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It’s hard to be from somewhere else. Muy difícil. Today, I dream of slipping into the ocean. I heard the Pacific’s quite nice, a bit rocky near the shore. I’ll just bring boots. I could walk to Peru on the bottom of the sea, encountering octopi peeking out from coral clusters. Why do they say octopi? Why not use octopuses? Everything’s more sensible in Spanish: uno pulpo y dos pulpos. Sharks flash by in pursuit of dinner, teeth winking. Far above, fishing hooks dangle, bright feathers failing to impersonate sea life.

Think of the new amigos I’d make. You don’t have to know English under the sea. All that spills out are bubbles. I can speak bubbles. So can they. We’re not so different, and nobody under the sea looks quite the same—fins, tails, tentacles, claws, overgrown teeth. In America, they try to fix messed up teeth. In the ocean, everyone has something wrong with them, but nobody minds. I think I’d like it there. I wouldn’t even care if I reach Peru before Christmas. Maybe I’d get new boots for la Navidad. Mine would be muddy.

Sometime I pretend my classroom is el oceano. With the pale green walls and the khaki floors, I don’t have to make-believe very much. Everyone has their place. My teacher, Mrs. G, is the giant squid. She’s as tall as a skyscraper taking jump shots with enough limbs to fix every problem and still have two left over for a hug. Alan is the narwhal, you always have to stay far away from him so you don’t get spit on. Sophie is an orca, showing off her pearly whites to anyone daring enough to say hello. Beatrice has a weak stomach. Right now she’s tinted green like a sea turtle. Travis could outrun a shark. He beat the fastest 2nd grader, Brad, last Tuesday during recess. Kayla’s hair looks like the strands of a jellyfish are streaming down her pasty face. Danny is a catfish—he already has some whiskers. Is there an opposite of a walrus? Sammy’s missing her front teeth so that’s what she’d be. Everyone loves the dolphin, sleek, playful, and friendly like Annette. The rest of the class are fish—clownfish, angelfish, salmon, barracudas, cobias, catfish, and more. Most days I’m kelp waving from afar, watching and learning the routine of the tides. I’m trying to be a starfish though, capable, alive, and connected. The desks are coral reefs, rock alleys to cower between or anemones to play hide and seek in. The fake wood veneer is overlooked. Every Friday, we clean our desks with shaving cream. It could be the foam surfing the crashing waves, disinfecting the sand and keeping the crabs healthy. If only my class was as friendly as the sea.

I always wear the same leggings to school. Slate grey like the streets, dotted with yellow taxis of food crumbs. Maybe next time Papí has extra money I can get another pair. In the summer I wear my favorite pink tank top, reminiscent of twice chewed bubble gum. I have a green one too, but I don’t like it as much. It’s from my cousin Lupita in Cuzco, then from my sister Marita. I did get a new purple sweater as my birthday present this year. Papí calls me his little princess when I wear it, since the kings and queens liked to wear purple. If I could be queen of any country, I think it’d be of Russia. Marita did a project on Russia for school. When I’m in 5th grade, I’ll do a project about Russia too. It’s on two continents and shakes hands with 16 different countries! It’s the largest land in the world. I would get to wear purple fur coats and purple reindeer boots all day long and nobody would say anything, since I was queen. Even boys could wear purple if I was reina. They would look beautiful. I would look beautiful. It doesn’t count if it’s only your papi and mami who think you look pretty.
My teacher's name is Mrs. Grolinski, but we just call her Mrs. G. My tongue gets twisted and tangled around the name like the trapeze artists in Cirque du Soleil. I saw the posters for their show over the summer, such crazy costumes. Grolinski sounds like the rumble escaping the tiger’s throat in The Jungle Book. Mrs. G showed us that pelicula today.

“Class, this is where our new friend Anabel is from. You can see how different it is from our town. Maybe we can use this to help Anabel feel welcome here at Limestone Hollow.” I am not from India. It’s not on the same continent as Peru. I didn’t even live near the Amazon. I’ve never visited it in my whole life. Sometimes we have alpaca-jams in my pueblo, when we can’t cross the road until the alpacas stop grazing and move on. I don’t have tigers stalking me through la noche, or panthers saving young casi naked children.

We wear clothes where I live. It’s not that warm in Peru. It is rainy. After this movie, no one’s going to want to share their organic peanut butter and locally produced apricot jelly sandwich with me now.

