

Chapter 1

La Machita

“Ay, que bonita machita¹,” the old lady said about the girl she noticed enter her bedroom. “Where are you going?”

“Just wanted to say hello and see if there was anything I could do to amuse you... I was told you've been sad.” The reply did not distract the old lady from staring at the mirror on the door.

“I don't know who would have told you that, but I am bored waiting for my family to arrive.”

“Well then, I've come at a good time.” The chair rasped the wood floor when it was moved closer to the foot of the bed. The girl's movements were reflected in the mirror hanging from the closet door.

“What do you have in that?” the old lady asked, referring to the cardboard box she noticed the girl place on her lap.

“I like taking notes on interesting people I've met,” the girl answered.

“But you're so young... you can't be any older than thirteen.”

“Well... maybe not thirteen,” the girl chuckled. “But no matter what, it doesn't mean I can't listen.”

“There's not much I can think that's interesting to tell you about me... but I would love to hear some of the stories you've collected,” the old lady said and turned onto her side

¹ What a pretty blonde girl (the term “macha” in Costa Rica generally refers to a blonde woman).

for a better look at the mirror. “You look like an angel, dressed in white... and what lovely golden curls. Your mother must be so proud to have such a pretty daughter.”

“My... my m-mother?” the girl stammered with the inflection of a question and paused before adding, “... She’s not so easily pleased... but does encourage me to read my stories to whoever wants to listen.”

“Well, *machita*, I like passionate stories, but my favorite TV *novela*² won’t be on until much later.” The old lady moved her head higher on her pillow and appeared ready to listen.

Machita scanned the room until focusing on the side table. “How do you watch the *novelas*... or are they told over that radio?”

“Ay, *muchachita*³, that radio only seems to broadcast church music!”

The muchachita ruffled through her box and brought out a stack of white papers. She glanced over the pages as if to assure she picked the right ones. “I’m sure you will find plenty of passion in this story.” She waved a stack of pages as if to get the older woman’s attention away from staring at the mirror. “But it doesn’t come with any pictures... would you mind if I read it to you?”

“That would be nice,” the old woman replied and gazed toward the door, as if anticipating someone else arriving. “I don’t have much else to do.” She looked at the papers the muchachita shuffled through. “That seems like a big story to read... promise me you’ll stop as soon as my family get here.”

“I’m sure you’ll enjoy it, but I will stop whenever you get tired.”

² Hispanic television soap operas, often melodramatic.

³ Young girl (Costa Ricans are referred as “Ticos” for often endearing words by adding -ita(o)).

“By the way, did the people who sent you here tell you my name?” the old lady asked.

“Of course,” the girl replied adamantly, but then softened her tone to continue, “I know your name... Bertha.”

“I suppose I should also be remembering yours.” Bertha hesitated and stared away from the mirror to the hall outside the open bedroom door. Bertha resumed in a softer voice, “Ceci comes to mind... It’s difficult to recall everything, particularly since not many people come to visit anymore... I often get things mixed up.”

“Yes, it’s easy to get confused when you’re not feeling well, and that’s why I’m here.”

Bertha stretched as if to look again into the hallway and, on noticing no one approach, rested back onto her fluffed pillow. Peering at the mirror, she said, “I guess I have no choice but to listen to your story.”

Enemy Lines

(To August 1933)

She ran by an open door and saw the flicker of light come from inside the darkened living room. She knew to enter it only when accompanied by an adult. But, stunned by the dancing light, she stopped at the threshold of the door and contemplated entering, enthralled by an imagined invitation.

There was no one in the hallway, and she had just left her mother hanging clothes on the line in the backyard. She took a step forward onto the wooden floor of the living room and cautiously walked to where the candle glimmered.

On top of a wooden cabinet, she recognized a music box. On winding its protruding key, she knew, a melodic tune would rouse the hidden ballerina to pirouette in fanciful

accompaniment to the music. But the wavering light, radiating from a centered candle, drew her eyes away from the box and up onto two large portrait paintings hanging from the wall, high above her.

The first painting had a wooden frame that was gold-painted and embossed with intricate forms of leaves. It was of a man dressed in military uniform, whose steadfast stare was directed as if beyond her left shoulder. She immediately turned, interested to where his eye appeared to be fixated. But behind her was a drawn curtain her mother swung open only on special occasions. She looked back to the portrait and noted the man's smirk hidden under the shadow of his thick mustache; she thought it probably was a restrained laugh at having baited her to turn.

