

SOL PAINTING, INC.

I reach inside the window of Papi's van and yank on the handle to open the passenger door. It's my turn to ride in front. Roli sat there last time.

"You think they'll need a painter soon?" Papi asks as I slide in next to him.

I follow his gaze to the second floor of building twenty-two. Men dressed like astronauts are tossing furniture into tall canisters marked BIOHAZARD. Doña Rosa, one of the old ladies who lived over there, died in her living room last week. Her TV was on, so no one knew anything was wrong for two whole days. That means we were all sleeping near a corpse. A shiver runs through me every time I think about Doña Rosa's ghost hovering in the halls, insulted that no one noticed she was dead.

"If they do, I'm out," I say. For starters, Doña Rosa was mean enough when she was alive. Who in their right mind wants to risk meeting her now that she's a spirit nursing a **grudge**? "I'm not going in there."

"Why not?"

"She's scared of putrefaction." Roli climbs into the back of the van and parks himself on one of Papi's paint buckets. My brother likes to show off his big science words, almost as much as he likes showing off his biceps, especially in front of Papi, who wants him to be a doctor. "That means human rot."

"I know what it means," I lie. "But that's not the reason."

"Are you afraid of ghosts?" Roli makes his best zombie face and holds up his hands like claws.

"Ooooooooooh..."

"Have some respect for *los muertos*, Rolando," Papi says, trying not to laugh. He crosses himself and starts to back out of the space.

I give Roli a stony look. He's right, but I know better than to let him know I'm scared. So I turn back to Papi.

"I'm too busy, that's all. School starts next week, and I have to finish my summer reading." I root inside the bakery bag for my *pan Cubano*. I take a deep breath of the warm bread that's dripping in butter and grilled flat the way Roli and I like it. I tear off a chunk and sink my teeth in. A full mouth will keep me from lying any more than necessary.

Papi smiles at me and pulls the bill of my painter's cap down over my eyes. "I can't argue with making a good start at your new school, so I'll let you off this time. But don't get used to it. You wanted to be my number one **apprentice**, remember?"

"Mmmm," I say, nodding.

Papi and I have a long-term business plan. I'm going to take over his company one day and turn it into an empire. Home Depot will eat my dust. I've already designed my business cards. They've got a sun rising and fancy gold letters: MERCI SUAREZ, CEO, SOL PAINTING, INC.

Roli makes a face and snatches the bag from me. He knows I haven't cracked open a single book on my summer reading list, but at least he doesn't say so. In fact, I think he felt bad for me, because he loaned me his good earbuds and CD player. Audiobooks to the rescue. He did the calculations while we were checking them out of the library. "You'll be done in a mere thirty-four hours."

Roli starts telling Papi about the process of human decomposition after death and proper biohazard cleanups, so I tune him out. This is definitely the dark side of having a science geek for a brother. Not that it's ever been easy. Even when he was younger, Roli liked to dissect salamanders, dead roaches, and other creepy things. He always wanted to play Operation, too—which would have been fun except that he changed the rules. You had to name the body parts correctly. "No, not the Adam's apple," he'd say as I tweezed out a piece without making the buzzer sound. "It's the *laryngeal prominence*. Say it or it doesn't count." Geez, you'd think he would have pity on somebody who was five. But no, Roli never cut me a break.

Anyway, these days Roli likes crime shows almost as much as he likes science. He says he's going to be a medical examiner. Poking around dead bodies all day? No thank you.

The air conditioner in Papi's truck is shot, so I lean my head out the window. Even with the windows open, I'm sweating in my long overalls. I've lived in West Palm Beach my whole life, but even I can't stand it here in August. It's 7 a.m. and we're already at 85 degrees, if the frog thermometer at my bedroom window is right.

Papi looked over at me and grabs my arm. "¡Ay! Don't lean on the door. The latch is loose. Your mother will kill me if you fall."

I scoot over.

