

# ORDINARY GIRLS



A MEMOIR

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## GIRL HOOD



**W**e were the girls who strolled onto the blacktop on long summer days, dribbling past the boys on the court. We were the girls on the merry-go-round, laughing and laughing and letting the world spin while holding on for our lives. The girls on the swings, throwing our heads back, the wind in our hair. We were the loudmouths, the troublemakers, the practical jokers. We were the party girls, hitting the clubs in booty shorts and high-top Jordans, smoking blunts on the beach. We were the wild girls who loved music and dancing. Girls who were black and brown and poor and queer. Girls who loved each other.

I have been those girls. On a Greyhound bus, homeless and on the run, a girl sleeping on lifeguard stands, behind a stilt-house restaurant, on a bus stop bench. A hoodlum girl, throwing down with boys and girls and their older sisters and even the cops, suspended every year for fighting on the first day of school, kicked out of music class for throwing a chair at the math teacher's son, kicked off two different school buses, kicked out of pre-algebra for stealing the teacher's grade book. A girl who got slammed onto a police car by two cops, in front of the whole school, after a brawl with six other girls.

And I have been other girls: girl standing before a judge; girl on a dock the morning after a hurricane, looking out at the bay like it's the end of the world; girl on a rooftop; girl on a ledge; girl

plummeting through the air. And years later, a woman, writing letters to a prisoner on death row.

And the girls I ran with? Half of them I was secretly in love with. Street girls, who were escaping their own lives, trading the chaos of home for the chaos on the streets. One of them had left home after being molested by a family member, lived with her brother most of the time. Another had two babies before she was a junior in high school, and decided they were better off with the father—a man in his thirties. Only one had what I thought was a perfectly good set of parents at home: a dad who owned a restaurant and paid for summer vacations abroad, a mom who planned birthday parties and cooked dinner. They were girls who fought with me, smoked out with me, got arrested with me. Girls who snuck into clubs with me, terrorized the neighborhood with me, got jailhouse tattoos with me. Girls who picked me up when I was stranded and brought me food when I was starving, who sat with me outside the emergency room after my boy was stabbed in a street fight, who held me, and cried with me, at my abuela's funeral. Hood girls, who were strong and vulnerable, who taught me about love and friendship and hope.

Sometimes in dreams, I return to those girls, those places. And we are still there, all of us, roller-skating on the boardwalk, laying out our beach towels on the sand, dancing to Missy Elliott's "Work It" under the full moon.

We are women now—those of us who are alive, the ones who made it. For a while there, we didn't know if any of us would.

**PART ONE**



**Madre Patria**

# Origin Story

*Puerto Rico, 1985*

Papi and I waited in the town square of Ciales, across from Nuestra Señora del Rosario, the Catholic church. He was quiet, stern-faced, his picked-out Afro shining in the sun, his white polo shirt drenched in sweat. Papi was tall and lean-muscled, with a broad back. He'd grown up boxing and playing basketball, had a thick mustache he groomed every morning in front of the bathroom mirror. Squinting in the sun, one hand tightened around his ring finger, I pulled off Papi's ring, slipped it onto my thumb. I was six years old and restless: I'd never seen a dead body.

My father's hero, Puerto Rican poet and activist Juan Antonio Corretjer, had just died. People had come from all over the island and gathered outside the parish to hear his poetry while his remains were transported from San Juan. Mami and Anthony, my older brother, were lost somewhere in the crowd.

During the drive from Humacao to Ciales, I'd listened from the backseat while Papi told the story: how Corretjer had been raised in a family of independentistas, how he'd spent his entire life fighting for el pueblo, for the working class, for Puerto Rico's

freedom. How he'd been a friend of Pedro Albizu Campos, "El Maestro," who my father adored, the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party leader who'd spent more than twenty-six years in prison for attempting to overthrow the US government. How he had spent a year in "La Princesa," the prison where Albizu Campos was tortured with radiation. After his release, Corretjer became one of Puerto Rico's most prominent activist writers.

In the car, Mami had lit a cigarette and rolled down her window, her cropped, blond waves blowing in the wind. She took a long pull from her cigarette, then let the smoke out, her red fingernails shining. My mother smoked like the whole world was watching, like she was Marilyn Monroe in some old movie, or Michelle Pfeiffer in *Scarface*. Every time we left the house, my mother was made up from head to red-pedicured toes, her hair colored, her eyes dramatically set in eye shadow and a thick coat of mascara, with lipstick to match her nail polish.

