

## The Flamboyán

It was Papi who picked the tree—a big *flamboyán* with soft, ferny leaves and branches spreading out in all directions. When the dry season came, the tree threw down its leaves and replaced them with hundreds and hundreds of red flowers. Then we could see it all the way from the other end of the pasture, standing right on the edge of the hill like a tall, red umbrella. But I liked it better when it was green.

“Can it be mine?” I asked. “Forever?” We lived in the *campo* in Puerto Rico. That was two years ago and I was only seven, and forever seemed barely long enough.

“Nothing is forever,” Papi said.

I wasn’t able to climb the *flamboyán* yet, so Papi put me on his back with my legs wrapped around his waist and my arms hugging his neck very tight and my cheek pressed against the curly black hair on the back of his head, and we scrambled up the trunk just like a pair of monkeys. I wasn’t afraid. He took me to where the trunk divided out into three fat branches like an open hand, big enough for both of us to sit. The leaves above and on every side made a round tent that threw a magic green glow all over us. Papi said if I was real quiet and listened hard, I could hear my tree talk when the wind came rustling through.

“What does it say?” I asked.

“That’s something you have to figure out yourself,” he said.

Mama hated me climbing the tree. “Trees are dangerous,” she said, looking around her with a frown that took in all the trees in the *campo*, even our beautiful mangoes and avocados. “You can fall and get hurt.”

“You’re wrong,” Papi said. “People are dangerous. People hurt you.” His dark green eyes looked even darker when he said this, as if someone had turned off a light inside. I wanted to hug him with all my might to make him happy, but then I’d have to hug Mama too, and for some reason, I never hugged them both at the same time.

As soon as I was big enough, Papi taught me to climb the tree by myself. He said I could go up as far as I wanted, if I was very careful. He showed me how to lean on a strong branch and wedge my foot against another branch for balance. He taught me not to look down, but to look out and beyond the branches to where I could see the mountains, and behind them more mountains and a thin brown road that wandered far away through *la isla*. That was where he worked. Beyond that, he said, was *la capital*, and beyond that the ocean and the world. I wanted to see *la capital*, but he said that was no place for a little girl. It was big and full of traffic, and people went crazy buying useless things at the malls and taking drugs. But I wanted to go so bad, because I wanted to see the ocean. He promised I would see the ocean one day, then he said, “Do you know how much I love you?”

“How much?” I said.

“More than to the ocean and back.” We both laughed.

But Papi never took me to see the ocean. He didn’t take Mama, either. I asked her once if that’s why she was sad a lot of the time, and she said *sí* with a strange look, as if she really meant something else.

Mama was also scared a lot. She still is—scared I’ll fall or get lost down a road or drown in the creek that barely reaches my knees. I tell her that I can take care of myself, but she doesn’t listen. In the morning she brushes my straggly hair into a pair of tails on each side of my head and ties them with colored ribbons. At night she comes into my room to check for cuts or scratches or ticks from the *campo*. And when I’m late coming home from school she’s outside waiting to see my uniform—blue and white checks—coming down the dirt road. Then she walks me back home and makes me eat beans and rice and slabs of fried *plátano* until I’m so full I can hardly talk.

I’ve always tried to please Mama but I couldn’t please her about the tree. I went there every afternoon when the sun started floating down toward the faraway hills, to watch for Papi’s white truck. As soon as the truck drove up the mountain, I knew I barely had time to slide down the rope, run across the pasture, up the ravine and into the house to put on a nice dress. Papi always said he wanted to see me looking like a pretty little girl at dinner time and not in pants and a T-shirt like some wild *muchacho*.

## The Flamboyán

I had four dresses to choose from, and a pair of red sandals that I wore on Sundays or whenever we went to visit my cousins. When Papi got out of his truck and came into the house after work, I hid behind the door, all dressed up and ready to scare him, and as soon as he opened the door I yelled, “Papi!” with all my might to make him jump. Then he would call me funny names like *Cachaplumpi* and grab me and fling me so high that my breath went away, and then he held me up in his big, thick arms and wiggled me around in the air until I giggled and screamed for him to stop.

The day Papi brought home a big old tire for a swing, the first thing I wanted to do was hang it from the tree myself. I tried, but it was much too heavy for me to lift. “Don’t worry,” Papi said, “little girls like you weren’t made to do rough work.” I said what about when I grew up, but he said that when I grew up I would marry a good man who would do those things for me.

“I don’t want to marry anybody, Papi,” I said. “I only want you.”

“And I only want you,” he said. But he looked so sad that I had to tug his hand and say, “Let’s go, let’s hang it now,” so he forgot what we’d been talking about and we set out holding hands across the *campo*.

“Whistle something for me,” I said. He whistled “*Cielito Lindo*,” and he kept whistling all the way to the *flamboyán*. He was happy again. So was I. The tire swung from his shoulder.

I had just turned eight when the dream happened. In the dream I heard Mama’s voice far away. I think I was in my room, listening. The voice was getting louder and clearer, and I didn’t want to hear it anymore so I kept thinking, “stop, stop” but it got even clearer, until I heard it say, “*No te quiero, no comprendes?*” and I was scared. Then I heard Papi’s voice talking very low and he said something about me, “Sonia,” and then he seemed to be sobbing but that’s impossible because grown-ups don’t cry. But I woke up crying for real. Mama came into my room and said it was just a dream and go back to sleep like a good girl, but I asked for Papi and he came and I asked him if Mama loved us, and he said he was sure that she loved me very much and that little girls needed to be with their mothers.

