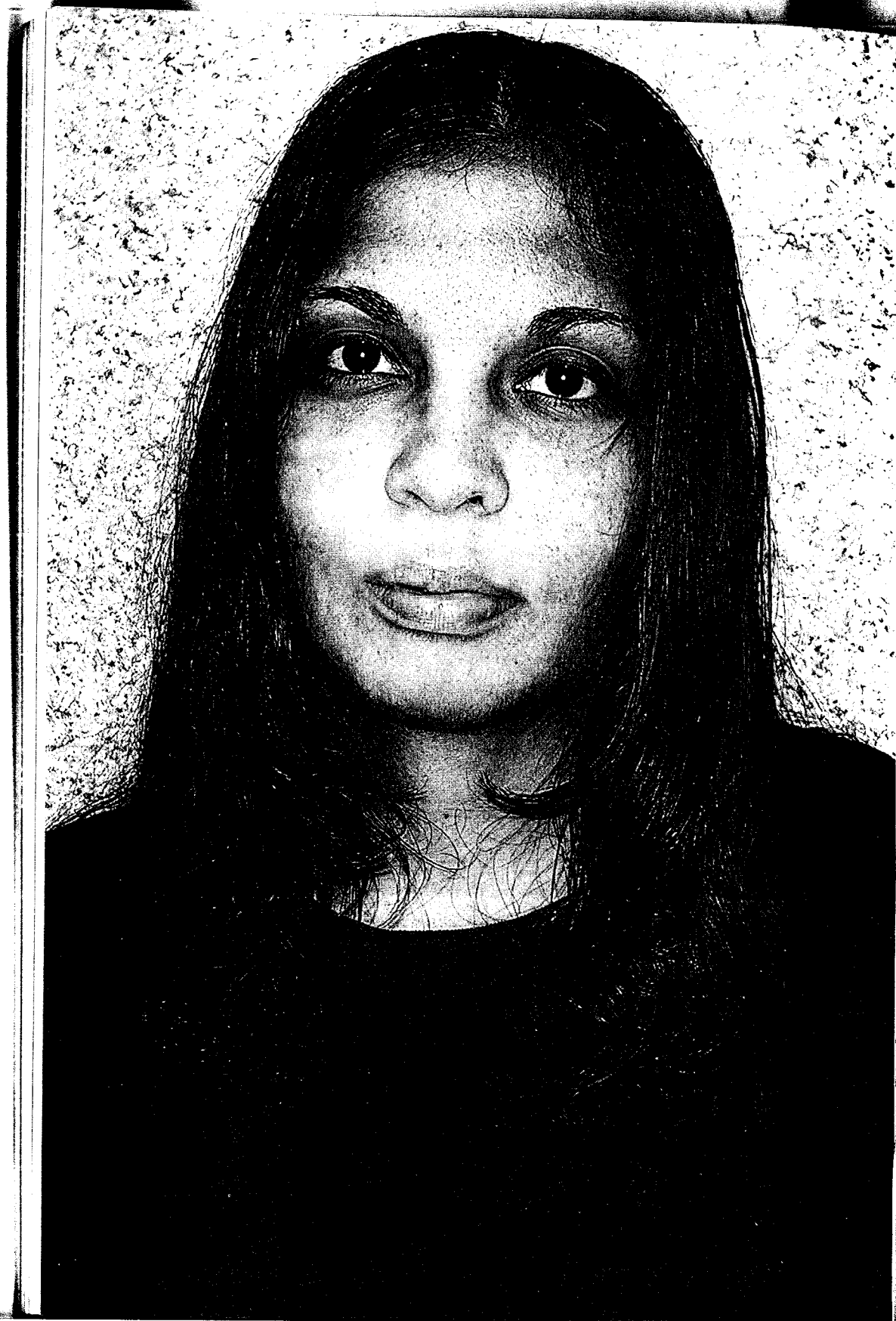




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HELL, AND HOW I GOT HERE



BRENDA MEDINA

Born: 1975

Conviction: Homicide

Sentence: 25 years without parole

Entered prison: 1993

Status: Incarcerated

1. MY MOTHER'S SECRET

The year I was six, my older brother David decided to play a prank on two of my sisters and me. Mimi was fifteen at the time and Jeanette was twelve; we three shared a bedroom. In the middle of the night, David burst into our room, startling us from our sleep. He was shouting and waving a butcher knife. His face was covered in blood. When our screaming stopped and we realized that David's blood had come from the ketchup bottle, Jeanette and I began to laugh. But Mimi didn't find it funny. For months after, she refused to talk to David and would wake from sleep screaming and drenched in sweat.

Ours was a full house: two parents, nine kids. Nine years my senior, Mimi had assigned herself the role of caretaker for Jeanette and me. She looked out for our safety, scolded us whenever she felt we needed it, and supervised our regular Friday night Monopoly games. I loved Monopoly night with my sisters. We'd play long past our bedtime, sliding the board under the bed and faking sleep whenever we heard footsteps. When the coast was clear again, we'd return to the game. The danger of discovery was part of the fun.

Mimi, Jeanette, and I were playing Monopoly the night I discovered my mother's terrible secret. I rolled the dice and moved my token, counting incorrectly and landing on New York when I should have been on Chance. On an ordinary night, my sisters would have pounced on the error, but that night, neither even noticed. It was hard to concentrate because of the screaming.

Mimi left the Monopoly game, locked the door, and turned up the stereo. But even at maximum volume, Michael Jackson's *Wanna be starting something, wanna be starting something* . . . got drowned out by the trouble in the living room. I made a run for the door to see *why* Mom and Dad were screaming, but both my sisters grabbed me and held me back.

The voices escalated. There were slamming noises. Then we heard a third voice in the living room—our older sister Madeline. She was shouting at Mom. Glass shattered. There was a long and tortured scream. Then, silence.

Without saying a word, Mimi, Jeanette, and I rose together from the bed and approached the door. In the hallway, we saw David, standing in front of his bedroom in wrinkled pajamas, looking sleepy and scared. I

clasped my sisters' hands and walked between them, David following behind.

At the entrance to the living room, Jeanette let go but Mimi tightened her grip on my hand. It took me a minute to register just *what* I was seeing. Madeline stood above our parents, her hands over her mouth. Daddy was bent over Mom, who was on the floor, thrashing like a fish out of water.

Yanking free from Mimi's hold, I moved toward my parents. I was just about to reach them when I felt a stabbing pain. I looked down at the broken glass around my bare feet. When I picked up my left foot, I saw the jagged piece lodged in my big toe and pulled it out. Wiping the blood with my hand, I looked back at my mother.

"Put the spoon in her mouth so she won't swallow her tongue!" Daddy shouted. Swallow her tongue? Why would Mom swallow her tongue? Was this even possible? "*Se va mori?*" Jeanette kept shouting. "*Se va mori?*" Her question became a terrifying chant.

"Of course she's not gonna die, stupid!" I screamed. "Shut up! Shut up!"

Mimi had been standing as still as Mom's statue of the Virgin Mary, but now she approached Daddy. In a shaky voice, she asked, "Why isn't the ambulance here yet? You called for an ambulance, right?"

Daddy shook his head.

"*Por que?*" Mimi cried. "If no one's called for an ambulance, then *I* will!"

"Mommy doesn't need an ambulance," Madeline said. Her eyes stayed fixed on our writhing mother. "If you want to help her, call a priest."

"*Dios mio!*" Jeanette started up again. "Mommy's dying!"

"No, she's *not!*" I yelled, my fists pounding against her. Jeanette didn't strike back or push me away. She just stood there, taking whatever blows I gave her. When I was too tired to deliver any more, I fell on top of her and sobbed.

I'm not sure how much time had gone by when Jeanette whispered, "Look!" Mom was sitting up, Daddy kneeling behind her to make sure she didn't fall back and hurt herself. Mimi knelt beside her, caressing her cheek.

Mom didn't look like herself. She was panting, staring hard at some-

thing on the wall: the black velvet painting she loved as much as I hated. The ancient Indian warrior in the portrait wore the big-feathered hat and fearless look of a tribal chief. Mom often said the Indian in that painting would protect our family from bad spirits. But whenever I looked at his cold, merciless stare, I wondered who would protect us from *him*. On that strange night, Mom seemed mesmerized by her Indian.