While my mother smoked, not paying attention to my father's story, Anthony slept beside me in the back, his mouth half open. My brother had no interest in stories, but I lived for Papi's tales of magic and Boricua Robin Hoods, imagined myself as a character in them, riding a black horse into battle, slicing conquistadores in half with my razor-sharp machete.

It was my father who'd taught me to tie my shoelaces like rabbit ears, to catch fireflies at dusk, to eat ensalada de pulpo bought from chinchorros on the side of the road in Naguabo and Luquillo, to play chess. He'd told me stories of coconut palms that bowed to the sun, of jíbaros like his uncles and grandfather, who got up before daylight to cut cane in the cañaverales. Stories of machetes, sweat, and sugar, before paved roads and indoor plumbing and

English. Stories of women: Lucecita Benítez, one of Puerto Rico's most famous singers, who sang about race and liberation; Lolita Lebrón, who fought among men, taking up arms after La Masacre de Ponce; Yuíza, a Taíno cacica who would be resurrected, rising from ash and clay and blood to avenge the death of her people. His tales were spun of history and wind and poetry.

The funeral procession approached, a caravan of cars led by a white hearse—every car flying a Puerto Rican flag—moving slowly uphill toward the plaza, closer to the church, where arrangements of roses and lirios and carnations already waited. The crowd grew, hundreds of people approaching the square, some of them waving Puerto Rican flags. Papi watched them, never looked away, even when I yanked his hand this way and that way or when I tugged on the hem of his shirt, even as I picked up pebbles and flung them across the plaza at the pigeons. Not even to wipe the tears from his eyes. I wanted to ask about his tears, to remind him of what I'd heard Mami say while Anthony, during one of his tantrums, thrust himself against the walls of our apartment, then the floor: *Los hombres no lloran*.

Papi and I moved through the crowd, the two of us zigzagging in between couples and families and students in their school uniforms, all of them waiting for their turn in front of the open casket. When we'd finally made our way to the front, I saw the man in the casket for the first time: in his seventies, balding, patches of white hair on the sides, pale, white mustache. I tried to memorize the lines around Corretjer's mouth, the shape of his forehead, the arch of his eyebrows. I wanted to trace my fingers along the creases of his unmoving face, commit them to memory.

I don't know how long Papi and I stood there in front of that open casket, as if in a trance, as if waiting for the rise and fall

of Corretjer's chest, my father voiceless, sweat trickling down his face. But I was sure of one thing: that I wanted everything my father wanted, and if he loved this man, then I would love him, too.

MONTHS AFTER ALAINA was born, Anthony in the second grade, Mami working at a factory in Las Piedras, I spent my days at home with Papi. Abuela took care of Alaina while Mami worked, so I had Papi all to myself. He'd sit up in bed, reading to me from Juan Antonio Corretjer's *Yerba bruja* or Hugo Margenat's *Obras completas* or Julia de Burgos's *El mar y tú*, a mug of café con leche in his hand. My father, who'd been a student at the University of Puerto Rico, had spent his college days writing protest poems and studying literature and the work of independentistas and activists.

I loved books because Papi loved books, and his were the first I tried to read. I was a kid trying to learn my father's secrets, whatever mysteries he'd found in those pages that kept him from me for so many hours each day. Imagine my disappointment when I discovered that Manuel Puig's *El beso de la mujer araña* didn't involve a masked superhero using her spider powers to save innocent people from muggers or mad scientists. Or that Mario Vargas Llosa's *La ciudad y los perros* was not about a society made up entirely of dogs.

In my father's books, I got lost in stories: children who sprouted eagles' wings, a baby born with the curled tail of a pig, a man who spent a hundred years on an island prison mourning the loss of his lover but never aged a day, a woman who carried a pistol into a government building and opened fire.

ONE MORNING, I woke to find Papi in the bedroom I shared with Anthony, sitting at my desk, his back to me. He pulled dollar bills,



wrinkled and folded, from a black garbage bag, unfolding them, lining them up in stacks. Our bedroom was cramped with our twin beds, Alaina's crib, stacks of Papi's books in a corner, our toys littering the floor. From my bed, under a nautical bedspread sewn by my mother, I watched him counting and bundling and fastening them with rubber bands, until the desk was covered with money.

