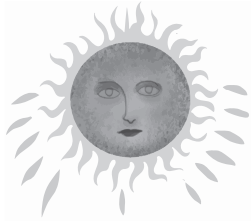


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CHAPTER ONE

I wasn't sorry at all that summer was over. It sucked.

In fact, it sucked *huevos*. Big time.

Mom didn't have the money to take me on one of those fancy vacations we'd talked about forever. We'd never even been on a fancy vacation so that's why I was triple excited about going on one. When I fantasied about Disneyland, Disney World or going on a cruise, I drooled like a kid staring at a giant ice cream cone. I imagined Mom and me staying at one of those fancy beach resorts where women's long hair blew in a tropical breeze against a sunset that looked like it'd been painted on the sky. I saw myself running on the beach under coconut trees and the air smelling of Almond Joys.

I'd spent most of last year imagining *my* hair blowing in the breeze against a painted sunset and eating an Almond Joy. Swimming in the ocean all day and then sipping tall drinks with fruit growing out of the top. Checking out the boys who were bound to be way cuter at the beach than at school. Or Mom and me sailing along on a cruise ship bigger than our apartment building and grazing at all-you-can-eat buffets piled high with exotic foods. Crepes, lobster, shrimp. A chocolate fountain.

But our car needed a new transmission, whatever the heck that was, and a new set of tires. So, my vacation dreams crashed to Earth harder than the comet that killed all the dinosaurs.

With our money going elsewhere that summer, Mom and I did what we usually did when we were short on cash, which happened a lot. We visited Grandma Lydia and Grandpa Frank. Went on long drives, or to the Denver Zoo. Lots of times, we just played games and watched movies on TV. I'd get to stay up late and sleep in the next day, which was great in itself. We had fun, but I would've had lots more fun whizzing down Splash Mountain or holding my mouth under a chocolate fountain. Walking with one of those cute boys on the sand at sunset and eating an Almond Joy.

But with no money, we stayed home.

Again.

Then the sucky summer was gone, and it was the first day of school.

"Trini, don't forget to eat breakfast," Mom shouted from the bathroom while she got ready for work.

Though she actually never cooked in the mornings, Mom always made sure I ate breakfast, which she called the most important meal of the day.

"Most important meal of the day," she said, and I mouthed the familiar words along with her.

"If it's so important, how come you never eat breakfast, Mom?"

"I'm not a kid."

"Lame excuse."

"Moms can have lame excuses."

"If you say so."

In her rush mode, she sped into the kitchen, gathered her purse and keys and took the Pop-Tart that I had made for her.

“Most important meal.” I grinned.

“Smarty-butt. Big meeting today at work, Trini. See you later. I’ll bring home Chinese.”

“We had that two days ago.”

“Okay then, burgers and fries,” she called on her way out of the door. Over her shoulder, she added, “Love you. Do good at school.”

That was another one of her favorite phrases. In English class I’d learned that she really should have said, “Do well at school,” but I didn’t want to correct her grammar.

That morning, I craved a breakfast burrito with eggs and bacon and cheese but didn’t have the time or ingredients to make one. A toaster pastry with strawberry filling would have to do. With my most important meal of the day, a Pop-Tart, in one hand, I picked up my backpack with the other. I had plenty of time because Pecos Middle School was only three blocks away. I met up with BFFs Lily Ramos and Ella Johnson at our favorite corner. They lived a few blocks away in real houses, not apartments like mine.

“Ready for another year of education, dudes?”

“No,” they replied.

“I’m really ready for high school,” Lily said. She was a tall kid with a globe of curly brown hair.

“But we just started the seventh grade, Lil.”

“There are no cute boys at school.”

Ella agreed. She always agreed with Lily. “So far I haven’t seen one cute boy in this entire school. Not one. They act like little kids.” She was shorter and fuller than Lily and me. Her long hair was so blonde it was practically white.

“I spotted some prospects, but then they opened their mouths,” I added.

“Why? What’d they say, Trini?” Ella asked.

“Nothing interesting. They grunted and they burped. They think it’s funny. And I really hate it when they bet on who can fart the loudest.”

“I can hardly wait until they grow up,” Lily said, disgusted.

“I hope we don’t have to wait until college before they finally get out of the burp and fart phase,” Ella agreed, and they both laughed at the thought.

The best thing about summer had been spending more time with my BFFs. We went to the malls, swimming, and had sleepovers where we made jewelry and watched movies all night. Lily’s mom owned a craft store, so we got all the beads and makings we wanted. Bracelets, earrings and necklaces packed one of the dresser drawers in my room. My friends and I beaded as we talked during our sleepovers, and man, did we talk! All summer we shared about becoming seventh-graders, and the topic of boys came up more and more. Funny how they had started taking over, even though I’d gone to school with them all my life. I chalked that up to growing up: maybe we were entering a stage when girls began thinking about having boyfriends more than playing with dolls.

