

'A perfect balancing act with terror on one side
and love on the other... It's marvellous'

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'From the opening page your heart will be in your mouth...
It will change your view of the world'

KIRSTY WARK

'Made me understand better why someone would give
up the home they know and love to survive'

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'Electric, important, heartbreaking and joyous'

KATE HAMER



'A roaring human triumph'

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'A dazzling accomplishment'

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'Harrowing and necessary. As pacey as a
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'Not simply the great American novel,
it's the great novel of *Las Américas*'

SANDRA CISNEROS



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CHAPTER ONE

One of the very first bullets comes in through the open window above the toilet where Luca is standing. He doesn't immediately understand that it's a bullet at all, and it's only luck that it doesn't strike him between the eyes. Luca hardly registers the mild noise it makes as it flies past and lodges into the tiled wall behind him. But the wash of bullets that follows is loud, booming, and thudding, *clack-clacking* with helicopter speed. There is a raft of screams, too, but that noise is short-lived, soon exterminated by the gunfire. Before Luca can zip his pants, lower the lid, climb up to look out, before he has time to verify the source of that terrible clamor, the bathroom door swings open and Mami is there.

'Mijo, ven,' she says, so quietly that Luca doesn't hear her.

Her hands are not gentle; she propels him toward the shower. He trips on the raised tile step and falls forward onto his hands. Mami lands on top of him and his teeth pierce his lip in the tumble. He tastes blood. One dark droplet makes a tiny circle of red against the bright green shower tile. Mami shoves Luca into the corner. There's no door on this shower, no curtain. It's only a

corner of his *abuela's* bathroom, with a third tiled wall built to suggest a stall. This wall is around five and a half feet high and three feet long – just large enough, with some luck, to shield Luca and his mother from sight. Luca's back is wedged, his small shoulders touching both walls. His knees are drawn up to his chin, and Mami is clinched around him like a tortoise's shell. The door of the bathroom remains open, which worries Luca, though he can't see it beyond the shield of his mother's body, behind the half barricade of his *abuela's* shower wall. He'd like to wriggle out and tip that door lightly with his finger. He'd like to swing it shut. He doesn't know that his mother left it open on purpose. That a closed door only invites closer scrutiny.

The clatter of gunfire outside continues, joined by an odor of charcoal and burning meat. Papi is grilling carne asada out there and Luca's favorite chicken drumsticks. He likes them only a tiny bit blackened, the crispy tang of the skins. His mother pulls her head up long enough to look him in the eye. She puts her hands on both sides of his face and tries to cover his ears. Outside, the gunfire slows. It ceases and then returns in short bursts, mirroring, Luca thinks, the sporadic and wild rhythm of his heart. In between the racket, Luca can still hear the radio, a woman's voice announcing *¡La Mejor 100.1 FM Acapulco!* followed by Banda MS singing about how happy they are to be in love. Someone shoots the radio, and then there's laughter. Men's voices. Two or three, Luca can't tell. Hard footsteps on Abuela's patio.

'Is he here?' One of the voices is just outside the window.

'Here.'

'What about the kid?'

'Mira, there's a boy here. This him?'

Luca's cousin Adrián. He's wearing cleats and his Hernández jersey. Adrián can juggle a *balón de fútbol* on his knees forty-seven times without dropping it.

‘I don’t know. Looks the right age. Take a picture.’

‘Hey, chicken!’ another voice says. ‘Man, this looks good. You want some chicken?’

Luca’s head is beneath his *mami*’s chin, her body knotted tightly around him.

‘Forget the chicken, *pendejo*. Check the house.’

Luca’s *mami* rocks in her squatting position, pushing Luca even harder into the tiled wall. She squeezes against him, and together they hear the squeak and bang of the back door. Footsteps in the kitchen. The intermittent rattle of bullets in the house. Mami turns her head and notices, vivid against the tile floor, the lone spot of Luca’s blood, illuminated by the slant of light from the window. Luca feels her breath snag in her chest. The house is quiet now. The hallway that ends at the door of this bathroom is carpeted. Mami tugs her shirtsleeve over her hand, and Luca watches in horror as she leans away from him, toward that telltale splatter of blood. She runs her sleeve over it, leaving behind only a faint smear, and then pitches back to him just as the man in the hallway uses the butt of his AK-47 to nudge the door the rest of the way open.

There must be three of them because Luca can still hear two voices in the yard. On the other side of the shower wall, the third man unzips his pants and empties his bladder into Abuela’s toilet. Luca does not breathe. Mami does not breathe. Their eyes are closed, their bodies motionless, even their adrenaline is suspended within the calcified will of their stillness. The man hiccups, flushes, washes his hands. He dries them on Abuela’s good yellow towel, the one she puts out only for parties.