"Ay, *señor*," she said as she felt only smooth skin above her lip. "*Que necio*⁴." She repeated her mother's admonishment for persistent misbehavior.

The second painting was of a woman, whose tender grin and direct gaze calmed the girl from the agitation the man's teasing had caused her. Quickly, she glanced back over her shoulder, as if to ascertain she had not missed the man's point of interest.

Examining the woman in the painting, the girl noticed her wearing a cape closed at the front to hide the buttons; and with a large medallion, the tall collars were drawn together at the midline. Her hair, parted at the front, appeared dark and was combed back into a bun.

The girl brushed her fingers through her hair and felt its strands loosely form strings of curls. Bringing one loop of hair to eye level, she examined its wave and noticed it a lighter color than that of the woman on the portrait.

⁴ Costa Rican (Tico) colloquial for foolish, persistent.

Further inspecting the portrait, she recognized facial features that made the woman seem familiar. Encouraged by an apparent fellowship, the girl returned a look over her shoulder—yet nothing had changed. She again noticed the man’s smirk remained the same.

As if for clues, she further scrutinized the man's portrait, until focusing on the embroidered epaulettes on the shoulders of the coat. Unlike the woman's comforting medallion, the man's stitched stripes seemed to demand she pay him attention. Then, as if urgently commanded, she turned to look again over her shoulder.

Footsteps suddenly sounded on the tiled floor of the hallway, coming in her direction. Hurriedly, she tried to hide behind the far side of the cabinet, and hoped to be out of the line of vision. She waited for whoever would pass the door.

Her mother entered the room and continued to the window at the front. As the heavy curtains were swung open, the afternoon sunlight illuminated where the girl was crouched behind the cabinet—failing to blend with the furniture.

“Aquí te encuentro⁵,” said the mother in a tone of irritation. “I’ve called for you many times... but like always, you found a way to get out of your chores.”

“No, Mami,” She stood up and attempted to smoothen the crumple of the Sunday dress her mother had told her to put on. “I just came in to see why the candle was on.”

“Look how you wrinkled that dress, and your aunts will soon be arriving to say the Rosary! Where are your sisters? They were supposed to be watching over you.”

“I was just looking at the paintings.”

⁵ Here I find you.

Her mother drew closer and reverently moved the candle to shine from under the painting of the man. She looked up to the portrait and made a sign of the cross, then said, "Today is the sixth anniversary of his death—a year before you were born... He was a great man. There's been no one like him in our family since."

The girl copied her mother's hand movement in making the sign of the cross. "Who was he?" she asked, and felt his stare directing her to look away. Even with the afternoon sunshine lighting the room, there was nothing she could imagine to be worth his relentless watch.

"He's your *abuelo*⁶," the mother said as she turned around to organize the room. "He's my Papá."

"Why does he have those things on his shoulders?"

"*Ay, muchacha. Que necia.*" The mother sat on the sofa facing the wooden cabinet. "Come here."

Her mother reached for her when the girl stepped closer to the sofa and was turned to face the hanging portraits. She brushed her fingers through the girl's hair and said, "He was a proud and courageous Colonel in the Costa Rican army... You would have loved him."

The girl looked at the man's smirk and again felt the tease. "I don't think he likes me," she said, as her mother gathered her blonde curls with a barrette.

"Why do you say that?" the mother asked. "I think you would have been his favorite... you're as bullheaded as he ever was."

"I am not," the girl countered without knowing the meaning of her mother's claim.

⁶ Grandfather.

“But I think that's what gave him *coraje*⁷... Your grandfather was a hero in the *coup d'état* of 1870... which turned out to be eventful in Costa Rican history.” The mother paused while stroking the girl's hair, then added, “In 1871, the victors of that rebellion wrote up a constitution securing justice for all Costa Ricans, not just for coffee landowners.”

“But Mamá, don't we own the coffee plants you send me out to pick beans from?”

“Of course we do, as well as the lands where we grow everything to sell at the store.”

“My favorite are the fresh roasted peanuts. I love when I can eat them while waiting for shoppers.” The girl pulled away when her mother finished with her hair.