We had begged Lily’s older sister, who was an eighth-grader, to tell us what to expect, class- and boy-wise, but she ignored us as if we were gum on the sidewalk.

I guessed that the seventh grade was going to be a lot like the sixth grade, except the boys would be taller and still telling their burping and farting jokes. I *was* excited about moving up a grade. Not necessarily about the possibility of getting a boyfriend, although that would be good too. I loved to learn new things in class, from English to art to history. I looked forward to reading a bunch of new books in the library. Learning made me feel smarter. I knew it was supposed to be totally cool to be smart, but don’t let anyone fool you. My friend Lily, who’s very brainy, pointed out there’s a fine line

between smart and nerdy at middle school, and you didn't want to cross it. I guess brilliance only counts when you're older and you can make money from it.

It turned out I was right about the seventh grade. Not much of a change from the grade before. I did get a taller locker, which was a bonus. One thing was different: seventh grade *was* much more serious. On the first day, my homeroom-slash-English teacher Mr. Ortega told us that summer was over and we had to get to work. He wrote it on the blackboard to make sure we were paying attention:

SUMMER IS OVER. TIME TO GET TO WORK.

Other than his wearing really ugly ties, Mr. Ortega didn't seem like a bad guy. But it was only the first day of school, and I had the rest of the year to be proven wrong.

"Miss Sánchez?"

I looked up. Mr. Ortega stared at me. He had a shiny bald head and huge glasses.

"Huh?"

"Are we paying attention?"

"Absolutely." I don't think I fooled him.

Mr. Ortega always said "we," like *he* was another seventh-grader, as in, "We are going to take a test" and "We are going to have to do better in class."

Since *we* were talking about what *we* were going to learn that year in his English class, there was nothing else to do but look forward to lunch.

At the cafeteria, I waved at Lily and Ella, who were in different homerooms.

"I haven't eaten a good school lunch since the fourth grade." Lily patted her flat stomach as we stood in line.

Ella took a big whiff. "Aw, not chicken tenders. They're the worst. I'm going to the salad bar."

“No, the spaghetti is the worst. All soft and gross. I’m doing salad bar, too. What are you going to eat, Trini?”

That day, the lunch ladies dished out french fries, a fruit cup and chocolate milk with the chicken tenders.

I smiled at my buddies. “I’m in the mood for a hot lunch, I guess.” I tried to sound like I didn’t care. But secretly, I thought the cafeteria food was heaven.

“You’ll probably get diarrhea,” Lily warned.

“Ew, I hope not.”

I *loved* eating a hot lunch, although I didn’t mention this to anyone. The other kids forever complained about the cafeteria food, but to me it was basically home cooking. I loved the beef and macaroni, pizza, spaghetti and those fishy stick things. I liked the tacos, even if they only hinted at being Mexican food and were served with ranch instead of salsa.

My mom wasn’t much of a cook. She fried eggs, mixed salads and served up chili dogs using that orange chili from cans. She’d also shove frozen pizzas or lasagna into the oven. When Mom was real short on money, she’d whip up tuna casserole because she said tuna and noodles and cream of chicken soup didn’t cost much. She did a good job, but really, who could mess up tuna casserole? Other than peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and ramen noodles, it was the easiest thing in the world to cook.

Mostly, Mom was a fast-food, take-out kind of girl.

We didn’t eat fast food or takeout every day, but sometimes it sure felt that way. Menus from our favorite restaurants, like Little China, Ribs R Us and Big Burgers U-Betcha, filled one of the kitchen drawers. They regularly sent us coupons in the mail or texts to my mom’s cell phone because we were such good customers. Plastic cups from drive-thrus and combo meals were stacked in our cupboards. The cups showed the faces of every superhero and movie

character in the universe, depending on what was popular at the time. The Avengers. Batman. Harry Potter. Elsa and Anna. I knew them all because I used to collect the cups when I was younger. But I had saved so many, they weren't special anymore, so now I just recycled the ones we didn't use. Mom said they'd be valuable one day, but I told her I'd probably be dead by then.

Not that I didn't like eating out or fast food, I did. But sometimes, I got tired of stuff that came in plastic containers, boxes or wrapped in paper.

After going through the lunch line, Lily, Ella and I picked out a cool spot in the corner of the cafeteria. From there, we could see everything that happened. Nothing usually did. But hey, it was only the seventh grade.

I dipped one of my chicken tenders in ranch and took a bite. Yummy as the day is long.

"Hey, Trini, wanna know what I heard?"

We looked up. Travis Benson stood by our table. I'd known him since the second grade.

He had brown hair and was built like SpongeBob Square-Pants.

"Yes, what have you heard?"

"This." He let loose a huge burp and ran off laughing with a bunch of his friends.

