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**The** father of Marcos, a ninth grader from McAllen, drove us all the way to Harlingen. We went into a huge cement building and sat through hours and hours of scholarship tests with about twenty others.

Papa, Mama, Lucy, Berta, and I had been discussing the school for weeks. But early on, we had at least agreed that I should go ahead with the testing.

I was summoned to Mr. Thomas's office a month later. "Sofia, this is Mr. Weld from Saint Luke's," said Mr. Thomas, smiling. Then Mr. Thomas politely excused himself.

"Hello, Sofia," said Mr. Weld, shaking my hand. He motioned me to sit next to him. {He had neatly combed brown hair, little wire glasses, a crimson tie, and a dark sports jacket with patches on the elbows. I couldn't help thinking that a hunting dog, a beagle, perhaps, would go perfectly with his outfit.}

"Sofia, you did very well on the tests. Congratulations!" Mr. Weld said.

"Oh . . . thank you." ~~I didn't even know the results were back.~~

"And congratulations on being at the top of your class!"

"Thank you."

"What are your favorite subjects?"

"English . . . and math."

"And how many students are in these classes?"

"Thirty or so."

"The classes at Saint Luke's have ten. The tenth-grade class next year, your class, will only have fifty students. And we make sure they all go on to college. Sofia, do you want to go on to college?"

"Yes."

"How about sports? Do like sports?"

"Yes." *Is this the interview? Everything is happening too fast!*

"So what's your favorite sport?"

"Soccer."

"Saint Luke's has a terrific girls' soccer team. It travels all around, competing with other teams."

I smiled brightly.

"Sofia, I'm here to offer you a scholarship to Saint Luke's Episcopal School." Mr. Weld beamed.

"Eh . . . thank you," I said, feeling my face turning white with shock.

"Are you interested? We'd love you to come. And Mr. Thomas is so excited."

"It sounds great, but . . . well . . . my parents . . ."

"Yes, of course. I'd really like to meet them, Sofia. I can tell them about the school and answer their questions. I also brought a whole carousel of slides to show them. How about I come over to your house tomorrow, around six?"

"I'll talk to my parents, but how much money will it cost to go to Saint Luke's?"

Mr. Weld lit up again. "The scholarship covers everything. All your family will be asked to contribute is four hundred dollars. A very small portion of the boarding cost."

*Four hundred dollars! That's a lot.*



My parents received Mr. Weld the next day in the living room with a pot of coffee and a platter of *pan dulce*. Lucy, Berta, and I sat on the sofa and listened to Mr. Weld congratulate my parents on my winning one of the scholarships. I had decided to let him tell them. Papa and Mama smiled politely at Mr. Weld and then looked at me. Berta and Lucy jabbed me in the ribs.

Mr. Weld projected his carousel of slides onto the wall

with Mama's five flying angels. Mama offered to take them down, but he said, "Oh, no, Mrs. Casas, they bring magic to my show." Berta and I laughed.

And the slide show *was* magical. Especially the images of the emerald green playing fields.

After Mr. Weld left, Papa, Mama, Lucy, and even Berta seemed subdued, while I was excited. "Hey," I said as I placed my hand on Lucy's small shoulder, "who died?" Silence.

"*Mija*," Papa said, "we're very proud of you, that you won one of the scholarships. Right, Mama?" He stood up.

"Eh . . . yes, *mija*, we are," Mama said. "But . . . well, we still have to decide—as a family—what's best for you. Whether you should accept it. So it's time for you to go see Tía Petra.

Lucy and Berta didn't say a word.



The sofa—covered in plastic. The lamp shades—covered in plastic. The coffee table, the dining room table, the everything table, even the carpet—plastic, wall-to-wall plastic, strips and strips all taped together. Tía Petra's house had everything wrapped and lined, covered and trapped. That was how it was on the day I went over to see what she thought about the scholarship, since Tía Petra was also my godmother.

I found Tía Petra carrying a fat spool of tape.