"They sent our school schedules," Roli says, licking his greasy fingers. "Mine is sweet. I've got Microbiology first thing in the morning."

Oh, good. A whole year of listening to him talk about germs. I just survived his year in chemistry. For two solid semesters he asked for things by their chemical formula, just to annoy me. “I’d like a glass of H-two-O, please. Pass the sodium chloride for my french fries. This banana bread could use more sucrose.”

I close my eyes, listening. Blah-blah, science club, blah-blah, college application.

I wonder what it’s going to be like for *me* this year. Roli and I will both be at Seaward Pines, although I’ll be in the lower school with all the other seventh-grade “amoebas”⁴ (his word). Roli is five years older than I am—a senior. The last time we were in the same school, I was in kindergarten and he was one of the bossy safety patrols with a plastic badge. After that, he became a Sunshine Scholar at fancy Seaward Pines School, where everybody thinks he’s a genius.

Mami says I’m going to love Seaward Pines, but I don’t know. I’m not much for fancy, and everything about that place is shiny and stiff. Even the red blazers I’ll have to wear look hot and silly, if you ask me. Plus, no one from our neighborhood goes there, except Roli, so I’ll have to make new friends. Stuff like that doesn’t bother Roli. In fact, he’s never brought home a friend in all the years he’s gone there. I asked him about it once, but he told me to close my oral **cavity**.

I think what Mami really means is that she’s going to love it. Last year was tough on her. My highest grade was a C, as in “*Caramba, niña,*”⁵ what are you doing? You’re shaming us!” Well, it was frustrating for me, too. To think, all my years of perfect attendance and neat penmanship did absolutely nothing to butter up my teachers at report-card time. It’s what we call a poor return on investment in the business world. Mami finally said, “*¡Hasta aquí!*”⁶ and called Papi to “discuss my future,” so I knew I was dead meat. I fought it as best I could, but they decided that I needed “a more structured learning environment,” aka Seaward Pines.

“Why does it matter if I get an A in science or English?” I cried to Mami. “I’m going to take over Papi’s business anyway!”

She **gaped** at me like a fish out of water. “Business? Is that what you’re calling a dented van and the few guys who show up when they feel like it? *A business?*”

Mami: She has no vision. No wonder she and Papi don’t get along.

Anyway, with Roli’s help, I managed to **broker** a deal. I agreed not to run away. I’d go to Seaward Pines but *only* if I could **apprentice** with Papi — and get paid. So far, they’re living up to the agreement. I’m twelve, so for now, I mostly do the trim, and I’m not allowed to go on all the jobs on

account of child labor laws and all that bull. I've been on two sites so far: Ramon's Auto Parts (not bad since it was air-conditioned) and the marina, which left me smelling like bait for days.

"So I have a surprise today," Papi says.

I study him. This could be bad. Among my parents' past surprises: "We've decided to get divorced."

"You're taking us to the science museum instead of to a job site?" Roli says hopefully. I roll my eyes. What an attitude. When I'm in charge, he'll be the first one to go.

"No, but you're close." Papi sticks his arm out to make a turn signal and heads over the bridge toward Palm Beach. "It's about the job."

I sit up and look outside, realizing he hasn't told us where we're working today. "Where's the site?" I ask.

The whole sky reflects in Papi's paint-speckled shades as he looks over and smiles. "Guess."

I look around for a clue. The Intracoastal⁷ twinkles beneath us as we cross the bridge into Palm Beach. The houses on this side of the canal are large, and they have bougainvillea vines⁸ trailing from their balconies. Royal palms line the street that ends at the ocean. Papi makes one turn after another on the quiet side streets where fancy cars are parked in the driveways and nannies push strollers in the shade.

Maybe we'll be painting one of the big mansions? I could run into one of the rich tycoons⁹ who live here and run a few business ideas past him....

Roli crowds into the front seat to look at where we are, too. "Where *are* we going?"