Mrs. G calls me Anna Bell, they all call me Anna Bell, with a twangy A to start off and a dragging N in between. She always pauses before she continues, like she thinks my name is two words, like she can’t remember the second part. Butchered, chopped in half. She always makes the Bell ring too loud. It’s not my name. Mrs. G could learn a thing or two from Mami. Anabel glides off her tongue like a lullaby rocking my ears to contentment. The smooth Ah is a ray of sunshine sitting by a plump cloud exercising in an azure pool. Each letter connected like Siamese sextuplets ending with the whispered L that drifts off her lips and fingers in the air, hopeful.

It’s Halloween. We wore our costumes to class today to parade around the school yard. I was Britney. She’s my favorite singer. Marita gave me her pink plaid skirt to pair with my bubblegum tank top so I looked perfect. Even Papi said so before he left for work. He works all day at a hardware store. Entering my classroom, I was a leaping dolphin, confident in my beauty, until the snickers flattened and drowned me. I couldn’t remember if I had gills or a blowhole to breathe from, so I stopped breathing entirely. Blush, red like Mrs. G’s apple costume, filled my cheeks. A drop of saltwater danced in the corner of my eye, one of Britney’s backups. Britney doesn’t need any backups. Sophie preguntó “Are you a loony bird too?” Alan started the chant “Loony bird, loony bird,” until it rattled between the desks. I don’t know what loony means, but yo sé that it’s not something nice. I leaped from the doorway into the hall, free before Mrs. G could say or do anything. Through the spooky school yard decorated with fake spider webs, left, right, past the corner bodega. I ran as fast as my tears, reaching for that red and white door at the end of the calle. Neighbors stared, muttering no more than normal. “Ay Anabelita, I’ll make some warm milk.” Anabelita is my nickname from Mami. Papi is the silly one. He calls me Anita Belita. He says it’s my name tickle, and it makes me giggle whenever he says it.

A tap on la puerta brings Mami shuffling. “Anabel, una amiga to see you.” I waddle to the door, cocoa dribbles and backup tears staining my pink outfit. Katrina the beluga huddles in the chill, her purple Sketchers shrouded by a pile of leaves. “You forgot your backpack at school. Here.” Puzzled, I reach for mi mochila. Katrina is pale and a little chubby, windblown today. Her hands are warm despite the autumn wind. “I’m sorry they laughed at you. When I first moved here from Russia, they laughed at me too. My mother told me to give them time, they would see. And they did. See you tomorrow Anabel.” With a quick hand squeeze, she flutters away. I wave, the warmth from her hand still humming inside me.

The days zip by like a car driving cross country on Interstate 90, cornfield after cornfield broken up by small towns and the occasional cityscape. I’ve been learning English and helping Mami. I can talk with my classmates at lunchtime now. “Want to share my potatoes?” Mami, Marita, and I practice our words at the grocery store. “Where are the peaches please? Thank you. Have a nice day.” I love learning English, but I don’t think
Mami does. I wish we talked in English more at home to practice. Mrs. G learned how to say my name, in her own special way. Tumble dry low then tug the warmth close—Anabel pops out.

The embarrassment and taunting about my Britney outfit initiated me into the class. I don’t get picked last during gym class to play kickball now that they’ve seen my rocket leg in action. Yesterday I was actually the team captain, and I chose Beluga Katrina first with a shy grin. She might not be good, but that’s what best friends do. Slipping into the ocean isn’t as tempting anymore. Everyone’s more different here than I thought.

I woke up this morning to Mike’s morning radio show. “Limestone County schools closed today due to inclement weather.” Inclement? I peeled my Barbie window shade aside to reveal an off-white miracle. Nieve, Mami, snow! It never snowed at my home in Peru. I rolled on my coat and pants while my toothbrush hung limply from my mouth. Splat went the toothpaste onto my new jacket. It might freeze off outside. Snow in the air, snow in my eyes, snow in my mouth, snow under my boots. I love snow. I wish Grandma and Grandpa could see this snow, Mami. And Tia Carmen and Tio Alberto too. I feel sorry for everyone in Peru who never sees snow. There’s lots of snow is Russia. If I was queen, every day would be a snow celebration. It’s nose-numbing and mouth-muffling, each flake spiraling out of control. It reminds me of a dance show with toddlers attempting the Nutcracker. Katrina came by to give me a snow gift in the face, which I passed along to Marita. Mami always says gifts are for sharing. We did a lot of gift sharing in the storm. My nose is blue from the cold and from the bruising snowballs, but I can still smell Mami’s barbeque slithering under the door. Where did she get the guinea pigs?

Mami worries I’m turning All-American with my pigtails. In Peru, I always wore a tight braid down my back. Never forget your heritage, never forget your home, never forget your family. I know Mami, yo sé. I just like the sound of my hair flopping against my raw cheeks in the snow. I like English so I can talk to Katrina. But every time I open the door to your barbequed cuy Mami, I’m home. Don’t worry.