"Come on," Madeline said, lifting me off the floor. "*Vamonos.*" I held tight to her neck and wrapped my legs around her waist. Jeanette and Mimi followed us back to the bedroom. "Was she really going to eat her tongue?" I whispered to Madeline as she tucked me in. She kissed my forehead and told me to go to sleep. When she went to leave, Mimi was waiting at the doorway.

In whispered tones, Mimi grilled Madeline about what had happened. Reluctant at first to answer her, Madeline suddenly sighed. "All right. I guess you're old enough to know."

They stepped outside, closing the door halfway. Jeanette and I snuck out of bed and inched toward them on hands and knees. I was closest to the door. Behind me, Jeanette kept tugging my nightgown and asking me what I heard. I turned back, raised my finger to my lips, and whispered, "Shhh!"

What Madeline was telling Mimi was unimaginable. Something controlled Mom, she said—made her talk in a strange voice, forced her to scream, throw things. It made her want to take her own life.

I couldn't believe my ears. My whole life I'd been told I was safe—that there were no such things as monsters. Now, suddenly, I was hearing that a monster, an evil force or vague "something," entered my mother's body and took her over. It didn't seem real, and yet, if it wasn't, what had I witnessed?

That night was the first time of many that I observed my mother's being overtaken by the mysterious "something." Each episode seemed weirder and scarier than the last. But if, at times, Mom appeared possessed by bad spirits, she was also a firm believer in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost—and the Holy Trinity's ability to deliver her family to salvation. Mom often invited her gray-haired aunts and cousins to our home for prayer sessions, during which the women worked their way through a communal rosary. To safeguard against evil, Mom lit

candles at the feet of the saints whose statues populated our house. And just in case flame and candle wax failed, Mom also consulted Aunt Rita, who knew the the chants and potions of Santeria.

In the wake of our family troubles, my sister Marizol rejected Catholicism and converted to the Pentecostal religion. Marizol's new church friends began to drop by to visit Mom. Whenever Mari would bring the church people home, they'd gather in the living room, Bibles in hand, and form a circle around my afflicted mother. That was my cue to grab my dog, Toby, and head for my room. I wanted no part of this holy voodoo. For hours, I'd sit in my room, clutching Toby and trying not to listen. Sometimes Mom would laugh louder than their prayers. At other times, she'd shriek. "Come on, Toby," I'd say, whenever the screaming started. The two of us would hide under my bed.

When I was old enough to go to school, my mother insisted that the family break from tradition and enroll me at Saint Margaret's, the Catholic school just down the street. Dad opposed the idea on the grounds that parochial school charged tuition and public school was free. But public school had turned my older siblings into troublemakers, Mom argued; they were always in the principal's office for something or another. It might be too late for them, but there was still time to save me. As usual, it was Mom who got her way.

Each morning, she'd kneel before me, buckle my black patent leather Mary Janes, and smooth the wrinkles out of my blue-and-gray-plaid uniform. Once I passed inspection, I was off to Ms. Foster's first grade.

Because Saint Margaret's was on the corner of our street, I usually walked to school by myself, dragging my feet all the way. Mom would stand out on the upstairs porch and watch me. I'd look back at her and wave before I entered the two-story white building and Mom would wave back. At the end of the day, she'd be stationed on the porch again as I exited school. I'd look at her and wait for her nod. Once she gave it, I knew it was okay to start home.

I hated Saint Margaret's. Most of my classmates were white kids from wealthy families and I was the skinny little Puerto Rican girl whose family was poor. The others were dropped off each morning in their expensive new shoes, their crisp white button-down shirts to match our plaid uniforms. I'd show up in a Kmart shirt with frayed

cuffs and my sister's hand-me-down Mary Janes. "Nice shoes, Brenda," snobby Monica Bradley noted once, running past me at recess with her giggly friends. Everyone in my class knew as well as I that I didn't belong at Saint Margaret's—that I was the odd girl out.

One winter school morning, Mom didn't go out on the porch to send me off. Instead, she followed me down the stairs to the front hallway, put her own coat on, and picked at the lint on mine. Waving away my gripes, she wrapped my black scarf around my neck like a tourniquet and shoved my mittens onto my hands. When I'd been bundled to her satisfaction, she shouted back upstairs for Marizol to *hurry up, hurry up!* When Mari came down, the three of us trudged toward Saint Margaret's. "I'm in first grade," I protested. "I can walk to school by myself."

"Mommy's got an appointment with Father Robert," Marizol explained. "I have to translate." She flashed me her big, pretty smile. "Better confess if you did something bad and I'll try to help you."

Father Robert was the head priest at Saint Margaret's—a tall, dark-skinned man with Brillo-pad hair. Before that morning, he'd been my ally, reassuring my parents at open houses and school plays that I was a nice, quiet girl. So why did he suddenly want to talk to Mom? Had Father Robert somehow found out about my last confession? I'd knelt in the booth and listed all the sinful things I'd done the week before: fibbing, talking back, popping off the head of Jeanette's Barbie doll and hiding it at the bottom of her toy box. "Four Our Fathers and four Hail Marys," he'd said. I'd thought that penance too harsh and cut the numbers in half. Could Father Robert have somehow found out?

The only other thing I could think of was the Monica Bradley incident. The Friday before, Monica had called my friend Lynnette "Miss Piggy" and made her cry. Later that day, as Monica made her way to the easel with a cup of yellow paint, I'd stuck my leg into the aisle and tripped her. She'd landed face down on the floor, her uniform soaked in paint. Wearing my most innocent face, I'd convinced Ms. Foster that it had been an accident. Had Monica *unconvinced* her? Was that why we were on our way to Father Robert's office?

We entered the school and climbed the stairs to the second floor. At the top, Ms. Foster gave my mother and sister a pleasant smile and shooed me into her classroom, business as usual. I looked back over my shoulder, watching Mom and Marizol disappear down the hall. I

slumped to the coat area, removed my winter gear, stored my lunch box, and took my seat. We pledged allegiance, said morning prayers, did morning drills. I couldn't concentrate. What was going on in Father Robert's office? What had I done?

Midway through the morning, a horrifying thought crossed my mind. What if the meeting wasn't about me at all? What if the school had found out about my mother? Had someone tipped them off that Mom wasn't normal—that a “something” sometimes took her over and turned her into someone else? Maybe they even knew about *La Negra*. Had Father Robert summoned my religious mom to confront her about her demon doll?

Mom had a collection of pretty porcelain dolls, but *La Negra*, an ugly old rag doll, was her favorite. *La Negra* had been in Mom's collection forever. Her skin was charcoal gray. Her eyes were Xs stitched in white thread, her mouth a thin, single strand of red yarn. She wore a green flowered dress and matching bandanna. I hated that doll, not just because it was ugly and scary-looking, but also because I was jealous. At times, my mother seemed to love *La Negra* more than she loved me.

Mom knew I was terrified of *La Negra*, so sometimes when I was bad, she'd use the doll to punish me. One time I made Mom angry for a reason I cannot today recall. What I *do* remember is her round cheeks turning the color of fire as she screamed in my face, “Stay right here! I'll teach you!” A minute later she was back with her precious *La Negra*. She propped the doll in the corner of the utility closet, then grabbed me by the wrist and shoved me inside there, too. “No, Mommy! No!” I begged, screaming and kicking. It did no good. The door was slammed and locked. I sat in the pitch black in the presence of my worst nightmare, my mother's demon doll. I don't know how long I was in there before I heard the door handles turn and could squint past my mother's dark and blurry shadow to the light of day behind her.

“Brenda? Are you all right?” Ms. Foster asked. I nodded and forced a smile, hoping to deflect hers and the class's attention. All day long, I fought back tears and nausea, thinking about the possibility that they'd discovered the truth about our family, my mom's fits, my babyish fear of *La Negra*. The last thing I needed was for them to know who I really was. I had enough trouble fitting in at Saint Margaret's.

By the time the 3:00 P.M. dismissal bell sounded, I thought my head

would explode. Any other day, I'd have run down the stairs and out to escape that place as fast as possible. But not this day. Not knowing what Mom had been told, I had no idea what to expect and I was afraid to go home.