"Move back," I say. He's breathing in my ear, and he hasn't brushed his teeth.

"No guess yet?" Papi asks.

Then the stone archway of Seaward Pines School appears up ahead. We drive past the perfectly **manicured** front lawn, startling a flock of ibises¹⁰ as we go. A team of men in wide-brimmed hats is running weed whackers and mowers.

"What are we doing here?" I ask.

Papi **maneuvers** us around back to the service entrance near the fields and parks in a spot reserved for maintenance crews. When he shuts off the engine, the van shudders to silence.

"I did a trade for your tuition," he says, turning to us. "We paint the gym and a few classrooms, and it won't cost me *un centavo*¹¹ to have Merci attend this semester! ¿*Qué te parece?*"¹² Your old man is always thinking!" He taps his temple and grins.

Roli glances at me uneasily and then shrinks into his seat again. "You should have told us," he mumbles. Something in his voice sounds tight, faraway.

But Papi doesn't hear him over the *squuuuuueeeaaak* of the van door.

"Let's go, Team Suarez," he says.

I hop out and start gathering the drop cloths and extenders from the back. I already know where the gym is; we came here for Orientation Night last spring. If I remember, the place is humongous. We could be here for days. Maybe I'll ask for a raise.

"Are you going to help or what?" I ask Roli. "These paint cans are heavy, you know."

He doesn't answer.

Finally, Papi looks up. He stares at Roli for a second before climbing in to help me with the cans. Papi can carry several cans in each hand. He's the strongest dad I know. Wiping the sweat from his forehead, he points across the grass. "Follow those signs to the main office," he says. "Tell them we're here."

I start down the path, dodging the sprinklers and hopping over the bricks with people's names chiseled into them.

"*Vamos,*"¹³ Roli," I hear Papi say.

Mrs. McDaniels, head secretary, wears high heels and clear nail polish. Everything on her desk is dangerously neat, so I can see she's the prickly type. She might even be an **enforcer**, so I'll have to keep my eye on her this year. Uniform length, the shine in your shoes, standard-issue headbands. You name it, she'll regulate¹⁴ it. I can feel her eyes on my head, so I pull off my cap. (No hats in school, according to the sign.) Naturally, my thick hair goes *boing*.

"Sol Painting at your service," I say, sticking out my hand. "I'm Merci." I put one of Papi's business cards on the counter.

She smiles cautiously and studies the card. "Aren't you a little young to be working?"

“The rest of the crew is outside, ma’am.” It pays to be professional, even with annoying customers.
“We’re ready to start on the gym.”

The phone rings.

I glance around uncomfortably as she explains that the head of school is at a meeting. The leather furniture makes it feel like a doctor’s office in here. There are oil pastel portraits behind acrylic¹⁵ cases, and photographs of a group of students at the Great Wall of China.

Mrs. McDaniels hangs up and closes one of the enormous files sitting on her desk. I try to catch the name on the tab as she looks for the master keys, but it’s too far away. My folder could be in this stack, but I don’t say so. You never know what’s in your permanent record. *Height: four eleven. Prone to daydreaming and lost assignments.*

She comes to the counter and looks down at me carefully. Finally, she slides a binder at me.

“Sign in,” she says. “The time is exactly seven-forty-three.”

Roli and Papi are waiting in the shade outside the gym when we arrive a few minutes later. The paint supplies are piled at their feet.

“Good morning,” Mrs. McDaniels says to Papi as she walks past him. Maybe she’s not so observant after all. Roli is standing right there. You’d think she’d say hello to one of their A students, but maybe she doesn’t recognize him in overalls.

She throws open the door for us and switches on the overhead lights. “Be sure to mark the work area. We don’t want any of the students tripping on a drop cloth and having an accident.” I can practically see the thought bubble over her head. *Paperwork.*

She turns on her heels and clicks away up the path.