“Well, you can thank your grandfather for all of that. He managed to get our family most of what we own... now if we can keep your father from losing it all.”

The girl returned to the wooden cabinet and gazed at her grandfather's painting. The mother resumed preparing the living room. “I'm afraid that, with all his drinking, your father might manage to give away everything we have,” she said.

“Mami... you look like that lady.”

“That's your grandmother... I wish I could be as strong a woman as she was... then maybe I'll be able to protect this family from your father's mismanagement.”

The girl scanned back and forth between the two paintings and asked, “Does a hero have to wear that bar on their shoulder?”

“Kind of,” the mother answered. “Papá was certainly heroic when, along with some of his friends, managed to hide under a bale of hay being delivered in a *carreta*⁸ to the central fort in San José. At that time, the fort was controlled by enemy soldiers; and,

⁷ Courage.

⁸ Oxcart: a brightly colored handicraft cart of Costa Rica.

once inside, they surprised the enemy and forced their surrender. Tomas Guardia then won the battle and eventually became President. Your grandfather was rewarded for his heroism and made an officer. Years later, he was granted Colonel status. That's why he wears those bars on his shoulders."

"Mamá, do I look like him?"

"Ay, *que muchacha mas necia*... You take more after your grandmother... but you certainly have your grandfather's *carácter*.⁹"

The little girl gleefully ran out of the room shouting, "*Yo voy hacer soldado!*"¹⁰"

The mother ran to the door and called out after her daughter, "Bertelina, girls can't be soldiers!"

⁹ Character.

¹⁰ I'm going to be a soldier!

Chapter 2

Taking a Fall

“Good morning,” said la machita as she entered the bedroom. “I came in earlier, but you were sound asleep.”

“There's not much else for me to do, except to wait until someone decides to visit,” Bertha said and pointed to the bedside table. “Can you pass me my rosary beads?”

“How about today we get you to sit in the garden?” Ceci's reflection hurried past the mirror to the bedside table. She handed her the beads. “Here you are.”

“You smell like a bunch of fresh roses from my garden... I should cut some of them to take to church for the Holy Mother.”

“Would you like to say the Rosary before we go out?”

“To be truthful, I feel like leaving it for another day.”

Ceci assisted her to sit up in bed. “Why would you prefer that?”

“I pray it every day, and I think it's making my fingers hurt... all that flicking of the beads is probably giving me arthritis. Ah, but you're too young to know how painful arthritis can be.” Bertha sat to the side of the bed and worked her fingers to emphasize where she hurt. “But the warm sun outside will probably make them feel better... I would like to go out to the garden.”

“It'll be good for you.” Ceci placed the walker in front of Bertha, who continued wiggling her fingers. “Just grab on to the walker whenever you're ready.”

Supporting herself with the walker, Bertha looked back to the bed. “Do you think I should make the bed before we go, just in case someone comes by to visit? It would be very embarrassing for them to see I left a mess.”

“Don't worry... just wait at the door while I change the sheets.”

After tidying the bedroom, Ceci helped Bertha walk slowly to the front yard. “The sun is brighter and warmer out here,” she said while pacing Bertha's step.

Bertha hesitated when she stepped onto the grass. “*Tengo miedo*¹¹.”

“You're doing great,” Ceci replied and led in the direction of a large chair, just outside the shade of a tree.

Abruptly, Bertha stopped and glared at a tall sprinkler set adjacent to the house. “Ay, *no!*... I tripped on that,” she pointed to the sprinkler, “and then I fell into the thorns on that rose bush... I thought I was going to die when my bloodied face was flattened against the stony ground... I couldn't move.” She jerked her head as if to distract from the painful recollection. “I cried out for *socorro*¹²; but it was many hours before a neighbor boy heard my screams and called for an ambulance.”

“That was a few months ago.” Ceci gently tugged her in the direction of the chair. “I won't let it happen again.”

“Ay, *Virgencita*¹³... that was so horrible!”

“It was a terrible accident,” Ceci assured Bertha and guided her slowly to sit on the chair. With her eyes closed, Bertha turned her face to the sun and smiled on feeling the warmth.

¹¹ I am afraid.

¹² A call for help.