Mom was up on the porch as usual. She nodded permission. I moved slowly toward her. When I got inside, Mom told me to change out of my uniform and start my homework, the same as usual. She went about her business, making no mention of her meeting with Father Robert. Mari-zol wasn't around, so I couldn't ask her. The big meeting remained a mystery until Daddy got home from work.

Mom had made me go to bed early, so I was already snuggled in bed with Flicker, my ivory-colored glowworm, whose face turned green when you clicked on the nightlight inside his head. If *La Negra* was the thing in our house I most hated, Flicker was the thing I most loved—a beacon against the dark. I heard Daddy's footsteps, his voice, the squeak of his and Mom's bedroom door. At first I couldn't make out what their muffled voices were saying. But a few minutes later, the shouting made their conversation loud and clear.

"Delia, we just don't *have* that kind of money!" Daddy yelled.

"Hector, *por favor, calma te.*"

But Daddy didn't seem interested in calming down. "I never wanted her to go to that school in the first place! Public school's good enough for all the other kids. Why does this one have to go to a damn Catholic school?"

It was suddenly clear to me what Mom's meeting with Father Robert had been about. This wasn't the first time Mom and Dad had had this argument. My parents were late, again, with my tuition.

"Why does she have to go there, Hector? Because we have to save her, that's why. Keep the devil away from her." My mother—who sometimes shrieked and laughed like the devil himself, who clutched to her breast the evil *La Negra* and believed in the power of Santeria and an Indian warrior painted on black velvet—was hell-bent on the idea that Jesus Christ would rescue her youngest daughter's soul.

"I don't *care* if he's giving us more time to pay!" Daddy screamed. "I want her *out* of there!"

"And I want her *in*!"

Whatever objections Daddy raised, Mom trumped them, her Spanish

revving to a thousand words a minute. Tightening my grip on Flicker, I pushed my face into my pillow. The last words I heard Daddy say were, "*Esta bien*, Delia. Okay, okay. We'll find a way to get the money."

When the house was quiet, I pulled back the covers and got out of bed. Flicker and I walked to the window. I looked toward Saint Margaret's, staring at the tip of the icy steeple, the only part of the school visible above the rooftops. Standing there, I cursed my Catholic school, and cursed my mother, too, who had committed herself to locking me up each day in that holy, hellish place.

One afternoon I was on the front porch with Mom. She was seated on the chair facing the woods across from our house. Mom claimed that staring at the moving trees calmed her nerves. "Will you brush my hair?" I asked her.

She looked at me, surprised, then nodded and smiled. Mom was her normal self that day; everything was fine. I knelt between her legs, enjoying the rhythmic caress of her hands, the brush. I began singing the new song Mimi had taught me. "*I'm in love with a big blue frog—*"

From the sky came a loud crack of thunder.

I stopped singing. I *couldn't* sing. Couldn't breathe. . . .

When I opened my eyes again, my throat hurt. Mom's face was over mine and she was glaring at me with an expression both strange and familiar. Daddy stood behind her, struggling to pry her fingers from my neck.

When Dad got Mom away from me, Madeline grabbed me in her arms and rushed me off the porch. It was over so quickly, I had no idea what had just occurred. Later, Daddy hugged me and promised he'd always keep me safe.

Following the porch incident, my father acted as if everything was still the same, but he began watching me closely whenever Mom was near me. He never would say much about that strange day, or about Mom's situation. I remember asking him once if she was crazy. He shook his head and looked away. Sometimes at night when my father thought he was alone, I could hear him praying, pleading with God to keep us safe from evil. Those overheard prayers told me what Dad believed: that a dark force sometimes took possession of his wife, the mother of his children.

For years, I struggled with the question of what was *really* wrong with Mom. Had she been taken over by an evil spirit? Was she crazy? I wanted to believe that *nothing* was wrong with her—that she was as normal as anyone’s mom. Unfortunately, that wasn’t one of my choices.

The older I got, the more obvious it became to me that something was wrong with my mother’s head, not her soul, but I was a minority of one. I could never understand why Marizol had brought her preacher home instead of a shrink—why everyone in my family but me was on board with the “evil spirit” thing. That was one boat I refused to step foot on. I don’t know why. Maybe I was afraid to consider the possibility that monsters *can* exist—that uncontrollable “somethings” can enter you and take you over.

2. FAMILY VALUES

Addiction comes in many forms: drugs, dice, the bottle, the mall. Mine came in the form of a dangerous boy named Manny. From the time I was fourteen until I landed in prison three years later, Manny ran through my veins.

I met him one summer day while attending Adult Ed. I had hated Kennedy High School—not because I wasn’t smart enough to do the work, but because the cheerleaders, the punk rockers, and even the “pocket protector” crowd heightened the feeling that always followed me—that I was the girl who didn’t belong. Adult Ed was the compromise my parents and I had reached. To my surprise, it was where I found my place.

“Awright already, you look good enough. Let’s go eat.” Leaning against the bulletin board, fixing my lipstick, I looked up and saw “my boys” coming toward me—Bobby, Stitch, and Green Eyes. I was the only female in this little Adult Ed crew, which was the way I liked it. My older sisters were always telling sob stories about how this girlfriend had stabbed her in the back, how that one had “stolen” a boy she liked or bought an outfit she was saving up to buy. Girls competed, but guys were your buddies—which was why I preferred to hang with Green Eyes, Bobby, and Stitch.

But our group was about friendship, not romance. Oh, Bobby flirted with me and I flirted back. I couldn’t help myself. With his caramel skin and dark hair, he was easy on the eyes. But I *knew* Bobby—his pattern

of moving on to his next conquest after he'd gotten the girl into bed. Boys were more trustworthy than girls, but only if sex wasn't in the picture. I flirted with Bobby and the others—took their teasing and teased them back—but I wouldn't date them.

The four of us were at the food cart, waiting for our orders and laughing at a front-page *Weekly World News* story: "Woman Eats Carrots During Pregnancy, Gives Birth to Rabbit-Boy." When Green Eyes called to someone, I looked up from the paper. That was the first time I saw him.

He was wearing white jeans and a Tommy Hilfiger shirt that fit his powerful physique just right. Leaning his weight on a carved wooden cane, he approached with a swaggering limp—and an air of mystery.

"What's up?" Stitch said. "I didn't know you were coming here today." The mystery man and Stitch exchanged a strange handshake. He and Green Eyes, too. Bobby got a regular slap of the hand.

I stood by the pay phones a few feet away, sipping on my Pepsi and taking quick glimpses. Olive skin, sexy hazel eyes: it was hard *not* to look. The guys huddled together, talking in low voices and studying something that circulated among them. "You're stupid, Bobby," the new guy said. "If I had a girl like that, I'd make something happen." He turned to me and smiled. "You look *good* in these."

Blood rushed to my face as it dawned on me *what* was circulating: the pictures of me Bobby had snatched from my purse earlier as a joke. "Hey, Bren," Stitch said. "Come over here and meet my brother, Manny."

"Since when did *you* get a brother?" I said. Stitch just smiled.

Manny's eyes wandered up my body to my face. "Hope you don't mind me looking at your pictures," he said. I stared back, stone-faced. Laughing, he turned back to Bobby. "Got your hands full with this one, man. She's got a major attitude."

"'This one' has a name," I informed him. "And 'this one's' leaving."

I didn't give Manny another thought until a few weeks later, when I ran into him at Louie's Pizzeria. He walked toward me as soon as he spotted me. "Hello, again," he said. "Hey, I'm sorry if I upset you that day at school."

I shrugged, pointed to his cane. "What happened to your leg?" I said.

"Someone shot me."

"Yeah? Who?"

He looked down, scuffed his shoe. "Just some guy. So, you're good friends with my brothers, huh?"

"Am I? Who are your brothers?"

"Green Eyes and Stitch."

I informed him that Green Eyes didn't have any brothers in Connecticut and Stitch didn't have any at all.

"Well, let's just say we're in a fraternity together," he said, laughing. "Except we don't go to college."

"Is that why you give each other that stupid handshake?"

