

Estela Bernal

Can

You

See

ME

Now?

A "tender story of learning
to connect with others through
open eyes and an open heart."

—Kirkus Reviews

Can

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by
Estela
Bernal

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PIÑATA BOOKS
ARTE PÚBLICO PRESS
HOUSTON, TEXAS

Can You See Me Now? is funded in part by grants from the City of Houston through the Houston Arts Alliance.

Piñata Books are full of surprises!

Piñata Books

An imprint of
Arte Público Press
University of Houston
4902 Gulf Fwy, Bldg. 19, Rm 100
Houston, Texas 77204-2004

Cover design by Gigi Little
Cover photo by Irene Treviño

The author will use proceeds from the book to support two of her favorite causes: children's education and animal welfare.

Bernal, Estela.

Can you see me now? / by Estela Bernal.

p. cm.

Summary: "Thirteen-year-old Mandy Silva feels invisible after her father's unexpected death and her mother's inability to deal with the situation, and her unhappiness is worsened by her peers' constant bullying"—Provided by publisher.

ISBN 978-1-55885-783-4 (alk. paper)

[1. Mothers and daughters—Fiction. 2. Grandmothers—Fiction. 3. Friendship—Fiction. 4. Death—Fiction. 5. Bullying—Fiction. 6. Oregon—Fiction.] I. Title.

PZ7.B45478Can 2014

[Fic]—dc23

2013038056

CIP

∞ The paper used in this publication meets the requirements of the American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984.

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Printed in the United States of America
August 2013–September 2013
Versa Press, Inc., East Peoria, IL
12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*In memory of my parents Ramona and Florentino
Bernal. Also, in remembrance of loved ones who
are gone but will never be forgotten.*

and

To Pinito. We'll never forget you.



Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Dr. Nicolás Kanellos, Marina Tristán, Adelaida Mendoza, Gabriela Baeza Ventura and Matthew Hall at Arte Público Press who were extremely professional and helpful in making this book a reality. It seems fitting that, as a native Texan, my first book would be published in Texas.

Although she doesn't know it, the very talented Tish Hinojosa (a fellow Tejana), was the one who first inspired me to write. After hearing her sing songs that I grew up listening to, as well as some of her own work at a concert in Davis, California, I decided to explore my own creativity. Since I can't sing or dance but have always loved to read, it was only natural that I express myself through my writing. Thanks, Tish.

Thanks also to the staff and students in the Spanish/Portuguese Department at UC Irvine who first validated my efforts through their Chicano/Latino Literary Prize. I was particularly touched by the two young women who approached me at the reception and told me, "You have to keep writing. These are stories that need to be told."

Thanks also to the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators (SCBWI), SCBWI-Oregon, Willamette Writers, Wordstock, The Rose City Writers, and all those

who are so supportive of the arts and from whom I've learned so much.

Thanks to Gigi Little for the lovely book cover, to my family and friends for their support and encouragement, to my compadre Gene Hiehle, first-line editor and “word tester”, to Shakti Huss who served as the model for the character Paloma, to teachers, parents, and role models who teach us that our actions and words do make a difference.

Thanks most of all to the Higher Power which guides my imagination and my reality.

May kindness become our mantra. Namaste.

Your pain is the breaking of the shell that
encloses your understanding.

—Kahlil Gibran

Chapter One

Glued

When I answered the door the morning I turned thirteen and found two police officers standing there, I knew they hadn't come to wish me a happy birthday.

That whole day I heard doors opening and shutting, people whispering and crying.

"He died instantly. He didn't suffer," I kept hearing again and again.

How would they know? Even if Dad had laughed himself to death, the truth was that he was gone and a part of me had died that day, too.

I hadn't been very excited about turning thirteen. Birthdays meant I kept getting older, but I wasn't getting any bigger. Mom calls me a late bloomer. I know it's just one more way in which I disappoint her. I tried to convince myself that I'd given up trying to please her. Even if I wanted to, I could never follow in her beauty queen footsteps.

Dad was just the opposite. He called me "Muñeca." Coming from him, I took it as a compliment, even though I know no one else would think of me as a doll. Dolls aren't short and skinny. They don't have thin, limp hair. And, I've never seen a doll with crooked teeth or braces.

The next few days were a blur, like watching TV from my favorite branch of the oak tree in our backyard. Although I don't have anybody but a drunk driver to blame for Dad's death, a month later I still feel like kicking or punching something or somebody, especially the clueless clowns who never miss a chance to torment me.

Like yesterday. When the bell rang after social studies class, I threw my stuff in my bag and, as I tried to slide out of my seat, I felt my skirt slipping off. I looked down to see my underpants were showing. They weren't my best pair, either.

I slid back in and waited for the students to leave.

Then I saw Haley, Sandra and Mina standing nearby holding on to one another, laughing so hard they were practically crying. It wasn't until I yanked at the skirt that I understood why. It was glued to the seat.

I reached in my bag and pulled out the first thing I could grab.

Before I knew it, I'd thrown my math book at them and caught Sandra right under the chin. She let out a howl as her head snapped back like a windsock jerked around by the wind.

Mrs. Franco rushed over. "Are you girls at it again? What did you do this time?"

"Amanda threw a book at us," Mina yelled.

"You glued my skirt to my chair," I yelled back.

Mrs. Franco took a tissue out of her pocket and started wiping blood and drool off Sandra's chin.

"Did you bite your tongue?"

Sandra just kept howling.

Mrs. Franco told Haley and Mina to take her to the nurse's office and then go see the principal. By then, the rest of the class had crowded around my desk trying to see what was going on. Mrs. Franco shooed them out of

the room, locked the door and came back with a ruler to scrape my skirt off the chair.

“They hate me. They hate me,” I sobbed. “I’ve never done anything to them.”

“They don’t hate you, Amanda. They’re just mean. You need to slip out of your skirt so I can scrape it off more easily.”

The skirt had an elastic waistband and started to slip off as Mrs. Franco stood behind me and lifted me by my armpits, making me feel like a baby being pulled out of a high chair.

I stood, half naked, watching her scrape and pull until my skirt came loose.

She handed it to me. “They’re getting smarter at these ridiculous pranks,” she said. “It looks like they used some kind of super glue and figured out a small dab goes a long way.”

I looked the skirt over before putting it back on. It had a hard, round, dime-sized circle where the glue was still sticking to it. I turned it so the spot was on the side, right below my hip, where it wasn’t as noticeable.

“You could’ve broken Sandra’s nose or injured her eye,” Mrs. Franco said. “You know I’ll have to report this to the principal. Next time those girls bother you, please come to me or one of the other teachers. Let us handle it.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I said before I started to walk out. At the door, I turned back. “Thanks for scraping my skirt off the chair.”

I didn’t see Sandra the rest of the day, but Mina and Haley glared at me whenever I ran into them. I was afraid they’d be waiting for me after school, so I skipped my last class and went downtown to Gary’s Discount Outlet. I walked up one aisle and down another until I got to an aisle with a huge pile of fake lipsticks, compact mirrors and make-up for kids. I held a mirror to my face and

turned my head this way and that. I looked like a freak with one bulging eye, fish lips and a pig snout, but I kept holding the mirror with one hand while I let a tube of lipstick drop to the floor from the other. I crushed it and flattened it with my foot before kicking it under the bin and putting the mirror back.

Gary's wife came up behind me. "Looking for anything in particular?"

"No. Just looking," I said.

She wasn't convinced. She followed me all the way to the door.