They don’t move after the man leaves. Even after they hear the squeak and bang, once more, of the kitchen door. They stay there, fixed in their tight knot of arms and legs and knees and chins and clenched eyelids and locked fingers, even after they hear the man

join his compatriots outside, after they hear him announce that the house is clear and he's going to eat some chicken now, because there's no excuse for letting good barbecue go to waste, not when there are children starving in Africa. The man is still close enough outside the window that Luca can hear the moist, rubbery smacking sounds his mouth makes with the chicken. Luca concentrates on breathing, in and out, without sound. He tells himself that this is just a bad dream, a terrible dream, but one he's had many times before. He always awakens, heart pounding, and finds himself flooded with relief. *It was just a dream.* Because these are the modern bogeymen of urban Mexico. Because even parents who take care not to discuss the violence in front of them, to change the radio station when there's news of another shooting, to conceal the worst of their own fears, cannot prevent their children from talking to other children. On the swings, at the *fútbol* field, in the boys' bathroom at school, the gruesome stories gather and swell. These kids, rich, poor, middle-class, have all seen bodies in the streets. Casual murder. And they know from talking to one another that there's a hierarchy of danger, that some families are at greater risk than others. So although Luca never saw the least scrap of evidence of that risk from his parents, even though they demonstrated their courage impeccably before their son, he knew – he knew this day would come. But that truth does nothing to soften its arrival. It's a long, long while before Luca's mother removes the clamp of her hand from the back of his neck, before she leans back far enough for him to notice that the angle of light falling through the bathroom window has changed.

There's a blessing in the moments after terror and before confirmation. When at last he moves his body, Luca experiences a brief, lurching exhilaration at the very fact of his being alive. For a moment he enjoys the ragged passage of breath through his chest. He places his palms flat to feel the cool press of tiles beneath his

skin. Mami collapses against the wall across from him and works her jaw in a way that reveals the dimple in her left cheek. It's weird to see her good church shoes in the shower. Luca touches the cut on his lip. The blood has dried there, but he scratches it with his teeth, and it opens again. He understands that, were this a dream, he would not taste blood.

At length, Mami stands. 'Stay here,' she instructs him in a whisper. 'Don't move until I come back for you. Don't make a sound, you understand?'

Luca lunges for her hand. 'Mami, don't go.'

'*Mijo*, I will be right back, okay? You stay here.' Mami pries Luca's fingers from her hand. 'Don't move,' she says again. 'Good boy.'

Luca finds it easy to obey his mother's directive, not so much because he's an obedient child, but because he doesn't want to see. His whole family out there, in Abuela's backyard. Today is Saturday, April 7, his cousin Yénifer's *quinceañera*, her fifteenth birthday party. She's wearing a long white dress. Her father and mother are there, Tío Alex and Tía Yemi, and Yénifer's younger brother, Adrián, who, because he already turned nine, likes to say he's a year older than Luca, even though they're really only four months apart.

Before Luca had to pee, he and Adrián had been kicking the *balón* around with their other *primos*. The mothers had been sitting around the table at the patio, their iced *palomas* sweating on their napkins. The last time they were all together at Abuela's house, Yénifer had accidentally walked in on Luca in the bathroom, and Luca was so mortified that today he made Mami come with him and stand guard outside the door. Abuela didn't like it; she told Mami she was coddling him, that a boy his age should be able to go to the bathroom by himself, but Luca is an only child, so he gets away with things other kids don't.

In any case, Luca is alone in the bathroom now, and he tries

not to think it, but the thought swarms up unbidden: those irritable words Mami and Abuela exchanged were perhaps the very last ones between them, ever. Luca had approached the table wriggling, whispered into Mami's ear, and Abuela, seeing this, had shaken her head, wagged an admonishing finger at them both, passed her remarks. She had a way of smiling when she criticized. But Mami was always on Luca's side. She rolled her eyes and pushed her chair back from the table anyway, ignoring her mother's disapproval. When was that – ten minutes ago? Two hours? Luca feels unmoored from the boundaries of time that have always existed.

Outside the window he hears Mami's tentative footsteps, the soft scuff of her shoe through the remnants of something broken. A solitary gasp, too windy to be called a sob. Then a quickening of sound as she crosses the patio with purpose, depresses the keys on her phone. When she speaks, her voice has a stretched quality that Luca has never heard before, high and tight in the back of her throat.

'Send help.'