The smile dropped off his face. "That handshake's sacred," he said.

We chatted for a few minutes more and I told him I had to go. Halfway to the door, he called to me. "What's the story, Brenda? Don't I get the digits?"

"Sure," I said. "My number's 1-800-YOU WISH."

Hey, I grew up in the neighborhood, not on Sesame Street. I *knew* what gangs were: their secret handshakes and special colors. I'd been warned to stay away from roughnecks, and done it. But meeting Manny and hearing this talk about my friends' mysterious "brotherhood" aroused my curiosity. I began questioning Stitch and Green Eyes at school but got answers that were annoyingly vague. About their "fraternity brother," Manny, they volunteered next to nothing.

One day, Bobby pulled me aside. "Why you keep asking those guys about Manny?" he said. "Leave it alone, Bren. That guy's no good for you."

I gave him a friendly poke. "And who *would* be good for me? You?"

"It's not like that. Manny's trouble. He runs with a gang." It was the first time any of my friends had used the word.

Bobby's warning excited me as much as it scared me, partly because of my mother. Gangs had been one of her chief excuses for keeping me under "house arrest" throughout my childhood. "Those hoods out there would love to get their hands on an innocent girl like you. You stay here in the house." But when I reached high school age, I declared myself liberated. I began to go where I wanted, when I wanted to. And if Mom objected, so much the better. Control of my own life was a fight I intended to win.

I didn't think of Manny as a battlefield at first. I was focused more on his sexy laugh, his "outlaw" aura. Manny was like a good suspense

book: after a few pages, you're hooked. You need to know more, your mother be damned.

My fifteenth birthday was a rough one, sabotaged by my bully of a brother, David. Earlier that day, Madeline had stopped by with a treat for me, two Boston cream doughnuts, my favorite. Before I could eat them, David discovered them on my bedroom dresser. "Gimme one of these, you spoiled brat," he ordered. I didn't like him demanding instead of asking and said no. To retaliate, he squeezed a doughnut in each fist and smeared the mess across my dresser. "Happy birthday, *Brendita*," he said.

Hostility was common at our house, but David was small change next to Mom, Queen of the Bullies. My sisters had left home, one by one, to escape her iron-fisted control. What confused me was why most had run straight into the arms of controlling, iron-fisted men. It was going to be different for me.

I was still sulking about the ruined doughnuts when my friend Maritza called to wish me happy birthday. Maritza and I had drifted apart, so I was touched that she'd remembered. We made plans to go out that night. "I want you home by midnight," my mother warned. I informed her that what she wanted and what I wanted might be two different things.

Maritza and I played arcade games at Crazy Eight, then caught a late movie. We were heading up Willow Street when someone called Maritza's name. A group of guys was across the street, checking us out. "Oh, shit!" Maritza said. "My boyfriend's over there. He's gonna be pissed I'm out this late."

When we crossed the street, Jose grabbed Maritza's arm and took her aside for a little talk. "I knew you'd come to me," someone said. It was Manny.

Excited and a little scared, I tried for a look of indifference. "Is that what you think I'm doing?"

"I *know* that's what you're doing. I'm just not sure if *you* know it yet. Come on up, sit with me." He pointed to the stairs of the building in back of us. "It's okay. No one's gonna shoot at you. Me and my uncle live here."

Manny pulled the beer he was drinking from the bag and spread the paper on the step so I could sit. He sat down beside me. "Sip?" he asked. I shook my head. I looked over at Maritza and Jose, whose argu-

ment had turned to kissing. "Maritza's a good girl," Manny said. "I'm glad my brother has her."

The "brother" thing: I'd given up trying to pry information out of Stitch and Green Eyes, but if Manny was going to give me an opening, I'd take it. "So what's *that* about?" I asked, pointing to his necklace.

He fingered the beads. "It's what we wear. They represent our family." They looked like the beads I'd strung from a kit when I was a little girl.

"Stitch and Green Eyes wear those same white and mustard colors."

He paused, took a sip of his beer. "We all do," he said.

"Who's 'we'?"

"The Unidad. Don't ask me anything more, okay? That's all I can say because you're not one of us."

There it was again: that same old "left out" feeling of mine. "Okay," I said, snippily. "What *can* we talk about then?"

He was born in New York City, he said, and had moved to Connecticut when he was ten. "My parents died together in a car accident, so my uncle and grandmother came and got me. I was okay with it, though. It's not like they were *good* parents. My little brother lives up the street with my grandma. She couldn't take us both in, so I ended up here. But it's okay. My uncle lets me do whatever I want."

Manny described one painful setback after another, confiding in me like no one ever had before. I was both overwhelmed and flattered. "You don't even know me," I said. "Why have you told me all this?"

"Because I'm safe with you. I can see it in your eyes." He took my hand in his and placed it against his chest. "And you're safe here," he whispered. Beneath my palm, I felt his strong, rhythmic heartbeat.

Manny was nothing like Gabriel, the only other boy I had slept with. After Manny and I made love, he stayed. Each encounter drew us closer and closer together. I told myself Manny was exactly what I was looking for.

From the start, my mother distrusted Manny, but she didn't forbid me to see him until the afternoon her nosy old aunt Maria stopped by to stir up trouble. Manny was visiting that afternoon, too. He and I were talking out on the porch when Aunt Maria's scowling horse face appeared at the screen door. She inspected Manny from top to bottom and disappeared back inside.

"Go home, Manny," my mother ordered a few minutes later. "I don't want you coming around here anymore." Her old hag of an auntie cracked a victory smile.

Mom started screaming as soon as Manny had gone. "From now on, you stay away from that hooligan! Maria says he's in a gang."

"He is not!" I shouted back.

"I saw him myself," Aunt Maria butted in. "Hanging out with all the other roughnecks at the corner of Baldwin Street, wearing certain colors. You young kids assume a woman like me wouldn't know what it means. But I do!"

"You don't know anything," I said, inching closer to her face. "Except how to make people miserable!"

It happened so quickly, I didn't see it coming: the burning slap across my face. I put my hand to my cheek, glaring back at Mom and wishing I was my brother. Whenever Mom hit David, he hit her back. But no matter how hard or how often my mother struck me, I could never bring myself to raise a hand to her. Instead, I stared back, dry-eyed and defiant. Back in my room, I took out my anger on the wall that stood in the way of my fist. Mom may have taken round one, but I was going to win the fight. Manny would be my knockout punch.

I met him secretly each afternoon at Washington Park and faced the daily interrogation as soon as I got home. "You're late. Where have you been?" At Lily's house, I'd tell her. At the pizzeria with Lily. Lily and I were studying at the library. "You always hated the library," Mom would note. "Now we can't get you out of that damn building."

"Do you want me to get good grades or not? Make up your mind."

When Mom couldn't catch me red-handed, she resorted to threats. "If I catch you with that boy, I'm shipping you down to Florida to live with your aunt," she told me one afternoon. "And not for a nice little visit either. You'll stay there until you're eighteen." I didn't scare easily, but Mom got to me that time. Three years in exile with lonely old Aunt Luz would be like a death sentence. I could no longer risk my secret meetings with Manny.

Dressed in my usual disguise—baggy black jeans, oversized leather coat, floppy hat—I set out to meet Manny the next afternoon. I entered Washington Park through the gate at the far end of the playground,

headed toward the benches, and took a seat at our usual spot. A minute later, he was there.

"Don't do this to me, Bren," he whispered. He reached out and took my hand, placed it against his heart.

"Manny, I have no choice. If I don't, she'll ship me off to—"

He put his finger to my lips. "Go home," he said. "Don't worry. I'm gonna take care of everything." He rose from the bench, kissed my forehead, and ran off down the path.

I'll take care of everything: what had he meant? I imagined him running up the stairs of our building, bursting into the apartment, putting a gun to my mother's head. I shook off the thought. Gang or no gang, Manny wasn't like that. For a minute there, I'd been thinking like Aunt Maria.

Still, I knew the company Manny kept. By then, I'd met many of his "brothers" at the meeting place on Baldwin Street. The Unidad had taken over an abandoned building and made it their hangout and place of business. It was pretty pathetic: peeling paint, boarded-up windows, no electricity. The inside was even worse, with its moldy smell, its furniture that looked like it belonged in the landfill. Manny and his brothers sold drugs from a downstairs window covered with a sheet of plastic. Their "patients," as they liked to call the addicts who bought from them, would come to the window to exchange money for "medicine."