"I'm not rich," she said as she pulled out more and

more of her sticky tape to cover something, "but my things will last forever—and will always stay brand-new, too."

She sat, swallowed up in her enormous wine red armchair, moving one bare thigh this way and that way because her sweat had pasted her to the plastic. She pried her arms from the armrests, making a rude sucking sound. I sat on the massive matching sofa, not knowing if and how and when to move, but ever more concerned that the pools of sweat gathering around my thighs and legs would soon start running like rivers onto her plastic-covered carpet. Every two minutes or so I turned to pull up the purple octopus doily—yes, one of Mama's wacky creations—that kept sliding down and bunching on my neck like a big ball.

I wanted to yell, *Why don't you just go ahead and enjoy your furniture? Uncover it!* But she would say, "I understand how to keep things new, how to keep things lasting forever, truly a great secret." Recently, she'd even arranged for the funeral home to line her entire casket with plastic, so that she didn't ever have to worry about bugs or dirt or anything.

Tía Petra left and then returned with a plate of hot, crispy cinnamon-covered *buñelos*. They smelled so good. I took the top one. "Tía," I said, "can I eat it on the sofa?"

"No! That'll dirty the cover. Come to the table. I'll get you a plate." And of course, the table was entirely covered with . . .

I pulled out the school brochure. Tía Petra returned with a plate and a big glass pitcher of bright red hibiscus water. She poured me a glass and then sat down beside me.

I thanked her, took a sip, and then handed her the brochure. "It's a school in Austin. I just won a scholarship to go there."

"Yes, your mama told me. I'm so proud of you, *mi'ja*. This is for when?"

"For next year . . . if I get to go."

"Do you want to go?"

"Yes."

"What about your papa and mama?"

"They're still talking about it. We've already had a million *sobremesas* on it."

"Ay, *mi'ja*," Tía Petra said laughing. "It's always harder on the parents. And then there's little Lucy. But let me tell you a secret. I'm your godmother, right?"

"Yes."

"Do you also know the secret of the godmother?"

"Well . . . you sponsored my baptism . . . and you're supposed to take care of me . . . if something ever happens to my parents."

"Yes, that's all true. But the secret you don't know about is that as your godmother, I also have a say regarding your education. Did you know that?"

"No."

"Yes, but here's the catch. Your education means not only your school and book education but your spiritual education as well. Do you know what I'm talking about?"

"Is it about learning to be a good *comadre*?"

"Yes, of sorts. So your papa and mama have mentioned this?"

"Well . . . sort of. In a way that makes them sound like they're from another world."

Tía Petra started laughing. "What do you mean?"

"Well, Mama worries that if I go away to Saint Luke's, I won't learn to be a good *comadre*. And when I asked what that meant, Papa said that it was at the heart of learning to be happy." *g. † \**

*JeDe* ["Ay. Two Martians talking. That's because you're still young, Sofia, and learning what your mama means takes time. And not through books but through experience, and having *comadres* around to help you."] *‡*

*‡* "But I'm happy now, so why do they keep saying they want me to learn to be happy? They also talk about discovering my *don* and things like that."

"Yes. I'm glad you're happy, Sofia. But like I said, you're still young. When I was your age, I was happy too, and thought I would always be that way. And no one could tell me *anything*. But as I got older, well, things got trickier. And then my father died. That's when things really got hard. Part of learning to become a good *comadre* is learning how to feel happiness, especially after life gets tricky.

~~"But now I'm talking like a Martian too. So let me stop. Now you tell me all about this school and why you want to go there. As your godmother, I'll then see whether I think this is good for your education or not."~~

Tía Petra kept pouring me glass after glass of hibiscus water as I went on and on about the school.

We heard a loud knock on the door, and in walked Mama, Papa, Lucy, and Berta.

They sat down at the table and Tía Petra brought in more *buñuelos* and a new pitcher. As everyone helped themselves, Tía Petra sat down at the head of the table and cleared her throat. She said how proud she was to have me as her godchild and how seriously she took her duty of overseeing my education, how impressed she was by Saint Luke's, and how wonderful it was that I'd won one of the scholarships.

