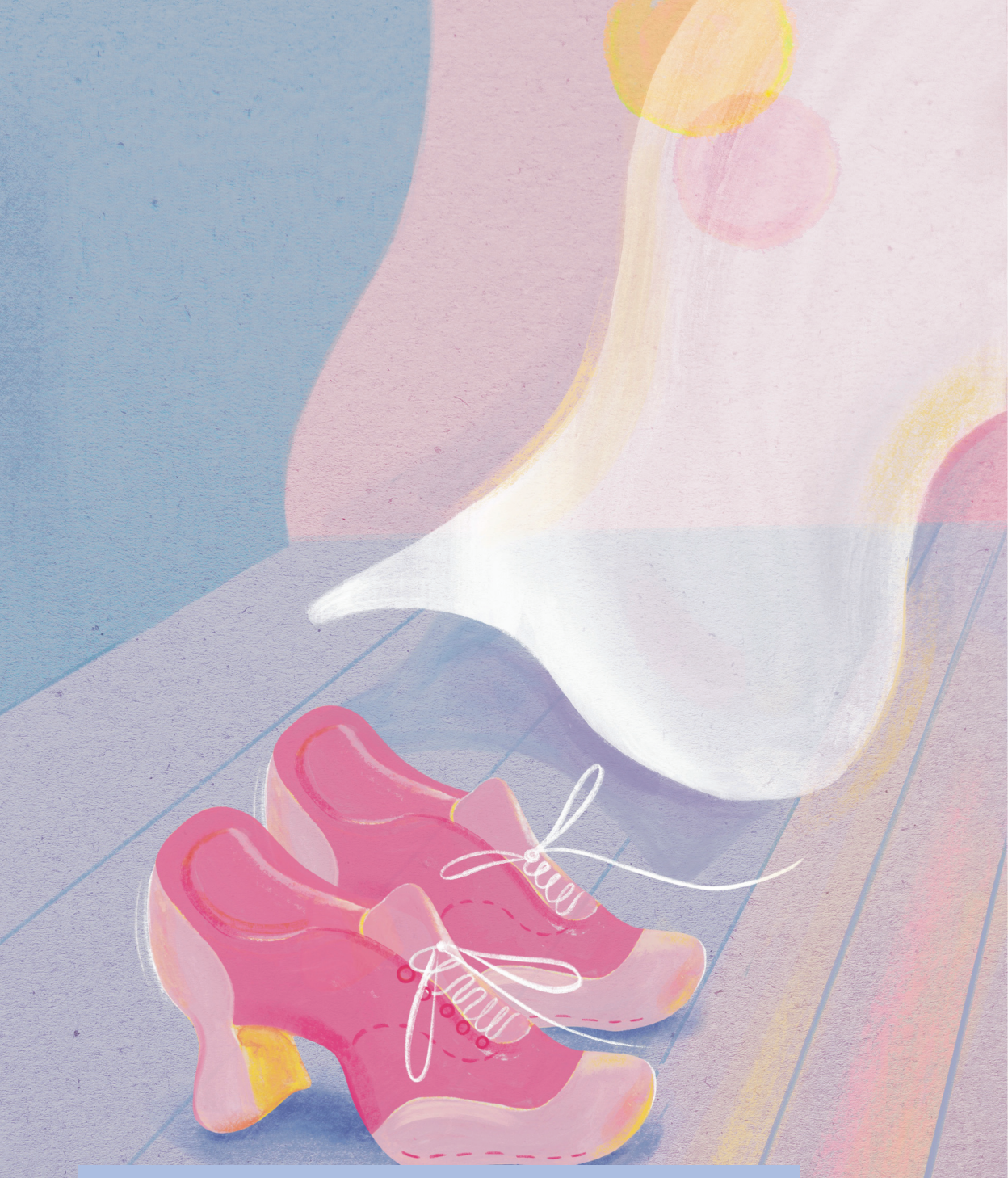
"I sure hope so," I say.

We eat our tostaditas like Grandma used to do it: dipping small pieces of toast into the coffee until the butter melts.

"Mami, what do you think Grandma meant when she said that people like to help?"

"She always used to say that," she says, "She'd say that it's harder to ask for help than to give it."

I keep thinking about this while I finish my snack. I think I know what Grandma was trying to tell me. . . .



EXCERPT 11

Asking for Help, Part 2

As soon as I finish, I run to my desk to look for my dance teacher's phone number. I'm a little bit scared that I won't be able to say the right thing. Or that she'll say no. But I'm definitely going to do this.

"Most people like to help," I repeat to myself like a **mantra**. Either way, the worst that can happen is that she will say no.