The first time I went to the building, it was swarming with people of all ages, a few as old as my father. I'd never been in a hangout like this before—or anything like it. I felt a little wild, being at this place and with these guys I knew my mother would hate.

There were girls at the house, too—something I hadn't expected. Three of them stood aside, whispering to each other and staring me down. Then they approached, smiling and greeting Manny like I wasn't there, exchanging the handshake. "You have sisters, too?" I whispered after they left.

"Yeah. But that's all they are, Bren. My *sisters*."

All afternoon, people came and went, sharing hugs and stories, laughter and beer. I felt both repulsed by and drawn to this filthy, friendly place.

Near the end of my visit, a group of guys came down the stairs, heading for the door. Each stopped to give Manny the handshake and the greeting, *Siembre Unidos!* When the last guy approached, I was shocked

to see it was my brother, David, wearing the white and mustard yellow beads. He extended his hand to Manny and muttered the greeting. Then he turned to me. "Does Mommy know you're here?"

"Does she know *you're* here?" I said.

Suddenly, he looked panicky. "You won't tell on me. Will you?"

It was the perfect opportunity to pay David back for a thousand injustices. But I didn't enjoy seeing people squirm the way he did. "No, I won't tell her," I said. He nodded and walked away without another word.

"Why didn't you tell me David was part of the Unidad?" I asked Manny.

"Because it's my duty to keep a brother's secrets." I rolled my eyes. "I don't expect you to understand," he said. "You're not one of us."

After my breakup with Manny at Washington Park, I didn't hear from him for days. Stitch and Green Eyes said they hadn't heard from him either, but I didn't know whether to believe them or not. Secrecy was a Unidad specialty. One morning at school, I was complaining to Green Eyes and Lily. "My parents claim they made us break up because they love me. What do *those two* know about love? I hate them!"

Lily stood silent, her dark eyes glistening, her big, pretty smile turned down in a frown. "I know you love Manny, Brenda, but your parents have a point. They're scared for you. I'm scared for you, too, Bren. I know what gangs are all about."

"We're *not* a gang!" Green Eyes protested. I shut him up with a dirty look. Lily's older brother, Kevin, had run with a gang called the Latin Dreamers. Then he'd turned his life around. He was working a job he liked, making plans to go back to school. When he tried to leave the gang, his fellow Dreamers took him to an alley and shot him in the head.

"You don't have to worry about me," I assured Lily. "And neither do my parents. I know what Manny's in, but I also know *him*. He's good inside."

"I just hope he never hurts you," Lily said. Her smile reappeared. "Because if he does, he'll have to answer to me."

When school was over that day, I went straight home, dropped my books on the couch, and headed for my room. All I wanted to do was blast my music and be alone. "Brenda, is that you?" my mother called.

"Can you come in the living room, please?" I recognized her sweet, we-have-company voice. The last thing I wanted to do was to socialize.

"Later," I said.

"Brenda, you get in here *now* and don't make me ask you again!"

At the entrance to the living room, I stopped dead in my tracks. There, on the couch by the window, sat Manny.

He rose slowly, casually, and walked toward me, his hand extended in greeting. I looked at Mom. Her eyes moved from me to Manny. She gave him a little smile and left the room without a word.

At the private meeting Manny had arranged with my mother, he had told her I meant more to him than his group of friends did. He'd given them up, he said. Against all odds, my suspicious mother had believed him. He and I could see each other again, she had declared. She told Manny not to worry about my dad—she'd talk to him and make everything okay. True to his word, Manny had taken care of everything—had charmed my mother into believing he'd met her terms. Unaware that she'd just lost the first battle, Mom incorrectly assumed she had won the war.

As I suspected, Manny had not forsaken the Unidad. Quite the opposite. Whenever we arrived back at my house, he would take off his beads, kiss them, and slip them in his pocket before putting on the false halo he wore for my mother. I didn't really care that he'd lied. All I cared about was the fact that we could now be together, out in the open. With Manny, I had found my place in the world.

I was, of course, in denial. Having vowed I would never allow a man to run my life as my sisters had, I ignored the evidence that I was following in their footsteps. I ignored, too, the fact that Manny and Mom were not that different from each other. Both wanted to be in charge of things—me in particular. Both assumed I could be molded to their specifications.

"You should start hanging out with more girls," Manny informed me. "If you're around guys all the time, people will think you're easy." I disagreed but dropped some of my male friends.

Manny appointed himself my fashion adviser, too. "What's this?" he asked one night. We were at my sister's apartment, baby-sitting for my niece and nephew, and I was laying out my clothes for school the next morning because I was sleeping over.

"It's what I'm wearing tomorrow. Why?"

He picked up my black miniskirt and handed it to me. "Put it on."

"Why?"

"Because I wanna see how it looks on you."

"You'll see tomorrow."

"Don't fuck with me, Brenda. Put it on!"

"Fine!" Usually I changed in front of Manny, but this time I snatched the skirt from his hands and stormed into the bathroom. When I returned wearing the skirt, he was on the bed with his hands crossed in front of him. "Turn around," he said. I did. He motioned me closer.

He took my face in his hand and squeezed. With his other hand, he gripped the waistband of my skirt and yanked. When he'd gotten it off of me, he tore it to pieces. With a shove, he sent me thudding back against the wall.

"No girl of mine's gonna strut herself like a little slut!" he shouted. His fist flew past my face and into the wall.

Later, he undressed and slipped into bed beside me. My face was to the wall. "I'm sorry, Brenda," he whispered. He kissed my shoulder, the back of my neck. "I get crazy 'cuz I love you so much. You're so beautiful, Bren. So sexy. I can't handle other guys thinking of you that way."

I forgave him immediately. I loved hearing how much Manny loved me. I loved that he wanted me all to himself.

Like many guys, Manny believed in a double standard. I was his, exclusively, but he had roaming privileges. Late one night after he'd stood me up for our date, I heard pebbles clicking against my window. Pulling back the curtains, I saw him standing below, grinning and stoned out of his mind.

"Where the hell were you?" I hissed.

"Come down," he begged.

The clock on my bedstand said 1:00 A.M. If I went out through the front door, Dad, the light sleeper, would hear me and there'd be trouble. So I did what I often did in situations like this: crouched on the windowsill, sprang toward the billboard five feet away, grabbed on, and climbed down. At the bottom of the sign, I let go, landing on all fours like a cat.

"So, where the hell were you?" I said.

"I'm here now, aren't I? Nothing makes you happy." His words were slurry, the pupils of his bloodshot eyes as tiny as pinpoints.

"Keep your promises. Then I'll be happy. What's *this*?" In the billboard light, I'd spotted a lipstick smear on his jacket collar. Manny tried a kiss instead of a straight answer, but I yanked free and headed to the billboard. "Go back to your whore," I said. As he walked away, I picked up a rock and took aim. It flew past his head. Manny waved his middle finger in the air and kept going.

The next morning, Manny came calling with one of his cousins, a chubby twelve-year-old named Bubbles. "It was my fault," she said. "I got lipstick on him when I gave him a good-bye hug." Bubbles couldn't look at me. She spoke like she was reading lines in a play. I chose to believe her anyway.

It wasn't all bad—far from it. He gave me roses from the gas station bucket, stuffed animals from the carnival, passionate kisses. All couples had problems, I told myself. That was just life.

He would sometimes disappear for days without letting me know where he was. Quizzing Stitch and Green Eyes about his whereabouts was a waste of time. "You're lying to me!" I told Green Eyes one day at school, poking my finger against his chest. "I thought you were my friend."

"I *am* your friend, Brenda. But I'm his *brother*."

When Manny got back, he tracked me down at my sister Marizol's, where I was staying for a few days. Mari and her kids had gone off somewhere on that hot, sticky day and I was in the shower. I heard a noise and poked my head out. Manny grabbed me by the neck and shoved me to the bathroom floor. "You think I'm fuckin' stupid?" he screamed. "I know what you're doing."

