



People can only be free if they are truly educated.

—JOSÉ MARTÍ

ZULEMA

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“Zulema! Have you gotten the water?”

Quickly, I put the book of fairy tales aside and think of Ana in Havana. She gave me the book on my visit to Havana two years ago—and I still can’t help laughing when I remember how the dove pooped on Fidel’s head that day at the rally!

“Zulema!”

Quickly I peek through the cracks in the walls at my mother.

COMING UP CUBAN

Did she hear me laughing instead of working? No—she is too busy working herself, pounding the corn.

Poom, poom, poom!

“I am going *now!*” I say, grabbing the clay jug. The sun burns my eyes the second I step out the door, so I look away, trying to ignore it on my way to the well. *Impossible.*

Before filling the clay jugs, I take a sip of water and pat my eyes cool with my wet hands. The water is light and refreshing. Not as it will be when I fill my jug. Then it will become crushing and heavy as stone. As I fill the jug and carry the water inside, my muscles tremble like taut ropes.

“Zulema, have you swept the floor?” I put the jug down and grab the broom, shooing the chicken off the table and moving into the doorway so Mamá can see me. But my mother doesn’t stop her pounding or even look my way. She just pounds and pounds and pounds. *Poom, poom, poom!* I sweep our dirt floor, making sure the dirt stays packed down.

“Zulema—please bring me water!” I take a deep breath as I pour some water into a jar and take it to her. The sweat runs down the middle of her back, and I see she is even more soaked than I am. When she returns the jar, she pats my cheek. The sweat from her hand blends with the sweat on my face, and I pull away. I don’t want to be like her when I grow up. I want to have all my teeth when I am her age. This idea makes me embarrassed for my feelings. I look away.

“Go on with your chores,” she says with a smile.

I am relieved to get away and feed the chickens, and the pigs I have named Sabroso and Chichón, who grunt and move,

ZULEMA

covering me in a cloud of their stink. The sweat from my brow drips into my eyes and stings. I dry them with my dress. The fabric scratches my eyes.

“Zulema!” Mamá calls out to me again. “What are you doing?”

Why does she ask me what I am doing? What does she think I’m doing? I am doing what I do every day. Get water, sweep the floor, feed the chickens, be covered in a cloud of stink from the pigs. What else is there to do?

“Are you daydreaming again when your father is out working in the fields and waiting for his water?” I pour water into my father’s jug, and I’m off.