¹³ An expressive call to the Virgin Mary.

"I brought the story I've been reading you," Ceci said and pulled a chair next to Bertha. "Would you like me to continue?"

"Yes, *por favor*¹⁴. My *novelas* don't come on until much later."

Fueled by Coffee **(February 1938)**

A loud honk made the house feel as if it vibrated. And in their shaken hands, the coffee sloshed inside the cup, and the *natilla*¹⁵ at the center of the table quivered when spooned. Everyone turned to the outburst of their father's new car, parked outside on the dirt road.

"Don't listen to him," Bertelina's mother said while rinsing her hands at the sink. "He doesn't even know how to drive that *chunche*¹⁶... Just finish your breakfast."

The eldest sister, Rita, carried to the table a handful of tortillas she had cooked on the wood-stove. From under a cloth wrap, Bertelina took the top one and ripped it to finger-picking sizes. Dipping each piece into the *natilla*, she ate the tortilla with coffee.

The older brothers, Uriel and Baudilio, hastily drank their coffee in gulps, as if in competition to be first to finish. When completed in a tie, they ran out to the car.

"Papá!" they shouted while struggling to get through the passenger door.

"Where are your sisters?" Bienvenido stood, pensively staring at the front fender.

"Papá, can I drive?" the brothers asked in unison as they struggled to gain position at the steering wheel.

¹⁴ Yes, please.

¹⁵ A Costa Rican sour cream often used on bread or tortillas

¹⁶ Costa Rican slang for contraption or jalopy.

“Either of you probably can do better than I did,” the father replied, still eyeing the fender. “*Que salado*¹⁷... It was stupid for me to learn how to drive on that jungle road. I never would have guessed those cows would part just to let us through—and straight to a waiting bull.” He touched the fender as if to measure the dented gash on the blue paint. “I should have transported this *chunche* from the harbor by train: I wouldn't have gotten into a bullfight then.”

“But Papá,” said Uriel, successfully positioned in front of the steering wheel, “the trip was a blast! ... Besides, I did most of the driving.”

At the driver's door, Bienvenido replied, “It was fun stopping at every *cantina*¹⁸ from the port in Limon to Guadalupe... You also got to learn to drive, and I got to teach you to drink like a man.” Shoving Uriel out of the seat, he added, “It's your younger brother's turn to learn.”

In response, Baudilio excitedly ran around the car and plonked himself onto the driver's seat. “Let's go!” he commanded and grasped the steering wheel, pretending to swerve at oncoming bulls.

From the passenger side, Bienvenido gripped the stick-shift and highlighted the principles of “clutch-in/gear-down.” The three sisters scooted into the back seat and pressed against Uriel, glumly looking out the side window. Before everyone were settled on the bench seat, a loud grinding sound was followed by the car jerking forward. Bienvenido shouted over the girls' screams and gradually directed Baudilio to a coordinated shifting of the gears. Slowly, the ride smoothened, and the sisters sat back comfortably to look out the window.

¹⁷ Slang for being unlucky or unfortunate.

¹⁸ Neighborhood bar.

“*Cuidado*¹⁹!” Shouted Bertelina and pulled herself up to hold her head out the window. Ahead of them, but quickly being gained upon, was an oxcart in which were being carted a band of boys. Like themselves, all Costa Rican school children were on summer vacation, and most were assigned to a *cafetal*²⁰ where they would travel daily for work on the coffee harvest.

“Is that Efren?” she muttered while scanning the oxcart they passed. Then forcing herself into a wedge between the window and Rita, she brushed her hair away from her face and mumbled, “I hope they've sent him to Papá's *cafetal*!”

With the hair held back, Bertelina continued to peek at the boys in the oxcart as it slowly receded. Knowing there were no 4th-grade classmates whose father owned a car, she hoped Efren had recognized her inside it.

Ruts, forged by oxcarts traveling on the muddy road, made the short drive up the hill to the *beneficio*²¹ slow, even for trained drivers. Outside the administrative shed, Bienvenido let the children out—to continue on horseback higher up on the hillside.

“*Buenas*,²² Guillermo,” Bienvenido called out to the man entering the shed. “You look dressed as if ready to only watch the rest of us work!”