“Who’s here?” I ask after she’s gone. It’s not like Seaward Pines had summer school. There’s no such thing as failing here. Roli told me you’re just “disappeared” back to your home school. I picture kids vaporizing, leaving behind their red blazers in heaps.

Roli shifts on his feet and points across the fields. Beefy football players are doing drills. Nearby, the girls’ soccer team is practicing their passes. If you listen hard, you can hear the coaches’ whistles, the grunts as the teams knuckle down.

I inch up the path a bit. I love soccer—and I’m good. Papi taught me most of my moves. He plays on a Sunday *fútbol* league at the park when his knees aren’t bad—and thanks to the dads on the team,

I know how to dribble and stall the ball on my ankles like a pro. Every once in a while, if they're short, they let me play keeper. I'm almost never stuck on the sidelines blowing a stupid *vuvuzela*.¹⁶

Maybe we can sit in the shade and watch for a while to see if they're any good? All employees are entitled to breaks, aren't they? But when I turn to ask Roli, he's gone.

"Get to work," Papi says. He's already inside, spreading the drop cloths.

Seaward's school colors are red and gray, so all the doors and baseboards are the searing¹⁷ color of a fire engine. Every time I shift my eyes to the floor, I see globs of blue and green floating in front of me, like levitating¹⁸ beach balls.

"Hey! I'm having those afterimages," I say to Roli. He's the one who explained to me how the cone cells in your eyes work. It's kind of cool to be blind for a few minutes.

"Hurry up, Merci. I want to get out of here." He dips his roller again and turns back to the wall. His muscles strain against his T-shirt as he rolls faster and faster. "It shouldn't take forever to paint a stupid door."

"It does if you're doing a good job," I say.

I stand up and look over at Roli. What a disaster. When Papi sees this, he's dead. Papi says a good painter can work without splatters or drips. Roli has sloshed paint all over the place, and there are streaks and drips on the walls where there shouldn't be any. No quality control, that's the trouble. I'll have to discuss this with Papi as we determine Roli's future with us.

"You guys ready to take a break?" Papi calls. He's across the gym, patching a hole in the drywall.

"We can take a ride to Burgers and Shakes."

We usually pack our lunch and dine "alfresco," as Papi calls it, which just means we picnic under a tree. It's too hot today, though, and a chocolate shake sounds like heaven.

I'm about to put down my brush when the door I've been painting swings wide open. Light floods inside and makes me squint. A group of upper-school girls is clustered outside. Their sweaty faces are almost as red as the paint. Grass clippings cling to their shin guards.

They're jostling and shouting.

"It's boiling!"

"Go in already!"

“Stop shoving!”

“I have to pee!”

A tall girl stands in the lead. She’s probably the team captain, if that C on her jersey means anything. Plus, she looks the part, with muscular legs and hair piled high on her head like a lopsided doughnut. But before I can stop her, she reaches her arms wide and grabs the wet doorframe as if she’s trying to keep her flock from moving forward.

She pulls her hands back when she realizes what she’s done.

“Damn!” She stares at her palms, then gives me an ugly look, like it’s my fault.

One of the girls next to her giggles. “Oops.” I rub my eyes with my forearm, trying to see them better around the big green globs that still linger before my eyes. I’m positive I stuck a sign in the grass outside, just like Papi said. WET PAINT. USE OTHER DOOR. But even if they missed it, couldn’t they see that the surface is shiny. Can’t they smell the fumes or see me standing here with a paintbrush? Hello?

I’m furious, but my tongue goes thick in my mouth. Maybe it’s the girl’s bright eyes on me or maybe it’s that they’re all older. You have to be in high school to play on the varsity team, right? Or maybe it’s really because Roli doesn’t turn and come to help me. He keeps his back to them and keeps painting.

Thank goodness for Papi. He wipes his hands and starts walking toward them from across the gym. He has a quick temper, so I’m expecting him to make a fuss the way he does at Roli and me when we track in dirt or argue too much. Or else he might just freeze them with his look, which is almost as bad. Papi’s a big guy, and his eyes can go narrow and dark when he’s mad.