"What am I doing?" I whispered.

"Washing off the stink of sex," he said.

Was it drugs? Was he crazy? After he stormed out, I struggled to my feet and locked the bathroom door. His false accusations made me feel dirty and cheap, and I eased back into the shower to scrub myself clean of what Manny imagined.

Manny had a gift for making me feel guilty when I'd done nothing wrong. His accusations kept me off balance and confused. But whenever I'd tell him I'd had enough—that I was ending our relationship—he'd cry, beg, remind me of how few breaks he'd had in life before I came along. "I'm never going to lay a finger on you again," he'd prom-

ise. Maybe it's true, I'd tell myself. Maybe he's learned his lesson. And what was waiting for me if I *did* leave him? The same world that had never accepted me—that had never made me feel special the way Manny sometimes did. So the cycle continued: explosions, promises, sweetness, new explosions.

One night, the phone rang. "Meet me at the building" was all Manny said. He'd returned the day before from a weeklong disappearance.

I took my time getting to the hangout. Let *him* wait for once, I figured. But as I climbed the hill on Baldwin Street, a cop car sped past, siren blaring. David was at the building, pacing out front. "Brenda, don't flip out," he said. "The cops arrested Manny. They been watching him. They know he sells."

I found Green Eyes at his regular corner. His girlfriend, Erika, was with him. Erika and I had been friends back in parochial school, but I hadn't seen her since. From the look of the white- and mustard-colored beads around her neck, she'd changed since our days with the nuns. "Manny's always telling me that if a member of the family falls, the rest are there to pick him up," I told Green Eyes. "All's I got for his bail is forty dollars. How about you?"

It had been a slow night, he said, but he'd make the rounds. He told Erika and me to wait for him at the police station.

The cops wouldn't tell us anything. As we waited for Green Eyes, I asked Erika what it was like being down with the Unidad. "I love it," she said. "For the first time in my life, I have a family." When Green Eyes showed up, he was empty-handed. The Unidad's Hartford chapter was having a party, he said, and most of the Waterbury brothers had driven up there. Manny would have to stay in jail until Monday morning when he went to court.

The three of us walked back to Baldwin Street. As we entered the abandoned building, Erika turned to me. "Hey, Brenda," she said. "Why don't you become one of us? You've got what it takes. I could bring you in."

Until then, I had always dismissed the idea of joining the Unidad, but suddenly it didn't seem like such a crazy idea. If I lost my "outsider" status, I could be let in on some of Manny's secrets. It might bring us closer. "Think about it," Erika said. "Hang out this weekend. I'll introduce you to the sisters."

All that weekend, I studied the members' interactions. They laughed, talked, joked around. They really *did* seem like a family—and not a hostile one like mine. One of the sisters Erika introduced me to had been in the group that stared me down that first day I'd gone to the building with Manny. Now she had a name—Liz—and she was friendly. "The Unidad's the best family," Liz assured me. "You should join."

On Sunday night, David and his girlfriend, Sandy, were at the building. I hadn't told David I was considering joining the family because I knew he'd disapprove. But in the middle of a conversation with Erika and Sandy, it was suddenly clear to me. I *wanted* their sense of belonging—this family of friends. Not much of a drinker, I grabbed Erika's beer bottle and took a swig. "Guess what?" I said. "I want to be your sister!"

Erika jumped up and hugged me, screaming. "Come on!" she said, taking my hand. "I'm taking you upstairs to see Carmen." Sandy told us to wait up—she wanted to join the Unidad, too.

Carmen, a squat, sloppy woman in her early thirties, was president of the Unidad girls. With an expression somewhere between contempt and indifference, she looked us over. "You think you got what it takes? Okay, I'll give you a choice. You can either get a beat-down or do something for the family."

Sandy looked at me, waiting for our answer. I wasn't afraid of a beat-down, but I figured Carmen was looking for the other answer. "I'll do something for the family," I said. Carmen cracked a smile and turned to Sandy.

"I'll do something for the family, too."

Carmen nodded. She checked her watch. "Follow me," she said.

As she led us down the stairs and outside, Carmen briefed us on the woman who lived in the gray house next door. This bitch didn't like the family, Carmen said. She'd sit on her porch sometimes, mimicking the sign and laughing. It was time she learned the Unidad was nothing to play with. "You two will be the ones to teach her that lesson," she said.

Carmen knew the woman's schedule. She'd be passing by any minute. "Use those on her," she said, pointing to a pile of two-by-fours. "She's a big bitch. You'll need 'em."

Sandy grabbed two pieces of wood and handed one to me. We crouched on either side of the gate to the front sidewalk. Carmen retreated and hid. A few minutes later, she called to us. "Okay, here she comes."

There was no way I could punk out at this point. I looked over at Sandy, crouched and ready to pounce. I watched our victim approach, focusing on her fat feet, squeezed into a pair of black sandals. "Now!" Carmen said.

"Hey!" I screamed, jumping up. The woman turned to face me. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail. Her eyes were wide with shock. Sandy took the first swing, a loud whack to the back of the woman's head.

For a second, I just stood there, frozen. But when the woman started defending herself against Sandy, I jumped in. Raising my two-by-four above my head, I brought it down on her. She screamed. I pounded her again and again. Even after she fell to the ground, I kept hitting her.

Then everything went dark. My legs wouldn't work. It was like I was in a weird dream. "Brenda, get out of here *now*!" someone shouted. I blinked, looked around. I was slumped against the fence in front of the building, gripping a piece of two-by-four. I dropped it and ran for my life.

A few minutes later, I was in some alley, at the bottom of a flight of stairs. I was bent over, holding my stomach, gasping for air. "Bren? Are you okay?" I looked up at Erika. "You did it! We're sisters now."

She pushed in beside me on the step. "Carmen really liked what she saw tonight," she said. "You won't be on probation long. Here." She removed her beads, kissed them the way a Catholic kisses the cross on a rosary, and handed them to me. I slipped the beads over my head and let them drop around my neck. I felt a piece of my soul slip away.

The next day, I went to the courthouse for Manny's hearing. Although I was forbidden to talk to him, we exchanged loving looks, silent promises. When the judge sentenced Manny to two years in Little Cheshire, I burst into tears. I fingered the beads around my neck and Manny nodded in recognition. He gave me the Unidad sign as they led him away.

3. DANCING IN LEG CHAINS

*I might have been a great actress
with awards up on my shelf.
I'd have been a big success,
if I hadn't lost myself.*

*Deep down, the real me exists.
When it's safe, she'll show her face.
While she's waiting for that day,
I am here to take her place.*

"*Brendita, que paso?* Mercedes? Oh, my God, what's wrong?"

My arrest nine years ago is a blur of scary sounds, smells, and sights—the vomity stink of the holding cell, the bite of shackles against bone, the nonstop crying of one of my codefendants. The worst of these memories, by far, is the pain on my mother's face when the detectives arrived at 5:30 that morning to pick up Mercedes and me. Mom's face, and Daddy's confused desperation. I can still see him running down the hallway after us, shouting promises as he struggled to dress himself. "Don't worry, Brenda! I'll follow you down there! I'll be right behind you!" All the way to the station, I stared out the back window of the cop car to make sure my father was still there.

"Garbage!"

"Murderers!"

"Not so tough now, are you?"

Mercedes and I collected these and other comments on our way to the tiny holding cell inside the Hartford courthouse. An egg-shaped sheriff opened the door and hurried us in. Providencia and Brandy, our friends and codefendants, were already there. "Better get used to *that* sound, girls," Humpty Dumpty said as he slammed the door behind us. "You may be hearing it for a long time." A second sheriff, a white man in his thirties, addressed Brandy, the only white girl. "You're a disgrace to our race," he hissed. Brandy's sobbing continued for over an hour.

Although I was damned if I'd give that racist officer the satisfaction of *my* tears, his remark upset me, too. The assumption was typical. The three little Spics were *expected* to engage in criminal behavior; it was the all-American white girl who'd betrayed the code. Another officer passing by looked in and sneered. "Feel like a big woman now?" No, I wanted to tell him. I feel like a scared little girl. Instead, I stared back, stone-faced, and said nothing. Weakness was a tool they could use against me. I had to show them how hard I'd be to break.