“*Cabron*²³,” replied Guillermo, dressed in pleated khakis and a short-sleeve white shirt. His leather boots were heavily smudged with mud at the toes. “If you'd done your job, this cooperative wouldn't be in the mess we're in.”

“What are you talking about?... I kept those communists from taking us over!”

¹⁹ Caution, be careful.

²⁰ Coffee plantation.

²¹ Processing plant for hand-picked coffee beans: washed & ground to remove the pulp, later sun-dried.

²² Short greeting for Good day!

²³ Often used in horseplay—dumbass.

Bertelina waited for Guillermo to close the door behind him. “Papá, what is a communist?” she asked from three steps behind him as he slowly threaded the puddles to the stables.

“They’re snakes!... International criminals and thieves wanting to take our lands by controlling the government.”

Guillermo stuck his head out the door, and, as in chorus to Bienvenido’s assessment, he shouted out, “Did you hear, United Fruit appears to be giving in to the *bananeros*²⁴ work demands and may sign an agreement with the strikers later this year²⁵.”

“Just what we need, *otra jodida*²⁶,” Bienvenido replied.

“Papi... Ash Wednesday is only two days away. Don't be cussing like that.”

“No problem: I can always be forgiven in confession,” he answered Bertelina, but then said to Guillermo, “At least we have Leon Cortes as President. He won't let those animals bully us.”

At the corral, Uriel and Baudilio held the reins of the saddled horses for Rita and Auxilio to side-mount. With mid-calf skirts locked under their thighs, they took the reins and spurred the horses to the trail ascending the hill. The brothers followed on horseback.

Bienvenido led Bertelina’s horse to the trailhead and hoisted her onto the saddle. Since recently sliding off her seat into a puddle, she would only ride astride. “Why do I have to wear this skirt?” she asked.

“It’s what your mother says ladies wear,” he replied.

²⁴ Workers in banana plantations won a significant strike in 1934.

²⁵ The strike occurred in August of 1938.

²⁶ A popular Costa Rican expletive for "getting screwed."

Awkwardly, she rocked her pelvis on the seat until the skirt was freed from under her weight revealing the jeans, rumpled and hidden under her dress. She tugged at the edge of the legs of the jeans till they extended over her ankles.

“Bertelina!” shouted Auxilio from one turn up the trail. “Mamá would be angry at you wearing pants!”

“Only if someone would tell,” her father replied and gently slapped the rump of the horse, setting Bertelina off on the trail.

“Where did you get those?” Rita asked.

“From Arturo,” Bertelina replied. “I don’t think an altar-boy would be needing jeans.”

On the flat gravel area at the top of the trail, several painted oxcarts were lined up; a crowd of workers were gathered at the head of the queue. Each *campesino* had strapped a woven *canasta*²⁷ to their waist.

With their horses secured to a nearby post, only Bertelina walked to where baskets were stacked. Rita and Auxilio continued to different locations, where they asserted themselves in a directorial role to appraise each *campesino* that passed them on the entrance to the *cafetal*.

Bertelina had let her skirt drop over her legs, and only a sliver of denim was visible to her ankle. It made for better protection from the creepy-crawlers she often came upon while reaching into the coffee plants.

While wrapping a scarf around her hair, she slyly glanced about the *campesinos*. “Efren was probably assigned to another *cafetal*,” she murmured disappointedly as she tightly fastened a basket around her waist.

²⁷ Woven basket in which the coffee cherries are carried.

Adjusting the scarf to cover the nape of her neck from the high-altitude sun, she stumped up the rocky trail, until calmed by the flitting wander of a blue butterfly; she followed it into a row of coffee plants as tall as her highest reach. There, she stopped only when among those branches heavily adorned with clusters of red coffee cherries.

Without the tedious job of picking from unripened green cherries, she indiscriminately raked the ripened clusters, letting the cherries drop into the *canasta*. Bertelina anticipated to meet her quota of filled baskets sooner.

“*Ola*,²⁸ *Bertelina!*” the barefoot *campesinas* greeted as they passed to untended rows of coffee plants. These girls were of similar age and height, but when stretched to pick coffee, showed unprotected flesh from below their mid-calf skirts. Bertelina recognized them only from brief encounters at church.

“*Culebra!*”²⁹ A loud but oscillating shrill cry caused the pickers to stop and stare toward its presumed origin.