"Miss Robyn, this is Celeste." My voice trembles a bit. "Am I interrupting?"

"What a surprise to hear from you, Celeste!" Miss Robyn says. "We've really missed you in class. How's your grandma doing?"

"She passed away a few weeks ago," I tell her.

"I'm so sorry," she says. "I didn't know."

"I'm not so sad anymore," I say, "even though I miss her a lot."

"She used to love to watch you dance. When will you come back?"

"Well, that's actually why I'm calling. I'd love to come back, but my mom can't really afford to pay for classes right now. . . . "



"Whenever you're ready, Celeste. You know I'll always have a space waiting for you."

"Well, I was thinking that maybe I could get a job," I say, timidly.

"But Celeste, you are too young to work . . . "

"Well, I wanted to ask you, maybe. . . perhaps, I could help with the classes for little ones," I say, "like a job." I'm **embarrassed** to hear myself saying this.

"What a good idea, Celeste!" Miss Robyn says. "I don't know why I didn't think of it before. Of course you can! You can be my helper with the kiddie class in exchange for your lessons!"



"Really?" I ask her, clearly surprised.

"But you have to ask your mother first," she tells me. "Tell her to send me a note saying she's okay with this **arrangement**."

"Of course!" I tell her. "And thank you so much. You don't know how much this means to me."

"Thank you for suggesting the idea, Celeste," she adds, "I'm very happy I can help."

Grandma was right. "Most people like to help."





EXCERPT 12

Flan

My Dear Celeste,

I'm running out of time, but I didn't want to leave you with a memory that is salty or sour, but with a sweet one. In life, you will get to eat many different foods, some that taste good, and others, not so much. Some will be so spicy that they will make you cry, and others so exquisite that you will remember their taste forever. That is how my life has been: sweet, bitter, sometimes perfectly seasoned and, at times, too salty or completely bland . . . But when I think of you and your mother, the memories that come to mind are always sweet. That is how I want to say goodbye to you, so that when you think of me, you have a memory of something sweet.

Here I'm sending you the recipe for the ***flan*** *you love so much. Be careful when you make the caramel: when the sugar begins to melt you have to work quickly and attentively, because if you don't, the caramel will burn or you may end up burning yourself. And don't rush it. Everything good takes time. When the flan is ready, refrigerate it overnight. The next day, before sitting down to eat it, cover the table with a nice tablecloth and put a flower in a vase. Take out a cloth napkin and use a nice plate. And then sit down and eat it slowly. When you take that first bite up to your mouth,* ***drenched*** *in caramel, close your eyes and smell the sweet aroma. In that instant, I'll be right by your side.*

Don't be sad, my dear Cielo. Remember me with love . . . and flavor!

Your grandma that loves you,

Rosa

My hands shake as I read the final words. I know that I'm holding my grandma's last letter. I think about how all I have left of her are just a handful of recipes. I think about how I'll never know how she's been sending me these letters after she'd gone. I think that no matter how many times I cook them, my dishes will never taste like hers. And, all of a sudden, I hear her voice murmuring into my ear:

"Remember me with love . . . and flavor!" That's why she sent me these recipes! The coffee, the cangrejitos, the congrí, the ropa vieja . . . The recipes were like spells, so that every time I make the food, Grandma could once again be with me!

As soon as Mami gets home from work, I show her the letter. She gets really sad, and I let her cry. But later, I have a great idea, something that Grandma would've loved.

"Mami, Grandma asks us to remember her with flavor, right?"

She nods, but doesn't say anything.

"I get it!" I tell her, jumping up and down with excitement. "Think about all the recipes that Grandma sent . . . What do they have in common?"



"They were the ones you liked best," she says.

"And what else?"

"I don't know. They're all from Cuba?"

"Yeah, but not just that," I tell her. "If you put them together, we have a dinner! Look, Appetizer: cangrejitos. Main course: ropa vieja. Side dishes: congrí and mariquitas. Dessert: flan. Don't you see? Grandma wanted us to have a dinner—to remember her!"

Mami's tears immediately disappear and I can see that Grandma's magic is working.

"That's a fantastic idea!" she tells me. "Let's do it this weekend."

"We'll set up an elegant table with a fine tablecloth, flowers, candles. Just like she used to like it," I say. "With music in the background!"

"Invite your friends, cielo."

"And Lisa and Doña Esperanza!" I say.

"I want it to be a real celebration."



EXCERPT 13

Family Dinner

The table is set with candles, red carnations and a yellow tablecloth. We decorate every napkin with a sprig of rosemary, like Grandma used to do for special occasions.