"See what I mean?" I told Lily and Ella and then stuck the rest of the tender in my mouth.

Lily set down her fork. "I lost my appetite."

This wasn't unusual for Lily. She barely touched her lunch. I mean, she'd literally place a finger on the food and made a face. Come to think of it, I rarely saw Lily eat anything at school. She must have saved her hunger for when she got home.

Ella picked up a carrot stick and pointed it at me. She grinned. “Travis must like you.”

“Because he burped at me?”

“According to my mom, when she was young, it used to mean that if a boy hit you, he liked you. Now that there is a zero tolerance for hitting, I think they just burp.”

“Ella, that’s just stupid,” Lily said.

“Who said that boys were smart?”

I was tired talking about boys, especially the ones who considered burping a gesture of love. These was one thing I did want to talk about.

“Do you guys ever worry about the future?” I asked them. “I mean what’ll happen to us? Sometimes, I worry about that.”

I’d started worrying about it the day before school started. Maybe because Mom and I didn’t go on a fancy vacation because a bad transmission ruined it. If something bad like that could happen, what else was waiting?

“What’d you mean the future?” Lily shoved her tray aside.

“You know, what we’ll be like when we turn into adults. What the world’ll be like. Will I be a loser? Will I go to prom? Will I graduate and go to college? Will I work at a tortilla factory like my mom? Will America turn into a country like in *The Hunger Games* and I’ll be the first kid to be called up?” I also worried about a zombie apocalypse and rising water from the melting polar ice caps but didn’t mention it. I didn’t want to sound too pathetic.

Lily and Ella looked at each other and then at me like I had sprouted another head.

“Trini, maybe you’re traumatized because your dad died when you were young and it messed up your view of the future, like a twisty straw.” For once, Ella sounded as serious as the seventh grade.

"I think she's right," Lily added. "Her dad's a therapist, remember?"

"Ah, a massage therapist."

"That doesn't matter. He helps people."

Suddenly, I felt stupid for bringing up the future. My friends weren't ready for such a serious conversation.

I shrugged. "Maybe all this worry is a pre-teen hormone thing."

"Yeah, that's all it is. Sometimes I'll look in the mirror and wonder if I'll end looking like my mom." Ella touched her face. "It freaks me out."

Her mom was very nice with a mass of frizzy hair.

"See? I'm not crazy."

"Yes, you are, Trini. But we still like you."

"The only thing you should worry about in the future is whether you'll get pimples," Lily said, smirking.

"Okay, pimples are much better than a zombie apocalypse."

"What?"

"Never mind." I smiled, and it felt good.

"And don't worry about what's going to happen. Only worry about what *is* happening,"

Ella added. "That means you have nothing to worry about."

The buzzer sounded, and I hoped they'd stay my friends in whatever future waited for me.



Because school had just started, homework was light, which gave me time to draw. Besides hot lunch, I loved that I was taking a whole class dedicated to art. At home that afternoon, I sketched the woman on the front of one of my mom's

fashion magazines with the drawing pencils I got for my last birthday. I'd been drawing since I was six years old. First, I started out sketching on paper bags, the back of Mom's bills, or anything else I could find because I wanted to do something more than filling in coloring books.

I wanted to make my own pictures.

I copied the cartoon characters on cereal boxes and practiced a lot until my pictures actually resembled Captain Crunch or the Lucky Charms Leprechaun. I'd hang up the drawings on the wall in my room like it was my own art gallery. After that, Mom bought me sketchbooks and pencils from the dollar store. She said I had a gift, a *don*, which she called something that God gave you when you weren't expecting it. Gift or not, I didn't think about the future or anything at all when I drew. I just concentrated on making my drawings the best I could.

Mid-sketch, my stomach growled like one of those souped-up cars in the *Fast and Furious* movies I'd seen on TV. I headed into the kitchen for a snack.

The kitchen was my least favorite room in our apartment. It was dollhouse small. So tiny that Mom and I had to scoot around the table and chairs to get from one end to the other. Not to mention, it was ugly. The pale brown linoleum looked like it would be more at home in a morgue from one of those CSI shows. The cupboards were painted a yellow color that reminded me more of an overcooked egg than bright sunshine. And no matter how many times we cleaned, the kitchen smelled like old grease, which stunk worse than the blown-out tennis shoes hidden at the back of my closet. The grease had come from the previous renters, not Mom.

Vroooooom my gut growled. I needed something to eat.

I probably cooked as much as Mom and I could kind of see why she didn't like to do it. There was really nothing special

about the whole thing. Cooking was scientific and logical. You gathered a bunch of fixings and put them together to make something new. Mix pasta, milk and cheese, add heat, and you ended up with mac and cheese. Warm a tortilla, sprinkle on cheese, and ta-da: a quesadilla.

I might as well have been a crazy scientist, mixing body parts to create that Frankenstein monster. My mac and cheese was only scary when I burned it.