As if emboldened by wearing boots and denim, Bertelina picked the groundkeeper’s unattended machete and ran to the far end of the plant-corridor. She recognized the hollering boy as the one who preferred dolls over playing soccer.

“What’s wrong?” she asked and raised the machete.

“There... there!” the boy pointed to a nearby thicket and, as if relieved of duty, let the basket drop, then fled far from it.

Coiled on the trunk was a band of red rings, interposed with smaller black ones; she recognized it immediately as the docile redback coffee snake, not the venomous coral snake every coffee picker dreaded.

²⁸ Another way to say the greeting “Hello!”

²⁹ Snake!

She let the redback untouched and secured the machete into her belt. The boy remained turned away from the brush when she approached him.

“Don't worry,” she said and guided him to a nearby tree. “We all have a hard time recognizing good from evil.”

Back at her area to complete her quota, Bertelina recalled her father's earlier caution on the communist snakes. She tightened her grip on the machete's handle and proclaimed a promise. “I'll fight to keep the communists from ever taking our lands.”

In the early afternoon, baskets brimming with coffee beans were stacked on the gravel base of the hillside. Bertelina stood by the baskets she had filled.

“Uriel,” she called out. “I'm finished!”

“Leave the baskets there,” Uriel commanded and continued emptying other baskets into a *cajuela*³⁰, loaded on the bed of an oxcart. “Baudilio will check them when he gets back... Go ahead and get down to Papá, but don't let him wander off without us.”

“*Muchacho*³¹,” Bertelina called out to the *campesino* tending the grazing horses. “Can you hoist me up onto the saddle?”

Preferring a different route than the rutted oxcart trail back to the *beneficio* (where the harvest would be milled), Bertelina steered the horse along the *Purral*³² riverbed. With extra time for the journey, she slowed the horse's pace.

³⁰ A trunk to transport the coffee fruit; a unit of measurement to assess payment for the picker.

³¹ A reference to a young boy or teenager.

³² A regional river.

Among the variety of plants shading the river were her favorite, purple orchids that hung from branches of banyan trees. Stretched from the saddle, Bertelina managed to reach for a cutting she intended to cultivate on the back of their outhouse, where the shade and moisture had proven best for orchids.

On arrival at the coffee mill, the car was where her father had parked it; but everywhere else she found only laborers tending to their chores. Bienvenido was not at the stable, nor at the coffee mill, and only *campesinos* raked into rows a mound of coffee beans to sun-dry on the *patio*³³.

“*Señor*³⁴,” Bertelina called out to Guillermo coming out of the office. “Do you know where my father is?”

“Most probably at some *cantina*,” he replied and waited as if ready to provide Bertelina further assistance.

“But the car is still here,” she said, glancing back to it.

Guillermo brushed the toe of his muddy boot on the rung of a stair and replied, “He told me he'd rather get there on his horse... it always gets him home after drinking... whereas, the car only leaves him to awaken wherever he blacked out.”

Bertelina slid off the saddle and walked the horse to the stable. “We'd be more likely to lose our land to the *guaro*³⁵ than communists,” she muttered to herself, but intended to keep her earlier promise.

³³ A flat yard: in this case, for drying coffee beans.

³⁴ Respectful addressing of an older man.

³⁵ Costa Rican liquor made primarily from sugar cane.

Chapter 3

Impatience

The sunlight had waned and created a shadow veiling Bertha's face, slumped on her chair in the garden. "Are you tired?" Ceci asked, supposing she had fallen asleep.

"I think the silliness of that girl in your story exhausted me," Bertha replied and straightened on the chair.

"If you think the story is silly, I can read you something else."

"Well, now that you've started the story, I might as well hear what else this silly girl gets herself into," Bertha answered, "but maybe I should first get something to eat. My stomach is complaining."

With the walker and assisted by Ceci, Bertha managed to return into the home. "Go ahead and sit at the table," Ceci said. "I'll make us something to eat."

"After all that sun, I think a *siesta*³⁶ would be better."

"Go ahead, take a nap, and I'll make something for when you wake up."

"I don't cook much anymore, so that would be nice... I'm waiting for one of my children to visit, then I will cook a large meal like I used to."