"A good table requires color, texture and smell, even before the food is served," I remember her saying. "Everything needs to be picked out carefully: don't choose flowers that have too strong a scent that will compete with the food. That's why carnations are perfect: they're bright and colorful, and their scent is subtle. To add some greenery, mix in some herbs with the flowers: basil, rosemary and thyme from the garden will complement most dishes. Remember: everything serves a purpose."

A tray is set with very small cangrejitos and, next to it, there's a warm loaf of bread wrapped in a white tea towel. Doña Esperanza is in the kitchen frying the plantains. The congrí and the ropa vieja are in the oven, so they'll stay warm until we're ready to eat. Mami brings a lettuce and tomato salad into the dining room. She looks beautiful in her blue dress, the color of the ocean. Lisa cuts a tiny carnation bud and pins it on Mami's dress.



Karen and Silvia arrive with a fruit basket: a pineapple surrounded by pears, apples and mangos. Mami gives them each a thank you hug and places the basket on the table. Now our table really does look like a painting. A true feast.

We all sit down at the table: Mami at the head, Lisa and Doña Esperanza on one side and Karen and Silvia on the other. I bring a chair in from the kitchen and sit between my friends, leaving the other end of the table open for Grandma because I know she's here with us.

"Don't tell me you're waiting for your grandma to show . . . " Silvia begins to say, but Karen elbows her, not very subtly.

"No," I tell her. "I just wanted to leave a special place for her, because I know that she's watching us."

"Seriously, Celeste?" says Silvia. "You're going to kill me, girl! Letters from beyond and ghosts coming to dinner . . . "



"Actually, I was never scared of the letters," I say. "Quite the contrary, they made me feel better. I still wonder how she did it; but I'm afraid I'll never find out."

"I can tell you," says Doña Esperanza. Everyone stares at her, stunned.

"Before she died, your grandma left me a pack of letters, each of them sealed and addressed to you.

She told me to mail them after she passed, every five days, so that every week you'd have a new one. She thought that this way she could help you feel less sad."

My mouth dropped open. I never would've guessed that it was Doña Esperanza who sent them. But now it all makes sense: the letters coming frequently, the trip to the grocery to buy all the ingredients, her hope that one of the letters would have the Ropa Vieja recipe . . . I'm actually thankful she didn't tell me right away.

"Thank you, Grandma," I say in a whisper. "Your plan worked."



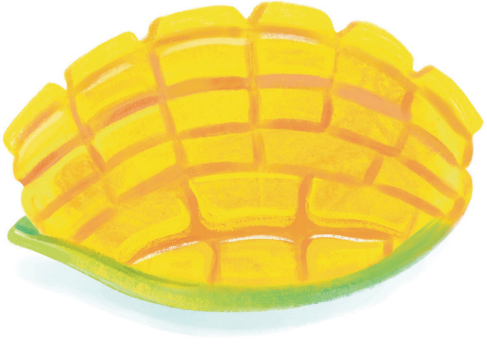






Biography

Lydia Gil was born to Cuban parents in Mayagüez, Puerto Rico. She has published one bilingual children's book, *Mimí's Parranda/La parranda de Mimí*, and one bilingual novel, *Letters from Heaven/Cartas del cielo*. She holds a PhD in Spanish from the University of Texas at Austin.

Glossaries

Glossary for Personal Narratives

A

adept, adj. very skilled

antibody, n. protein created by the body to protect itself from a disease

B

buckled, v. bent or collapsed

bulbar polio, n. polio that affects the brain

C

cattleman, n. a person who tends to cattle

cause, v. make happen; **n.** the reason that something happens

character trait, n. an adjective that describes a character

chronological, adj. organized in time order, the order in which something happened

cloudy, adj. unclear

coaxed, v. persuaded, asked nicely

contagious, adj. capable of being passed from one person to another

contaminate, v. to infect

crippled, adj. disabled, unable to walk normally

D

diagnosed, v. identified an illness

diagnosis, n. the act of finding specific disease or other cause of an illness

dread, v. to fear

E

epidemic, n. quick and widespread outbreak of a disease

ethic, n. set of moral principles

excruciating, adj. extremely painful

exuberant, adj. full of energy and excitement

F

fiction, n. a made-up story

first person, adj. told from the narrator's perspective; "I" is the narrator

firsthand account, n. version of a story or event written or told by a person who actually experienced it

flawlessly, adv. perfectly, without imperfections

float, n. a decorated sculpture or scene in a parade

fulfillment, n. the achievement of something hoped for

G

gazed, v. looked at intently

glisten, v. to shine

grumbled, v. complained

gunnysack, n. bag made of burlap or similar rough cloth

H

hazy, adj. misty; foggy

heralded, n. announced

Homecoming, n. fall celebration in many American high schools and colleges that welcomes back graduates with a football game and other activities