As we waited for who knew what, Providencia paced, Brandy cried, and Mercedes sat and rocked, her knees to her chest. Trying to keep my

mind off whatever was coming, I concentrated on the graffiti scrawled all over the cell's filthy walls: TINA AND DAVE 4-EVER. GET ME OUT OF HERE! JOSE WAS HERE '88, '90, & '91. But distracting myself didn't work. Plunking myself on the bench beside Mercedes, I hid my face in my hands and rocked, too.

I heard the jangle of chains before I saw the corrections officers in charge of our prison transport. "We'll take the others first," one of them told the sheriff. A female officer with a bad perm and a strictly business attitude interviewed us, asking several routine questions. Finally, she asked the one she'd been leading up to. "Are you gang members?" Provi, Brandy, Mercedes, and I shook our heads in unison. "Skip the pretense, ladies," the officer said. "We know all about your gang activities from the Waterbury police. You girls are all over the news."

A line of handcuffed, shackled women gawked at us as they passed by. "Hey, those are the ones did that murder down in Waterbury," someone said. "Look at 'em. They're *babies*." One woman stopped dead in her tracks to stare. "This ride's gonna be fun," she said. Dried puke decorated her shirtfront.

Once the "girls" were out of the building, it was our turn. Our cell was popped open and a CO entered and threw his armful of hardware on the floor. "Sit side by side on the bench," he said. One by one we were shackled, handcuffed, and belly-chained. My eyes were burning. My face felt hot. *Don't cry*, I kept telling myself. *Don't let him see you cry*.

Outside, we were led past the blue bus that held the other women and helped, one by one, into a smaller van. "Aw, come on, let 'em ride with us!" someone from the bus shouted. I was relieved not to be riding with these criminals but also curious. Did the officers assume they were too dangerous for us—or vice versa?

On the way to prison, I kept looking out the back window of the van, hoping against hope that I'd see my father's car. Halfway there, I gave up and closed my eyes. Not knowing if God would even bother to listen to me, I asked Him to be with my parents through this mess.

At Niantic, they gave me my new name—221437—and made me pose for a mug shot. In a back room, three female officers ordered me to take off my clothes. Their instructions mortified me: pick up your hair, stick out your tongue, lift up your breasts, bend over and cough. I was

handed a bag of toiletries and ordered to the shower. With my head under the water, it was finally safe to cry.

"I'm your ride," the officer said. He had a booming voice and kind eyes.

"Where am I going?" I whispered.

"To your housing unit. First time here, right? How old are you?"

"Seventeen."

"Well, don't worry. You'll be okay."

I climbed into the back of the empty van. Where were Mercedes and the others? When would I see them again? The van stopped in front of an old wooden building. The officer unlocked the steel door and led me inside. "Guess they were expecting you," he said, grabbing the linens and a pillow from a metal chair by the entrance. The hallway he led me down reminded me of one of those psycho wards in a bad horror movie.

The room I'd been locked into smelled like mothballs. Dirty mattress, grungy toilet, white radiator, back wall window. I thought about my bedroom at home—the clean sheets on my queen-sized bed, the pictures of my friends. I made the bed, put on the nightgown they'd given me, and stared out the window. Hours later, I began to doze, my face still hot and wet with tears.

"Breakfast!" I opened my eyes. A heavysset woman stood at the door, holding a tray. I stared at her for several seconds. "I don't want any," I croaked.

She placed it on the floor anyway. "In case you change your mind."

After she'd gone, I got up and walked over to the tray. Juice, coffee, an apple, a piece of cake. I figured the bowl of tan paste was supposed to be oatmeal. I bent down, poked the cake. It was hard and stale. I drank the juice, bit into the apple. As I chewed, I noticed the paper on the floor. *Inmate Medina, Brendalis #221437 confined to seg pending investigation.* I had no idea what it meant.

Later that morning, I was escorted across the compound to the office of Deputy Warden Sackett. Women stared as I passed, made comments. "Which one? That one?" "If she's so tough, why did she have to *jump* that girl?" "Doesn't look like much of a murderer to me." *That's because I'm NOT a murderer, stupid!* I wanted to scream back. Instead,

I held my tongue and wore my couldn't-care-less-what-you-think mask. If I let them know they could get to me, prison would get a lot harder than it already was.

"I sent for you because I have to ask you a few questions," Deputy Warden Sackett said. His voice was soft. His office, with its plants and posters, was the first good place I'd seen at Niantic. "I need to know if your victim was a member of a rival gang."

"I don't think she was in a gang," I said. "But I didn't know her."

"If I let you out in population, are you going to cause trouble?"

I shrugged. "What's 'population'?"

"A regular housing unit," he said.

"Isn't the building I'm in already jail?"

My confusion made him smile. "You're in seg. Segregation. I had to put you there in case you were planning to cause trouble with members of other gangs. Tell you what. As long as you don't cause problems, I'll move you to Fenwick North. Keep you with your codefendants, okay?"

I nodded, relieved. But, of course, I tried hard to show the deputy warden that I didn't care much one way or the other.

That night, Mercedes, Provi, Brandy, and I were escorted to Fenwick North. Three officers were waiting for us at the front door. "The girls in the unit have been following your case on the news," one of them said. "They've been expecting you." Which would explain why they were huddled together inside, gawking at us.

"You four are high-profile right now," another CO warned. "We don't want you causing any commotion." Provi appointed herself our spokeswoman, promising that we'd be "good little girls." The officer told her a little bit of smart-mouth went a long way at Fenwick North.

My room was on the first floor. I noted with relief that my roommate, a young white girl named Sarah, kept things clean and neat like I did. When she introduced me to the family pictures on her wall, I tried to seem interested. "Where are the phones?" I asked.

My sister Nancy accepted the charges. The month before, my parents had put a block on long-distance calls because I'd run up their bill. Not being able to call them was a relief, in a way; I'd have been too ashamed to talk to them from this place. "What *happened*?" Nancy asked. I wanted to explain everything, but all I could manage was, "I go to court on Monday. Tell Mom and Dad I love them." My sister began to cry.

Later, Mercedes and I walked down to the TV room. Provi was already there, entertaining her new fan club with war stories about our glamorous gang life. "Another time we had to drag two girls down the street by their hair 'cuz they kept fuckin' with us," Provi said.

"Damn, I ain't fuckin' with you four," someone said. "Y'all are crazy!"

I rolled my eyes and leaned toward Mercedes. "Dragged two girls by their hair?" I whispered. "When did that happen?" Mercedes shrugged.

Later, awake in bed, I heard my roommate shift in the bunk below. "You awake?" she asked. I said I was. "I have a confession. When I first heard you were going to be assigned here, I was really scared."

"Why?"

"Because of the news. I thought you'd be mean. I'm glad you're not."

"Oh," I said. "Thanks." I didn't tell her I'd been afraid to meet her, too.

The next day, while I was eating lunch with Mercedes, an officer approached and told my friend she had a visitor. Mercedes smiled, jumped up, and left. A few minutes later, another officer came for me. "You have a visitor," he said. Were my parents here? My brothers and sisters?

I was taken to an office where a lieutenant was waiting. "We're transferring you back to seg," he said. "We think it would be safer." Safer for who, I asked. He wouldn't say.

In chains, I was escorted back to the room I had occupied the night I arrived. To my surprise, Brandy was locked in the adjacent room. "Bren, why are we here?" she called from under her door.

"I don't know. They wouldn't tell me anything."

"Provi and Mercedes are downstairs. We were just yelling out the windows to each other."

You'll only be sent back to seg if you break the rules, they'd said. Come with me. You have a visitor. But I had *broken* no rules. There had *been* no visitors. Why were they lying to me? Why was I here?

When I was released from seg fourteen days later, I found out why. Provi had threatened some girl, using "us" as her weapon. We had all received disciplinary tickets because of it. Provi was the only one of the four of us who was released from seg early. The more I saw of the way prison worked, the more I seethed.