She took a loud drink and said that I had promised her that I would work just as hard at learning to become a good *comadre* as I would at my school studies and that I would write her every week from Austin, and she agreed to monitor my progress carefully.

*Pow!* I hit my glass with my elbow. All five of us shot up, frantically grabbed the sides of the tablecloth, and jiggled it this way and that, trying to keep the red river from pouring onto the plastic-covered carpet.

After cleaning up every last drop, Tía Petra stood up, smiled, and said, "My secret has done its magic again!"

She left the room and returned carrying a roll of plastic, scissors, and a big spool of tape. "Sofia, come here," she said. She whispered, "*Mi'ja*, trust me. Don't move."

She wrapped the plastic all around me and then took the tape and sealed me into it like one giant bean taco.

Everyone started laughing, especially Lucy. "Yeah! She's always spilling stuff," Lucy cried. "She should go around like that!"

I couldn't believe it. And Tía had even asked me to trust her.

But Tía Petra came and stood right beside me. She cleared her throat and then pointed at me. "*Compadre, comadre*, Lucy, and Berta," she said, looking directly at my parents. "Yes! Believe in plastic. But you can't keep Sofia sealed up. Let her go, if that's her dream. And I promise you, as her godmother, that I'll help tutor her on everything she needs to know about her life here." Tía Petra leaned over and yanked the plastic off.

Before we left she presented me with a secret box. Inside, I found a Bic pen and a plastic-covered spiral notebook. My name was written in bold black letters on the front, and right below, LESSONS ON BECOMING A GOOD *COMADRE*, in even bigger ones. "That's for your weekly letters to me," she said, and she gave me her blessing by laying her warm hand on top of my head and then closing her eyes for a second of silence.



As we stood on the porch, Tía Petra said, "Wait. I want to talk to Berta and Sofia alone for a minute." Mama, Papa, and Lucy kissed her goodnight and went to wait in the car.

"Berta, I'm your godmother too, right?"

"Yes, Tía."

"Well, I want you to help Sofia with her goal of going to that school."

Silence.

"Berta, Sofia needs you. She needs you to be her very first *comadre*."

"Ay, Tía, . . . but . . ."

"But what, *mi'ja*?"

"I don't know if I want Sofia to go. It's so far away."

"But it'll be good training for both of you. It'll teach you how to stay connected from afar. And when you get good at this, it'll be easier for you to learn to stay *comadres* with the dead."

"With the *dead*? Tía, you're joking, right?"

"No, Berta. Being a *comadre* is never a joke. This is why you must *always* choose them carefully. A true *comadre* is forever."

Silence.

"So will you be Sofia's first one?"

"But what do I have to do?"

"Support her dreams, that's all. And hers is to go to that school."

"But what if it's a big mistake?"

"It's still her dream. She'll figure that out herself. And if it's a mistake, it's her mistake, and she'll have to learn from *that*. Won't you, Sofia?"

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"Yes," I said.

"But remember, Sofia, a *comadre* is always free to tell you what she thinks, like it or not."

"Okay."

"Yes, I think this will be *very* good training for both of you. So, Berta, will you do it?"

"Well, I guess so . . . yes."

"And you, Sofia, will you be Berta's first *comadre*, too?"

"Yes, of course, but I don't know what her dream is. . . ."

Tía Petra laughed. "Oh, Bertita will have *too* many along *her* way. Just wait and see. That's the secret behind those great teeth of hers. She'll always be biting off more than she can chew."

I laughed, and eventually Berta did too. We kissed Tía Petra goodnight.)

\* When we joined Papa, Mama, and Lucy in Papa's old Ford, Berta said, "Sofia, I'm . . . so, so . . . excited for you, really." They stared at Berta.

"Eh . . . thanks, Berta," I said, smiling. "Yes, thank you *very much*."

As we drove home that night and I stared out at the passing darkness, I felt I had never loved Berta more.

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