There was another morning, and another, and another, and I learned not to ask questions, not to let slip what I knew about the money, about Papi's hiding places: the top shelf in our closet, which Anthony and I couldn't reach, the small suitcase under my parents' bed, my father's toolbox.

Every afternoon when my mother came home from the factory, my father left and went to the little plaza in El Caserío. And every afternoon I begged him to take me along, but he refused. I could play outside, but la plaza, he said, was no place for a girl.

"How come Anthony *always* gets to go?" I would ask Mami, yelling, slamming my fists on the kitchen counter. Anthony was never banned from any place, always got what he wanted because he was a boy.

But Mami, she didn't take no shit. She'd pull me by the arm, the half-moons of her sharp fingernails biting into my skin, and shut me right up. She'd leave me sobbing, longing for something to lift this burden of girlhood.

ONE AFTERNOON, OUTSIDE our apartment building, I kicked off my chanquetas and ran around on the front lawn, barefoot, looking for moriviví. It grew all over the neighborhood, a small plant with leaves that closed like tiny fists when you touched them, faking

their own death, reopening when left undisturbed. I leaned down to touch it, running my fingers over it, until my friend Eggy, who lived two blocks over, showed up on his bike.

“Wanna go for a ride?” he called from the street. Eggy was my best friend, always wandering the streets because his mom didn’t pay him or his brother Pito any mind. He was brown, a dash of freckles across his nose and cheeks, his Afro always unkempt, his T-shirts always either too small or too big, with holes on the front. Eggy was too smart for his own good, always knew everybody’s business: whose husband crashed their car into a barbershop, who kissed who behind the elementary school, which boys got caught looking up the girls’ skirts on the playground.

I glanced back at our building, our balcony, our apartment’s open windows. Mami had told me to stay where she could keep an eye on me, but Papi was in the plaza, and I was dying to see what he did there, why girls weren’t allowed. So I climbed up on Eggy’s handlebars.

“Don’t drop me!” I said.

Eggy pedaled hard, making a left toward the building across the street, then past his building. We rode around to the back, the wind slapping my head, my curls blowing in my face. I held on to the handlebars, my bare feet in the air.

When we finally got to la plaza, a small square surrounded by two-story buildings, shaded by ceiba trees and flamboyanes, I hopped off the bike.

Next to one of the buildings, children’s clothes were drying on a clothesline. A homeless man slept on a discarded sofa, baking under the sun. Four hustlers, three men and one woman, played dominoes around a makeshift card table made from a large paint

bucket and four milk crates used as chairs. Papi was standing among his stone-faced friends. Tecatos walked up to Papi, said something I couldn't hear, handed him money, then disappeared behind the buildings.

"You know what they're doing, right?" Eggy asked.

"What are they doing?"

"Your dad is selling them perico."

I knew what perico was, just like I knew what tecatos were—Eggy had told me. His mother, he'd said, had sold all her jewelry and their TV to get perico. She would've sold the food in their fridge, if they'd had any.

Eggy got off his bike, leaned it against the building.

I looked for my brother among the men, feeling betrayed, wondering how much he knew, if this was a secret he and Papi shared, something else they kept from me. But Anthony was not around.

My face hot, upper lip sweaty, I turned and started walking back home.

"Where you going?" Eggy called after me.

I kept walking, ignoring his question. Bare feet on the grass, then the sidewalk, on tiptoes, trying not to step on broken glass while crossing the street. As I reached the front of my building, I found one chancleta there, right where I'd left it. The other one gone. I leaned down and ran my fingers over all the moriviví. They each shriveled, leaf by leaf, dying their fake deaths. And me, pretending I'd been there all along, in case Mami looked out the window, stepped out on the balcony, asked where I'd been.

DURING THE WARM nights in El Caserío, I lay in the hammock on our first-floor balcony, listening to the coquis' songs as they

echoed through the whole neighborhood. Every night, at all hours, Papi's friends came asking for him. I fetched my father when I saw them approaching, watched as he took their balled-up dollar bills and handed them their baggies over the railing. Some of them came by every day. Some of them, a few times a day.

I was rocking myself in the hammock when one of them strolled right up to our balcony, a man with a curved, jagged scar on his face extending from the corner of his lips all the way up to his eye.

"Is your father home?" he asked.