"What...?" Ceci interjected, but then let the thought drift into a silence before asking, "Anything special you would like to eat?"

"*Tortillas con natilla*, like that silly girl had... how about also a *cafecito con leche*³⁷?"

"You'll need better nutrition than that," Ceci answered. "Go ahead and take your nap, and I'll fix something healthy for when you wake up."

³⁶ An afternoon rest or nap, usually during the hottest hours of the day.

³⁷ Coffee with milk.

Later, her mother's whispered voice from the bedroom sounded as if in pleasant conversation. From the hall, before entering the room with a tray of food, Ceci noticed Bertha was conversing with the mirror.

"Bertha, hope you had a good nap," Ceci said and set the tray on the bedside table. Glancing at the mirror; she only noticed herself reflected. "How about tortillas and cheese to make *taquitos*? I'll bring you coffee shortly."

Bertha sat by the side table but disdainfully lifted a tortilla; letting it drop back onto the plate, she then poked a finger into a lump of white cheese. "I've lost my appetite... but I'll take a *cafecito*," she said.

"I'm sorry... there's no *natilla*... Besides, the cheese is better protein... how about if I scramble some eggs?"

"The coffee is enough for now." Bertha sat back on the bed and appeared as if anticipating to continue her conversation, when she again stared at the mirror.

"Would you like me to continue reading the story?" Ceci asked on her return from the kitchen, carrying a steaming cup of coffee.

"I hope this time there'll be some romance." Bertha positioned herself to listen, facing the closet door.

Vengeance

(September 1943)

Of Bertelina's eight siblings, her nearest older brother Arturo had planned for the priesthood, and he was the only one permitted schooling beyond the fifth grade, much as if it was her mother's offering to the glory of God.

By age fifteen, Bertelina was primarily involved with regular family matters, such as chores at the farms and tending to the corner store. On that day, she had closed the store for the afternoon siesta and, as was habit, returned home for an afternoon coffee.

With bare feet, she stepped from the tiled hallway onto the earthen floor of the kitchen. The cold glare of her older sisters warned Bertelina to expect the sarcasm they had mastered since reaching courting age.

“Ay, *pricenssa*³⁸,” her sister Auxilio said, working over a raised concrete basin at the backwall of the kitchen. She poured boiling water through a sock-filter hanging from a small wooden stand. With a breeze from the glassless window behind her, a tantalizing aroma of coffee drifted to where Bertelina stood.

“Which of your *novios*³⁹ has taken your shoes?” Auxilio demanded, staring at Bertelina’s bare feet.

In a corner, a fire flared under a flat-top iron stove on which Rita flip-turned a tortilla. “I think she wants all the men for herself,” she added and shoved tinder into the fire.

“What are you both talking about?” It was not unusual for girls in Guadalupe to be the subject of casual masculine solicitations; but Bertelina never thought her playful responses amounted to more than being coy. “I don’t have a boyfriend!” she sternly asserted.

“Always the innocent one!” Auxilio turned away to work on the table at the center of the kitchen.

“I’ll finish that for you,” Bertelina offered, afraid Auxilio would break the porcelain bowl in which she vigorously stirred the *natilla*.

³⁸ Sarcastically referring her as a princess.

³⁹ Admirers, boyfriends.

“Like you finish everything wonderful that happens to me.” The sour cream splattered on the knitted table cloth when Auxillio let the wooden spoon drop. She neared Rita, and both stared as if to confront a traitor. “You told Mamá about us going out without a chaperone.”

“*Jamas*⁴⁰!” Bertelina shouted with an apparent quiver in her voice. “I would never do such a thing!”

“What’s all this gibberish?” Doña Elena asked on entering from the backyard, carrying an armful of *chayote*⁴¹. “Sounds like a feeding frenzy in a chicken coop.”

“Mamá,” Bertelina called out and rushed to assist with the wrinkled green fruit her mother carried. “These are big. . . one would be enough for a *picadillo*⁴².”

“Your little brother Chito is a monkey... he managed to climb over the neighbor’s roof to get these.” Doña Elena put the green squash-like fruit on the table and sat on a nearby chair. “Where are your brothers? I thought we would all be ready for coffee.”

“Arturo was assigned the Sunday High Mass and is at church doing whatever a seminarian needs to practice,” Rita said, adding to the stack of tortillas.