But before Papi can reach them, the girls start shoving again, trying to get out of the heat. They don’t seem to care that he’s holding up his hand to wave them off. It’s like they don’t see him at all.

“Move!”

“Let us in, Catie!”

And just like that, they burst through, their hands and bodies sliding over the wet door as I stand there, rooted to the spot. They barrel through, shrieking with laughter as they get smeared. One or two make handprints on each other’s backs. And then somebody wipes herself clean on one of the

walls Roli finished a while ago. I stare, breathless, at the long streak of red fingers along the length of it.

They're dead—and I can't wait to see it happen. Papi is going to yell at them for ruining my work. Any second, his voice will boom across the gym. The walls will rattle. When Papi loses his temper, it feels as if you're trapped inside a huge storm cloud.

But as the seconds tick by, absolutely nothing happens. I finally turn to see that Papi has stopped in his tracks, his hands in his pockets as he watches girls race past. We are ghosts as they go by—unseen. Finally, the tall girl looks at us from the top of the steps leading to the locker room.

"*Perdón*," she calls out in a heavy American accent before she takes the steps, two at a time. There's laughter, hoots. Then another voice calls out from somewhere, "Excuse-oh *moi!*"

A metal door slams behind them.

I feel like I've been slapped. An ugly coldness creeps up from my stomach as we stand there in silence. *Perdón? Excuse-oh moi? Do they think we don't speak English? And even if we didn't, would that make their silly apology any better?*

But it's Papi's stillness that makes me feel worse. *Why didn't he say anything? He's Papi. He's the boss, an adult, the guy in charge. How could he let this happen?*

It's only when a man with sweat stains around his armpits comes jogging to the door that the silence is broken. It's Mr. Falco, the guidance counselor. He spoke last year at one of the parent college nights I was dragged to. Seaward Pines School was a special place, he said that night. A school with a history of turning out fine young men and women.

He steps carefully through the door, looks at the mess, and shakes his head.

"I told them to use the side entrance," he said, sighing.

"They should come clean it up," I snap.

Papi shoots me a warning look. "Quiet, *Merci*." His eyes slice through me in a way I'm not expecting. But why? I'm not the one who made this mess.

"But, Papi—"

"*Sío*—"¹⁹ he hisses.

When I drop my stare down at my shoes, he turns back to Mr. Falco and pastes on a smile. "It's no problem, sir. They're children, and accidents happen. We'll clean it up."

With those words, my father shrinks before my very eyes. My arms hurt, and I'm thirsty and hot. I feel ugly. My cheeks burn as I stand there, humiliated for all of us.

I will not clean this up, I tell myself. I slide my gaze to Roli. His jaw twitches as he rolls on a new coat of paint, but he won't look at me.

"Thank you," Mr. Falco says. He walks away and closes the glass door of the athletics office at the far end of the gym.

It doesn't take that long to touch up the walls or to repaint the door, but I'm furious just the same. I don't speak to Papi for the rest of the day, not even when he buys me an extra large chocolate shake. That afternoon, I let Roli sit in front and brood all the way home as I pick the dried red paint from under my nails. Every bump makes the springs in the seats squeak as we make one turn after another and head over the bridge again toward home. A million thoughts bang around inside my head, but I can't seem to turn them into a single question. All I feel is a rotting feeling inside. It's like I'm putrefying, just like Doña Rosa.

Finally, Emerald Isle Condominiums comes into view.

"I'll see if one of the guys from the team can help me finish up tomorrow," Papi says as Roli and I climb out. He doesn't look at me as he says it, which makes me feel satisfied. At least he knows I'm not speaking to him. He taps his horn before he pulls away, and Roli turns. "Make sure Merci works on her reading." Then he's off.

"I don't need your help," I hiss at Roli as the van disappears around the corner.