Two months later, the anger I'd been holding in erupted big time. I

had just returned to my unit after a painful visit with my older brother, Ricky, a Waterbury police officer. It had been Ricky's first visit to York. We talked about his kids, our parents, the food in prison—everything except the events that had led to my arrest and incarceration. Twenty minutes before our time was up, he'd stood up, making excuses about all the things he had to do. I knew the real reason why he had to leave: my brother the cop couldn't handle his baby sister being here. I had shamed Ricky with his fellow officers.

So I was in no mood when, back in the housing unit, a woman named Roz started giving me shit. We argued for several minutes, getting in each other's faces. "Look," I said. "You want to do something to me, then do it. And if not, then shut the hell up."

"You think I'm scared of you just 'cuz you're a murderer?" Roz said.

That did it. Roz became Provi, and those sheriffs up in Hartford, and every other person who'd used the word *murderer*. I lunged, slammed her against the wall, pummeled her with everything I had. By the time I regained control, I'd been pinned to the floor, shackled, and handcuffed. I was pulled to my feet and marched off to seg—this time for a reason.

At Niantic, minimum- and maximum-security prisoners interact. Staff keeps our security status straight by our color-coded ID cards. Low-risk inmates—levels one and two—wear green cards and are free to walk the grounds. Yellow cards go to level threes. Denied grounds privileges, a level three must be transported around the facility in a van, but she need not wear restraints. When I entered the compound, I was given level four status. The pink ID I wore meant transport by van *and* restraints whenever I left my housing unit and entered the compound. I had assumed that four was the highest level of security risk status, but when I was released from lockdown two weeks after my fight with Roz, I found out differently. "Congrats," the CO said as he handed me my level five orange card. "You're only the fourth inmate at this compound who's earned one of these."

"It's an honor," I said, smirking back. If they wanted to name me to the troublemakers' all-star team, I'd be happy to play the game.

Level fives are to be restrained even in the rec yard outside their unit, but there's freedom of choice: handcuffs or leg chains. To let everyone know what a badass I was, I always chose the more difficult option. First, I perfected walking in shackles, then running in them, and finally,

dancing. One time, hoping to get under the skin of a CO who had gotten under mine, I inched slowly to the top of the picnic table, stood, and danced up a noise-making racket. I was doing the "cabbage patch" when the officer stormed over. "Get off of there before you fall!" she shouted.

"I *won't* fall!" I said. "Life is for dancing!"

"Get off now, Medina, or I'm writing you up!"

"Why? Because you're mad that I can dance with shackles?"

With my orange card clipped to my shirt pocket, I pulled out all the stops. When I felt angry, I let it show. When I saw something I didn't like, I let them know. I was carted back to Hotel Seg so frequently, they should have named a room after me. And, of course, my "badass" rep grew accordingly—with staff and inmates alike. "Hey, there, Ms. Respect," a CO named Shulman called to me one afternoon. I liked Shulman better than most; at least he had a sense of humor.

"What you call me that for?" I asked.

"Because of your orange card and your *baaad* attitude. The Godfather himself wouldn't mess with you, Ms. Respect." I rolled my eyes, unsure if he was complimenting me or making fun.

Five years into my bid, I was still stoking my "Ms. Respect" reputation and living down to my orange card expectations. Inmates came and went. Old staff retired, new staff replaced them. Fewer and fewer people understood that there was a frightened kid behind the tough girl mask.

My parents still knew me, though. During a visit I will never forget, my father let me have it. Mom and Dad had come the Sunday before but had been turned away at the gate because I'd been locked down. "I drive two hours here every Sunday just to be told you're in trouble again," Dad said, his voice raised in exasperation. "This happens over and over. Don't you know what it does to your mother when she can't see you and make sure you're all right? Look at her, Brenda. Why can't you just behave?"

Mom had been sitting there, holding my hand across the table and crying. She cried every visit. "*Brendita, por favor, porta te bien,*" she said. There was almost no trace of the woman I'd done battle with all my life.

I looked away from them both. "You just don't understand," I said. I'd been accusing them of not understanding for years. But it was *I* who didn't get it. No matter what I'd done, no matter how much I'd hurt and shamed them, they still loved me. Those two-hour rides every Sunday

proved it—proved that their love was unconditional. Suddenly, in the middle of that visit, I understood that. And when it was time for them to go, it was harder than ever to watch them leave.

But *understanding* the price my parents were paying for my wild ways and *changing* those ways were two very different things. It wasn't until the middle of a counseling appointment a few weeks later that I made the decision to take the leap from one to the other.

I'd been seeing Ken for two and a half years' worth of mostly stormy sessions. Week after week he invited me to let down my guard and explore my feelings, and week after week I resisted. I always listened, though. In my bunk at night, I could admit to myself that many of Ken's observations about me were accurate. But in his office, I tried hard to let him know it was all a crock.

Ken was ignoring my dirty looks and bouncing a rubber ball against his wall the afternoon he hit me with a crucial question. "Brenda, why do you keep getting in trouble?" *Thunk, thunk, thunk*, that ball kept going. I thought *I* was supposed to be the rude one.

"Why? Because that's who I am."

He shook his head. "It's who you pretend to be. Big difference." I rolled my eyes, tried to tune him out. "Kid, I talk to a lot of people doing time in here. The way I see it, this place deals you two choices. Either you can roll over and die, or you can choose to live." *Thunk, thunk, thunk*.

"I'm not dying for nobody," I said. "No matter how many times they drag me over to seg."

He stopped bouncing and leaned forward. Looked me in the eye. "You got it backwards," he said. "That's exactly what you're doing. Every time you convince someone else what a hard case you are? Every time you earn yourself a ticket, or a lockdown? Your spirit dies a little more. They can make it pretty tough for you here, Brenda, but they can't kill your spirit. Only *you* have the power to do that."

I had never cried in front of him before.

From that day on, I have tried hard to stay out of trouble. Success was a zigzagging line at first, not a straight one, but whenever I did screw up, I refused to let my setbacks defeat me. I have not received a disciplinary ticket in the past three years. Just the other day, I bumped

into Officer Shulman, whom I hadn't seen in a while. "Well, well, if it isn't Ms. Respect," he said.

"That was a long time ago, Mr. S.," I reminded him.

"Maybe so, but I *still* wouldn't mess with you." He could only see the wild girl I was, not the woman I had become.

Ineligible for parole, I have served the first nine years of my twenty-five-year sentence. I am twenty-seven. I'm kept afloat by my writing, by the friendships I've made, and, most of all, by my mother and father's enduring support. "Why *shouldn't* I see him!" I used to scream at my parents when they objected to my involvement with Manny. "What do *you two* know about love?" More than I thought, I guess. They recently celebrated their forty-fifth wedding anniversary. Dad's retired now. He and Mom still make the two-hour drive on Sundays. They wait for my release.

Hope and despair live side by side here at York prison. Goodness and evil live here, too. As for God, I retain my doubts about His existence, but search each day for evidence of His mercy and love.

*Beyond the steel door, there's a mourning
Grief for misplaced innocence*

*Past the mourning, there's a darkness
Filled with fears that make no sense*

*Beyond the darkness, there's a bright light
Illuminating half the way*

*Past the bright light, there's a longing
One that will not go away*

*Beyond the longing, there is silence
Stillness that may save my soul*

*Beyond the stillness, there's salvation
Grace from God to make me whole*



Incarcerated since 1993, Brendalis Medina is serving a twenty-five-year sentence without parole for a gang-related killing at which she was present. Ordered with three of her fellow gang members to accomplish the beating of a fifth woman, Medina contends that she was taken by surprise when one of her "sisters" stabbed and killed the victim during the fight. Each of the four teenagers was charged and ultimately convicted of first-degree homicide. Medina maintains that she participated in the violence but is innocent of felony murder.

While at York prison, Brenda Medina has obtained her high school general equivalency degree and has earned thirty-six credits toward an associate's degree. A bilingual tutor registered with Literacy Volunteers of America, she has taught fellow Hispanic inmates to read, speak, and write English. In addition, Medina serves as a reporter, photographer, and editor for the *York Voice*, an inmate newsletter. In 2002, she designed, organized, and implemented York prison's first-ever Latino Appreciation Week.

"I began writing about my life because it was the only way I knew how to keep my sanity in this place of confusion," Medina says. "My writing is a sanctuary in the middle of each day."