“Forever?” I asked. He stroked my hair, and I reminded him that he loved me to the ocean and back, and he said he hadn’t forgotten that and I

must never forget it either. He held me very close until I fell asleep again. When I woke up the next morning, he had left. He didn't come back that day or the next day, but Mama said that was because he had gone to *la capital*, which was far away. She wouldn't tell me just how far. She said she didn't know.

The third day after that, I was up in the *flamboyán* waiting to catch sight of Papi's white truck and wondering just how far away *la capital* was, and wishing it was a lot closer. Thinking about that made my stomach start to swirl inside, and I knew that meant I was going to be scared, so I stopped looking and snuggled back into the branches and listened to the leaves swishing all around me saying shh, shh, shh, like a lullaby. I pulled out a mango I had stuffed into the pocket of my shorts and bit it slowly, watching the yellow juice trickle down my arm and thinking very hard about how it made bright yellow polka-dots on my T-shirt. By the time I'd licked my arm clean, I'd decided that *la capital* couldn't be more than three days away, and then I felt better. I sat back with my legs up against a slanted branch and the bark tickling the bottoms of my feet, and looked at a ray of sun that burned right through the leaves and left a black dot glowing in my eyes.

"Sonia, come down right now!" It was Mama's voice that found me—the high, flat voice that had gotten worse in those three days since Papi left. I didn't want to come down, but the voice made me. It was a scared voice, too—not loud but you could hear it sort of exploding. So I peeked out and there was Mama down below with one hand on her forehead and the other hand sticking up and waving stiff little circles in the air. I shook the branch to let a shower of red petals fall on her, but she didn't smile. When she finally saw me grab the rope and start down, then her eyes got softer—at least, I thought they did—and her arms fell limp like a marionette when you let go of its strings.

We walked back without speaking, across the *campo* and up the ravine and through the *yuca* patch to the house. Mama pushed open the screen door to the big white kitchen. She made me wash my hands and splash cold water on my face. I shivered. Then she served me a bowl of *guayaba* slices in thick, pink syrup with a fat piece of farmer's cheese on top. She poured me a glass of cold milk to go with it.

## The Flamboyán

Mama had her voice back now because she was saying, “Next time I find you up there, I’m taking that rope away. Don’t you know you can fall?”

My mouth was full. “But Mama—”

“No.” Her voice was as hard as the glass in my hand.

“But Papi said—”

“I said no.”

I ate another spoonful of *guayaba*. Mama took a clean sponge and flicked it here and there over the white countertop, then over the table.

“When is Papi coming home?” I asked for no reason at all.

She hesitated, then answered, “Not yet.”

“I bet he’ll be back today,” I said.

“No,” she said.

“I know he’ll be back today.”

Mama just looked at me. That’s one of the things about her that makes me mad, how she gets quiet all of a sudden and doesn’t explain things. I wanted to stare back at her but I couldn’t, so I looked down at my lap instead. My bottom lip trembled and that made me madder. I stared at the big red tiles under my feet, though I couldn’t see much because my eyes were blurry and stinging. I heard Mama breathing. Then a chair scraped against the floor and Mama’s legs came up to the table and stopped in front of me. My thumb was sticky. I rubbed it hard on my thigh to clean it, until the skin burned. “You don’t need to climb that tree any more,” Mama’s voice said. “There is nothing for you to see up there. *Nada*. Do you understand?”

She stopped. She was going to say something else, but before she could, I pushed out my chair and stood up and yelled, “I don’t want any more,” and I went outside fast, banging the door hard.

The afternoon sun burned on my face. Nothing was moving. My bare feet started running, running over the stones and scrub. I looked straight at the ground in front of me as I went, listening for Mama’s footsteps, but all I could hear was the buzzing of cicadas in my ears and the rush, rush of my own feet. At the bottom of the ravine, I finally stopped to catch my breath and look back. Mama wasn’t behind me at all, but I started running again anyway, up the other side of the ravine, past the yellow field, and all the way

to my *flamboyan*. I was going to climb to the very top and I was going to stay there forever. So what if Mama said not to? So what if she said there was nothing to see? That was a lie—well, maybe not a lie. Mama didn't ever tell lies. But it was her fault, anyhow. I wondered for a minute what the fault was about, but I wasn't sure, so I took that back. Mama just didn't know what she was talking about. And what she especially didn't know is that Papi loved me all the way to the ocean—and back.

By the time I reached the *flamboyan* I was out of breath. I leaned against the trunk, heaving in and out for a little bit, but as soon as I could, I jumped on the tire and pulled myself up the rope with all my might. Papi could be getting near. What if his truck was coming down the road right now? I had to be quick if I was going to see it and get back down in time to change my clothes and hide in my spot behind the door.

When I reached the top, I looked down. The ground was farther away than it had ever been before, and that made me feel dizzy, like I was about to fall. But I stayed there, grabbing on tight to the branches with both hands like Papi had taught me and looking out toward the mountains as far as I could.

I looked until the sun dipped down toward the hills and the sky became painted and the mosquitoes started to buzz around my face. I saw a blue car come up the mountain road and much later a red one. From a tree very close by came the “ko-kee, ko-kee” song of a night frog. A big *mirlo* flew by, flapping its wings like a black shadow against the purple sky. My right leg started feeling numb, so I shifted my weight a little bit and kept looking, hard, and saw a bus come around the mountain and disappear on the other side. I looked longer, until a breeze swished through the branches of the *flamboyan* and made the leaves shiver and tremble, but they didn't speak to me at all. I kept looking out until the sky turned dark and so did the mountains and I couldn't see the ground any more, and until the road disappeared into the blackness and there was nothing—nothing left to look for.