"Suit yourself," he says.

I don't follow Roli upstairs. Instead, I walk toward the pool. The old ladies who usually bob in the water aren't here. They might have been scared away by the heat, or maybe they're praying for Doña Rosa at the funeral parlor in Lake Worth. I let myself in the gate and sit at the pool's edge with my legs dangling in the water. Roli and I used to do handstands in here. We used to dive for pool sticks. But now all I see is an ugly pool. Leaves are floating on the surface, and I'm pretty sure there's a dead frog in the deep end. The deck chairs are lopsided, and the scummy water is warm enough to poach you. I think of the pretty office at Seaward Pines, the fountain with cherubs²⁰ spitting water, and feel mad all over again.

I don't know how long I sit there, but finally, someone opens the gate behind me. "Mami says to come up." Roli has changed into shorts, and he's barefoot. "She wants you to eat."

"I'm not hungry." I go back to watching lizards dart around the pool deck.

Roli stays quiet for a few seconds. Then he walks over to where I'm sitting and curls his toes over the edge.

"Hunger strike, huh?" he says. "How long you think you'll hold out?"

I give him my darkest look.

Roli considers the water as a beetle paddles near our legs. He walks to the supply closet at the shallow end of the pool and finds the net. I watch him circle the perimeter, cleaning away the mess. He even scoops up the frog and hurls it like a lacrosse ball into the bushes. When he's done, he walks back to me. I can feel a fight between us.

"Merci...", he begins.

But I strike first, hard and fast. "Seaward Pines is a dumb school," I blurt. "I'll hate it. And I hate Papi, too."

Roli sighs. He's quiet for a long while, which makes me uncomfortable. My brother has always been strangely good at reading my mind. Can't he see how awful it felt to be unimportant, to watch Papi stand there like a chump?

"What did you want Papi to do, Merci? Pitch a fit and blow your free ride?"

Without warning, tears spring to my eyes. He pretends not to notice. Instead, he cups my scalp with his enormous hand and gives a squeeze. "Try to let this idea into your thick cranium. Papi *chose* to be invisible today so that you won't ever have to be."

I look up at him guiltily.

"That's harder to do than shooting off your mouth, Merci."

Without warning, he yanks off his shirt. He has Papi's same shape, even if he's a little skinnier. There are still tiny dots of paint in his hair, a smear at his elbow.

He cannonballs into the pool and makes a spray arc that soaks me to my underwear. For a second, I'm stunned. I want to shout at him, stay enemies, but instead, I take a deep breath and let the water offer what relief it will.

"Race?" He bobs back up to the surface, grinning. "Come on. Show me what you're made of."

I hesitate, my shame holding me still. But in the end, I stand up and shimmy out of my overalls until I'm just in a T-shirt and panties. I jump, arms wide, eyes open. Then I paddle after him, reaching and gasping into the deep end like mad.

Definitions

1. "the dead" in English
2. "Cuban bread" in English
3. "Hey!" in English
4. An "amoeba" is a single-celled organism that often lives in water or soil.
5. "Wow, girl" in English
6. "That's it!" or "Up to this point!" in English
7. refers to the Intracoastal Waterway, which runs from Boston, MA, around the tip of Florida, and to the Gulf of Mexico
8. a flowering vine that is used on fences or balconies
9. **Tycoon** (*noun*) : a wealthy and powerful person who has been successful in business
10. a large bird with long legs and a long neck and a long, curved beak that wades in shallow waters
11. "one penny" or "one cent" in English
12. "What do you think?" in English
13. "Come on!" in English
14. **Regulate** (*verb*) : to control or supervise with rules
15. **Acrylic** (*adjective*) : a type of plastic
16. A "vuvuzela" is a plastic horn instrument.
17. **Searing** (*adjective*) : extremely hot or intense
18. **Levitate** (*verb*) : to rise and float
19. "shhh" or "be quiet" in English
20. winged angels