I

infantile, adj. relating to newborn babies

iron lung, n. machine that helps polio patients breathe

isolation ward, n. section of a hospital where infectious patients stay

J

jubilantly, adv. joyfully

L

laboring, v. doing a difficult physical job

limp, adj. wilted, not firm

M

melody, n. a tune

metaphor, n. a literary device that compares things like a simile, but without using *like* or *as*

migrant workers, n. people that move from one place to another for work

mucus, n. thick, slimy liquid manufactured in the respiratory passages, especially the lungs and the throat

N

nonfiction, n. a true story

nourishment, n. food and other substances that help the body grow, heal, and thrive

O

O.T., n. occupational therapy, exercises and projects used to help patients recover skills for daily life

P

paralysis, n. being unable to move

paralyzed, adj. unable to move

personal narrative, n. an expressive literary piece written in the first person that centers on a particular event in the author's life and may contain vivid description as well as personal commentary and observations

perspective, n. outlook; viewpoint

phlegm, n. thick, slimy liquid manufactured in the respiratory passages, especially the lungs and the throat

plow, v. to break up earth in preparation for planting

preserve, v. maintain; protect

R

remnants, n. remains; leftovers

respiratory, adj. related to breathing

S

sabito, adj. in Spanish, this word means "little brain" but is used as a nickname for someone who is smart

scorching, adj. having very high temperatures

secondhand account, n. version of a story or event written or told by a person who did not experience it but gathered information from people who did, from books, or from other sources

sequencing, v. arranging the important parts of a story in order

shimmered, v. shined with a light that seemed to move

simile, n. a literary device that compares things using *like* or *as*

spasm, n. violent muscle contraction

spinal tap, n. a medical test taking fluid from around the spinal cord

stench, n. a strong and terrible smell

structure, n. the basic way a story or essay is organized sullen, **adj.** a sad mood

sunstroke, n. a life threatening physical response due to lack of hydration and excessive exposure to heat

T

text structure, n. the way authors organize the text

U

unwavering, adj. constant; steady

unimaginable, adj. unthinkable; incredible

V

vaccine, n. a substance given to protect a person from a disease

virus, n. a tiny creature that infects a living organism with a disease

W

woozy, adj. dizzy, weak

Glossary for Contemporary Fiction

A

addressed, v. wrote instructions for delivery

advertisement, n. a notice or announcement, especially one intended to sell a product

afar, n. far away

appointment, n. a pre-set time and place for a meeting

aroma, n. an often pleasant smell that one notices

arrangement, n. a plan or agreement between people or a group, usually for something to happen in a certain way

B

broadcasting, v. sending a signal

C

café con leche, n. a drink made by mixing coffee with hot milk

cangrejitos de guayaba y queso, n. croissants made with guava and cheese

cheerfully, adv. happily

cielo, n. darling

condolences, n. ways of showing sympathy

congrí, n. a Cuban dish made from black beans and rice

croissants, n. a soft half-moon shaped pastry

D

drenched, v. filled or covered by liquid

E

elegant, adj. stylish and of high quality in appearance or manner

embarrassed, adj. a feeling or state of being extremely self-aware about one's behavior, usually resulting in stress or shame

F

flan, n. a sweet dessert made out of custard with caramel glaze

furiously, adv. angrily, or in a hurried or intense manner

G

guava, n. a tropical fruit

H

hilarious, adj.very funny

I

immediately, adv. without waiting for any time to go by

M

mantra, n. a word or motto that serves as a guide to action

mariquitas, n. Cuban dish made with green plantains

N

nostalgia, n. wishing for a past period of time

novela, n. a Spanish television soap opera show, short for "telenovela"

P

plantains, n. a tropical green fruit that looks similar to a banana

plastered, v. fixed in place

protesting, v. disapproving or objecting of something

Q

qué bueno, adj. how wonderful!

R

recital, n. a performance, usually by music or dance students

rotisserie, n. a cooking appliance on which food is turned over a fire or other heat source

S

salutation, n. a way of greeting someone

script, n. handwritten letters

suspects, v. believes to be true

T

tornado, n. a high-speed wind in a funnel-shaped cloud that often destroys property and plant life

tostaditas, n. a dish containing toasted tortilla chips

U

unexpectedly, adv. in a way that is not anticipated

ISBN 979-8-89072-659-9

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ENGLISH

PERSONAL NARRATIVES AND CONTEMPORARY FICTION

GRADE 4 | ANTHOLOGY

EDITION 1

