

TWO

Wildwood

1982–1985

It's never the changes we want that change everything.

This is how it all starts: with your mother calling you into the bathroom. You will remember what you were doing at that precise moment for the rest of your life: You were reading Watership Down and the rabbits and their does were making their dash for the boat and you didn't want to stop reading, the book has to go back to your brother tomorrow, but then she called you again, louder, her I'm-not-fucking-around voice, and you mumbled irritably, Sí, señora.

She was standing in front of the medicine cabinet mirror, naked from the waist up, her bra slung about her waist like a torn sail, the scar on her back as vast and inconsolable as a sea. You want to return to your book, to pretend you didn't hear her, but it is too late. Her eyes meet yours, the same big smoky eyes you will have in the future. Ven acá, she commanded. She is frowning at something on one of her breasts. Your mother's breasts are immensities. One of the wonders of the world. The only ones you've seen that are bigger are in nudie magazines or on really fat ladies. They're 35 triple-Ds and the aureoles are as big as saucers and black as pitch and at their edges are

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fierce hairs that sometimes she plucked and sometimes she didn't. These breasts have always embarrassed you and when you walk in public with her you are always conscious of them. After her face and her hair, her chest is what she is most proud of. Your father could never get enough of them, she always brags. But given the fact that he ran off on her after their third year of marriage, it seemed in the end that he could.

You dread conversations with your mother. Those one-sided dressing-downs. You figured that she has called you in to give you another earful about your diet. Your mom's convinced that if you eat more plátanos you will suddenly acquire her same extraordinary train-wrecking secondary sex characteristics. Even at that age you were nothing if not your mother's daughter. You were twelve years old and already as tall as she was, a long slender-necked ibis of a girl. You had her green eyes (clearer, though) and her straight hair which makes you look more Hindu than Dominican and a behind that the boys haven't been able to stop talking about since the fifth grade and whose appeal you do not yet understand. You have her complexion too, which means you are dark. But for all your similarities, the tides of inheritance have yet to reach your chest. You have only the slightest hint of breast; from most angles you're flat as a board and you're thinking she's going to order you to stop wearing bras again because they're suffocating your potential breasts, discouraging them from popping out of you. You're ready to argue with her to the death because you're as possessive of your bras as you are of the pads you now buy yourself.

But no, she doesn't say a word about eating more plátanos. Instead, she takes your right hand and guides you. Your mom is rough in all things but this time she is gentle. You did not think her capable of it.

Do you feel that? she asks in her too-familiar raspy voice.

At first all you feel is the heat of her and the density of the tissue, like a bread that never stopped rising. She kneads your fingers into her. You're as close as you've ever been and your breathing is what you hear.

Don't you feel that?

She turns toward you. Coño, muchacha, stop looking at me and feel.

So you close your eyes and your fingers are pushing down and you're thinking of Helen Keller and how when you were little you wanted to be her except more nun-ish and then suddenly without warning you do feel something. A knot just beneath her skin, tight and secretive as a plot. And at that moment, for reasons you will never quite understand, you are overcome by the feeling, the premonition, that something in your life is about to change. You become light-headed and you can feel a throbbing in your blood, a beat, a rhythm, a drum. Bright lights zoom through you like photon torpedoes, like comets. You don't know how or why you know this thing but that you know it cannot be doubted. It is exhilarating. For as long as you've been alive you've had bruja ways; even your mother will begrudge you that much. Hija de Liborio she called you after you picked your tía's winning numbers for her and you assumed Liborio was a relative. That was before Santo Domingo, before you knew about the Great Power of God.

I feel it, you say, too loudly. Lo siento.

And like that, everything changes. Before the winter is out the doctors remove that breast you were kneading, along with the axillary lymph node. Because of the operations she will have trouble lifting her arm over her head for the rest of her life. Her hair begins

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to fall out, and one day she pulls it all out herself and puts it inside a plastic bag. You change too. Not right away, but it happens. And it's in that bathroom where it all begins. Where you begin.

A punk chick. That's what I became. A Siouxsie and the Banshees-loving punk chick. The puertorican kids on the block couldn't stop laughing when they saw my hair, they called me Blacula, and the morenos, they didn't know what to say: they just called me devil-bitch. Yo, devil-bitch, yo, *yo!* My tía Rubelka thought it was some kind of mental illness. Hija, she said while frying pastelitos, maybe you need *help*. But my mother was the worst. It's the last straw, she screamed. The. Last. Straw. But it always was with her. Mornings when I came downstairs she'd be in the kitchen making her coffee in la greca and listening to Radio WADO and when she saw me and my hair she'd get mad all over again, as if during the night she'd forgotten who I was. My mother was one of the tallest women in Paterson, and her anger was just as tall. It pincered you in its long arms, and if you showed any weakness you were finished. Que muchacha tan fea, she said in disgust, splashing the rest of her coffee in the sink. Fea's become my new name. Nothing new, really. She's been saying stuff like that all our lives. My mother would never win any awards, believe me. You could call her an absentee parent: if she wasn't at work she was sleeping, and when she was around it seemed all she did was scream and hit. As kids, me and Oscar were more scared of our mother than we were of the dark or el cuco. She would hit us anywhere, in front of anyone, always free with the chanclas and the correa,