All this made me wonder why there were so many darn cooking shows, none of which Mom ever watched. Those dudes traveled all over the place and came up with dishes too pretty or weird to eat. I guess the celebrity cooks were just trying to make cooking look not so boring so they could sell their recipe books and get their faces on TV.

I opened the fridge door and stuck my head in. A block of yellow cheese. Good start. There were also stacks of packages of tortillas from the López Tortilla Factory where Mom worked. Assorted kinds too. Whole wheat and regular. Green ones made from spinach, which I didn't understand. Small tortillas and the ones nearly the size of a tire. Mom supervised people making the whole-wheat tortillas. Yeah, the healthier ones. She called her paycheck just okay, but the factory gave her good benefits, including a constant supply of tortillas at reduced cost.

I had the makings for a quesadilla but felt like being adventurous. I decided to throw in anything I could find... within reason. I found leftover KFC chicken. In the cupboards, there was a can of black olives. I grinned because I loved them. I could live on a diet of olives and Cheetos. Since I didn't have any Cheetos, I added the leftover KFC chicken instead. I shredded it into a little bowl and sliced up the olives.

Then I kept piling on things like onions and tomatoes between two buttered tortillas—not the healthy ones—and grilled it all on a pan.

On the stove, the cheese oozed out and the tortillas turned golden and slightly crunchy. My invention was turning out pretty good, I had to say.

“I’m going to call you the Everything Quesadilla.” I flipped it over with a spatula.

“That’s ’cause I put in everything I could find.”

I wondered how to get a license to sell it, like I’d seen on an ad with the guy who came up with the Foreman Grill. That made me laugh.

Mom’s car rolled up in front of our apartment, and I glanced out of the window and then up at the clock. She was home early. Really early. She stared at the ground as she walked to the door, probably whacked from her day of supervising workers making lots of tortillas.

“Hi,” she mumbled as she came in and sat down at the kitchen table. She didn’t have any takeout food with her.

Something was wrong.

I knew Mom’s moods. Sad. Mad. Happy. Annoyed. What I saw on her didn’t match any of those. She had no color in her cheeks, like someone had used a huge pink eraser on her face. Her hands trembled.

Mom was afraid.

“I have something important to tell you, baby.”

My stomach twisted up at the sound of her shaky voice. After turning off the heat on the stove, I sat down across from her.

“Remember I said there was a big meeting today at work?”

I nodded.

“The factory is laying me off. Me and a bunch of other people. They said they had to downsize because of the economy.”

“But everybody loves tortillas. Even people who aren’t Mexican like us love tortillas.”

“All I know is that I won’t have a job one week from now.” She looked up at me. Her eyes widened. Tears slipped down her cheeks.

I handed her a napkin. “We’ll be okay, Mom.”

But I was scared too. We weren’t rich, but always had enough money to pay the rent, buy takeout and still have fun together, even if it meant not going on fancy vacations.

“I’ve never been laid off before. It doesn’t feel so good.” Mom wiped her face with the napkin.

“You’ll find a new job soon.” I handed her another napkin. “Today, my social studies teacher said the economy’s getting better.” I smiled, hoping that pep talk would help.

“Well, *he’s* got a job.” Her eyes had turned as red as melted Twizzlers from crying.

“Don’t worry. Everything’ll work out.”

I’d heard that line on a TV show once. I wanted to be optimistic and threw her comforting nods, but my stomach hadn’t untwisted. Here was a future I hadn’t seen coming or even thought to worry about. A zombie apocalypse seemed like downright happy times compared to this. In a flash, I pictured me and Mom standing on a busy street corner with our hands out and holding a cardboard sign saying:

ANYTHING WILL HELP
NO MORE TORTILLA WORK

We'd seen guys like that standing on corners with similar signs, but theirs didn't mention anything about tortillas. I shook my head to get rid of the image.

Mom gave a limp smile and sighed, "Oh man."

"What?"

"I forgot to bring us dinner."

"That's okay. I made my new invention, the Everything Quesadilla."

"Everything?"

"Yeah, everything I could find in the kitchen."

I cut the quesadilla in fourths and put them on plates for us. As I did, Mom's hands clenched together tight on top of the table. Her knuckles resembled small pale eggs.

From one of the many fast-food condiment packets we kept in a bowl in the fridge, I found salsa and sour cream and I placed them in small bowls to put on the table. Though my quesadillas were delicious, bad news tended to make all food tasteless. We chewed slowly and didn't talk much. A giant's hairy hand squeezed my heart because Mom looked miserable. I hated to see her like that.

Be right about the economy, Mr. Social Studies teacher, be right.

"These are good." One side of Mom's mouth went up in a kind of a smile, but she didn't sound cheery.

I guess there were some things in the world that not even cheese and tortillas could fix.

Damn economy. Damn future. Damn tortillas.