



## CHAPTER 1

# My Mother the Slave

Want some more *café*?"

Oh, for heaven's sake. Why did Mami always have to be so *beggy*? I hated that *beggy* voice of hers. She sounded like a slave. I just wanted to go to the bathroom and then back to my room like I did on any other normal morning, not hear her pitiful *beggy* voice offering me more coffee. Besides, I knew she was mad at me. *She* knew she was mad at me — as mad as she ever had the nerve to get. Why couldn't she act mad if she felt mad? She could at least not speak to me, or shoot me a dirty look. Instead she wanted to give me more coffee.

"No, thanks, Mami. I don't want any more coffee. One cup is enough."

"¿Avena?"

“I don’t want oatmeal, either.”

“You have to eat something before you go to your first day at work.”

I couldn’t believe it. Going to work at the five-and-dime was exactly what she was mad at me about. *She* had wanted me to work in the *bodega* for the whole summer — but it wasn’t *my* grocery store. It was hers and my stepfather’s. Working all of July in that store that smelled like *bacalao*, the world’s smelliest fish even when it was fresh, and listening to old people talk about Puerto Rico as they watched Telemundo on television, was enough, thank you!

*Please* — this was 1969, and who cared about Puerto Rico in the old days anyway? Not me.

Mami went into her room and came out with a freshly ironed blue-checked sleeveless shirt. “Here is your shirt, nice and *planchada*.”

Only my mother would iron in weather like this. Who irons in July? And when did she iron it, in the middle of the night?

“Mami, you didn’t have to press it. The shirt looked okay the way it was.”

“Are you kidding?”

*Fine.*

“Thanks, Mami.” I grabbed the shirt and tried to go into

my room before she could say another word. But I wasn't fast enough.

*"¿Huevos?"*

*"No eggs!"*

Thank God I had my own bedroom, where I could be all by myself in this tiny apartment of ours. There were only two other rooms in our home, not counting the kitchen and the bathroom — the living room and my mother and stepfather's bedroom. This morning I was glad to duck into my own space.

I had fixed up my room all by myself without my mother's help. That's why it wasn't decorated in late 1960s Puerto Rican décor — plastic covering all the furniture and fake roses everywhere. Which was Mami's way of making our home look pretty.

She'd put a vase of plastic roses on top of the television set, and there were even plastic roses poking out from behind picture frames on the wall. What was it with Puerto Ricans and plastic roses anyway? Did my mother really think those tacky flowers looked good against her greasy turquoise walls?

Then there were the plastic covers on the armchairs. I always tell people you haven't lived until you've sat on plastic-covered furniture while wearing shorts in the

middle of summer and had your thighs stick to the seat when you tried to stand up.

At least the sofa didn't have plastic on it — but that was only because it was a pullout, and it would've been too hard to take the covers off every time we were going to use it. Not that that happened very often. But we never knew when some starving somebody from Puerto Rico was going to come over, asking to sleep on our sofa for the night, which always turned into having a houseguest for a month.

Mami's yellow kitchen didn't escape plastic and roses, either. She'd even found a plastic flowered tablecloth in *La Marqueta*, where you could buy anything from a crucifix to a freshly killed chicken.

Mami's other "decorating" was done with *tapetes*. My mother spent hours crocheting those lacy table coverings. Some were as big as pizzas, others as dainty as daffodils. Mami put *tapetes* under vases, beneath picture frames, and on all the tables. She even draped them on the armchairs and the back of the sofa.

What did Mami think? That nobody would notice the dirty walls because they would be too busy drooling over her *tapetes*?

There's a Puerto Rican expression that says some people try to "*tapar el cielo con la mano*" — to cover the sky with their hand.

That was Mami. She was always covering up what she didn't want to see, or putting something pretty on top of something ugly.

The picture of her father on the dresser in her bedroom was another good example of Mami's bad decorating skills. That thing had both roses *and* a *tapete*. The fakeness of the plastic roses matched the fakeness of the photo. Like in all the old-fashioned pictures I had seen from Puerto Rico, the photographer had decided to make it better by coloring it in and putting lipstick and blush on Abuelo, whose thin black moustache looked super stupid with all that makeup.

Little did I know that Abuelo's life was my mother's ultimate act of — "*tapando el cielo con la mano.*"

I wish Mami would have just demanded that the landlord paint our apartment. Whenever I asked her about calling the landlord, she said, "We don't have to paint. We're not going to live here forever. Someday we'll buy a house in the Bronx." Yeah, she did want to buy a house in the Bronx, but really Mami was too afraid of the landlord to complain. When it came to standing up for herself, she was as frail and delicate as one of her *tapetes*.

Since my room was off-limits to Mami's decorating — and plastic roses and anything lacey — the walls were creamy beige. I had a corduroy bedspread that was once yellow but had been washed so many times, it was faded

to almost white — just the way I liked it. My bare dresser, without a *tapete* on it, stood in the corner, and a table I found on 110th Street served as a desk. I'd painted the dresser and the table white.

With Mami still in the kitchen holding her egg pan in one hand and her iron in the other, I got dressed. I was tucking my shirt into my A-line skirt, when Pops busted into my room.

“What are you doing?” he shouted. “You should be helping your mother.”

My stepfather had been acting super parental lately. I just looked at him.

“I want you to take out the garbage. If you can't help in the *bodega*, you can help more in the house! In Puerto Rico, a young girl knows her place. Knows that she should help her mother. What are you, a hippie?”

Pops had an issue with hippies.

“¡Malcriados sinvergüenzas! Shameless spoiled kids,” he called them.

Before I could answer, my mother stepped in behind Pops, saying, “That's okay. I'll take out the garbage.”

*My mother the slave* was all I could think.

I had to be at the five-and-dime, six blocks away, by ten thirty. I looked at myself in the mirror over my dresser. I still had a small pink hair curler in my bangs. The curler

helped my bangs be a little smoother. I hated my hair because I never knew what it was going to do. If the weather was sticky, my hair got frizzy and stuck out like a triangle. I took out the hair curler and combed my bangs with my finger. In the top drawer of my desk, I found a thick rubber band. I snapped it around my wrist, brushed my hair into a ponytail, and slipped the rubber band over to hold it in place.

Trying to see myself from the side was hard, but I could tell I had an ugly profile. I looked better from the front.

I shoved my feet into my white tennis shoes that made my size eights look even bigger. I didn't even care that the sneakers hurt. I just wanted to get going.

My mother the slave was back, calling from the living room.

"Rosa, do you —"

"*Evelyn*, Mami, remember?" I yelled, correcting her. Ever since my fourteenth birthday last month, I told everybody I wanted to be called Evelyn. My full name is Rosa María Evelyn del Carmen Serrano. But I shortened it. *El Barrio*, Spanish Harlem, U.S.A., did not need another Rosa, María, or Carmen.

The boys in our neighborhood always joked by calling out "Hey, María" every time they saw a group of girls together. They were sure *one* of us would look their way.

They were right. That's why I cut off half my name and chose Evelyn — it was the least Puerto Rican-sounding name I could have.

Mami said, "Oh, *sí* . . . Evelyn . . . do you need money?"

When I came out of my bedroom, Mami was dusting the furniture and shaking out all the *tapetes*.

"I'm okay, Mami. I don't need any money."

I had saved up what Mami and Pops had given me for the time I worked in their *bodega*.

Mami kissed me.

"Good luck, *mija*."

"Bye, Mami."

I ran out the door.