“The other boys are probably being happily attended to... now that they’ve all managed to find wives,” Auxilio scornfully added.

“*Se le metio la chicha*⁴³,” Bertelina said in recognition of Auxilio’s expressed anger.

“Is this about you and Rita showing yourselves as women who don’t care what others say about them?” the mother asked bitterly.

⁴⁰ An emphatic ‘Never!’

⁴¹ A gourd-like fruit grown on vines.

⁴² A kind of Costa Rican hash.

⁴³ A Costa Rican colloquial for “in a mood”.

“Ay, *Mamá*, Rita and I watched each other... and besides, Juan José and Ademar only walked us to the store for an ice cream,” Auxilio replied, placing a steaming cup of coffee at her mother's side. “I'm angry because we have a sister who is a *sapo*⁴⁴... she doesn't care who gets hurt.”

“I didn't say anything!” Bertelina loudly asserted.

“You think all the ladies in town would remain silent about seeing women without morals?” Doña Elena wryly asked as she spread *natilla* over a tortilla. “All of you sit down and keep silent as ladies should.”

Among the small-town population of Guadalupe, not far from the capital San José, Bertelina was notable for her sociability, particularly her capacity to enliven tired conversation. But after being charged with a betrayal, Rita and Auxilio's cold-shoulder agonized her more than she knew how to manage.

Fortunately, soon after, Bertelina was distracted with altering a hand-me-down embroidered church-dress from her cousin Corina. She intended to modify it into a fashionable outfit, similar to one she had seen inside the *Woman's Illustrated* magazine her father brought from Nicaragua. She hoped to outclass *las polas*⁴⁵, her unsophisticated sisters, at the *Virgen de Guadalupe's* ⁴⁶upcoming celebrations.

⁴⁴ Costa Rican slang for tattletale.

⁴⁵ A colloquial term for “provincial”.

⁴⁶ Patron saint for the town of Guadalupe: The Virgin of Guadalupe.

During the week following their encounter, her sisters' whispered voices were often heard through the thin pine slats of the walls; but their conversations were never loud enough for Bertelina to make out what they plotted. It was not until the day they carried their luggage to the oxcart waiting at the curb that she realized they were moving away to live with their aunt.

“*Que guapa*⁴⁷!” shouted out a boy riding horseback past the porch on which she stood, blankly staring in the direction of the long-gone oxcart.

“*Haga pedo*⁴⁸!” she angrily responded to the boy's flirty whistle. Feeling the warmth of a blush, she quickly scanned the sidewalk and was relieved no one was near to have overheard her indiscretion.

“Mamá?” she called out from inside the hallway.

“She's not here,” answered her father from the darkened living room.

In the dim light from a small lamp only recently installed, the portrait of her grandfather appeared ghoulish, and overshadowed her slumped father on the sofa.

“I last saw her in the backyard pruning the *chile*⁴⁹ tree,” her father added. “She probably ate some of the pepper, because she seemed to be fuming.”

With the sound of steps coming in their direction, he sheepishly said, “*Muñeca*⁵⁰, don't say where you found me.”

“No, *Papi*,” she answered, knowing her mother would guess by his smell of *guaro* and dank clothes.

⁴⁷ A cat-call: “Hey, beautiful!”

⁴⁸ Derogatory put-down: “Make a fart!”

⁴⁹ Chilli pepper.

⁵⁰ Endearing term similar to “sweetheart” or “doll”.

Bertelina quickly skirted away to her bedroom, brushing aside the tabby cat that slept at the doorway. At first, the mound on her bed looked like a collage of cloth pieces for stuffing a doll, but the embroidered lapel struck her like a bolt of lightning.

“Mamá!” Bertelina hollered. “No!... No!... *Why would they do this?*”

Kneeling at the bedside, she dug her hands into the shreds of the dress she had worked on for the Guadalupe festival. Holding the tatters, she started to cry and tears began to stain her needlework.

Her father, followed by Doña Elena, came into the bedroom.

“*Esas malditas*⁵¹!” said her father, accusing her sisters.

Doña Elena sat at the edge of the bed and gathered the scraps. “Tomorrow, we’ll go buy the best dress any girl in Guadalupe has ever owned!”

⁵¹ Those evil-doers!