"No," I said, even though my father *was* home. I lied without hesitating, without knowing why. Maybe I thought I was protecting my father. Maybe I sensed that something about this man was dangerous.

"Do you want to see what I'm holding?" the man asked, stepping closer. He looked past me, through the door into our living room. "I have something for you."

I got up out of the hammock and walked over, thinking that maybe he'd hand me a few crumpled dollar bills to give my father. I wanted so much to believe him. But when I looked at his pants, down below his waist, he pulled out his dick.

It wasn't like the ones I'd seen before—my brother's, a baby cousin's, or Eggy's, which I saw once when he pulled it out and started pissing on a dead toad. Eggy's had been no big deal. I'd been more interested in the toad, its carcass torn open and full of live maggots. Those other ones had been small, shriveled-up things. But this was something else. This was a grown man's dick, swollen and thick and veiny. Horrifying.

At first I thought it was a mistake, that he'd meant to pull something out of his pocket and it somehow slipped out. But then,

the smile on his face, the serrated edges of his sickle feather scar. I stumbled back.

“Papi!” I screamed at the top of my lungs. The man tore past the side of our building toward the cañaverales behind El Caserío.

Papi came out to the balcony, barefoot, wiping sleep from his eyes. But how could I explain what had just happened? From my mother, I’d learned that a girl’s body was special, that I should stay away from men, who were not to be trusted, that I should not let boys see my private parts, or let them show me theirs. How could I explain what the man had done without admitting that I’d stupidly let him? Years later I’d remember this moment, how I’d thought it was my own fault. How, ashamed, I thought of it like a secret that needed to be kept.

Standing there, heart pounding in my chest, I said nothing as my father rushed over, as he wrapped his arms around me, as he asked, “What’s wrong?”

I held my stomach, willing the tears to come, as Papi asked again and again, “What’s wrong? Where does it hurt?”

But I kept it to myself, just cried and cried, wilting like moriviví in his arms.

I **ADORED MY** father. He was the center of my universe, and I wanted, more than anything else, to be the center of his. That whole year, I had Papi mostly to myself during the day. But when I didn’t, at least I had his books.

In my father’s books, I would learn about the genocide of the Taínos, about our island’s Taíno name, Borikén, which then became Borínquen, and later, Puerto Rico. About Africans who were brought through the Transatlantic slave trade, including part of our black

family, although most of my father's side came from Haiti right after the Haitian Revolution, and settled in Naguabo. In my father's books, and in my father's own stories, I would find our history:

*Ponce, 1937*

AFTER PEDRO ALBIZU Campos' first imprisonment in La Princesa, members of the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party and civilians organized a march in protest. Puerto Ricans wanted independence from the United States, and from Blanton Winship, the US-appointed governor, who had not been elected by the people. They secured all the necessary permits, invited a marching band, gathered with their families after church. Men, women, and children headed toward the parade, where they would celebrate Palm Sunday with music and palm fronds.

Hundreds of people marched as the band played "La Borinqueña." They were met by hundreds of police officers in riot gear who shot their Tommy Guns directly at the crowd of unarmed civilians. Under Winship's orders, the cops surrounded the demonstrators, leaving them no route for escape.

The shooting lasted about thirteen minutes, some people say. Others insist it was fifteen.

The police murdered nineteen people, and wounded about 235, including a seven-year-old girl, a man shielding his young son, and an eighteen-year-old boy looking out his window.

Witnesses said that as the cops walked by the dead or dying, they beat them with their clubs. Most of the victims who lay dead on the street, the evidence showed, were shot in their backs while running away from the gunfire.

Although an investigation by the US Commission on Civil Rights found that Governor Winship had ordered the massacre, none of the murderers were ever convicted, or even prosecuted. [1]

This was our history, I would eventually learn. We'd come from uprisings against colonial rule, slavery, massacres, erasure. We'd carried histories of resistance, of protest.

AND I WOULD also learn that my father, even though he spent his days selling perico, was imagining some other life. All that time lost in his books, all those nights writing poetry and painting, every single dollar he stashed away—Papi dreaming of another place, where his kids could play outside, where he didn't have to sell dope anymore. One day, he would tell me all his secrets, all the stories not meant for children: the other woman he'd loved, the baby who died before I was born, the army days. And I would write it all down, determined to remember.

Prohibido olvidar.