



THE NEW GUARD
VOLUME IV

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THE GIRL WITH TRANSLUCENT SKIN

ON THE SECOND DAY OF THE HURRICANE, after the Christmas party, my cousin Ubén and his friends were so drunk that my aunt Graciela locked them up in the storage room next to the kitchen so they could sleep it off. Us girls knew it was because Titi Graciela wanted to keep Ubén out of trouble. He was twenty-two years old, lived at home, and was drunk or high most of the time. He was bad news, but Titi Graciela wouldn't acknowledge it because he was her boy, her only son.

Outside the house, the invisible giant recklessly flipped cars over, plucked trees up like yucca roots, and pounded the taped glass of the windows in Titi Graciela's room into a fascinating mosaic. The electricity was gone and with it the TV and internet. The howling wind unnerved the adults so much they let us drink all the anise we wanted. Over a plastic cup of the greenish syrup, Angelita, fourteen years old and the second oldest of Titi Graciela's three children, told the two of us that if we put candles in front of mirrors we would create portals into other worlds. Since most of the mirrors in the house were in the back, in Ubén's wreck of a room, the three of us went there to see if what Angelita said was true, still sipping from our cups of anise.

Angelita had wet-looking hair like Ubén's, and narrow shoulders that stooped when she unlocked Ubén's bedroom door with Titi Graciela's master key. Inside the room was silky with darkness and smelled musty with a hint of sea brine. We kept tripping on empty bottles and clothes bunched all over the floor. Mila, Titi Graciela's youngest at twelve, who smelled of pork *chicharrones*, and had an enormous lumpy behind, shined her small flashlight on something, picked it up from the floor, and held it in the air. I went up close to it. "It's Ubén's shit-stained underwear," I said and giggled as quietly as I could. The silence of the others made the large dark room seem like a mausoleum.

Angelita was the only one with a lit candle in its holder. She shushed us. Something was stirring in the back of the room near the closet, she said. In the cottony blackness, we couldn't tell what was fluttering over there, where the largest mirror was supposed to be. Angelita held the candle up high. The candle flickered in the mirror and then, suddenly, I saw three pairs of eyes at different heights. When Mila passed her small flashlight over the mirror a wrinkled shirt floated up from the mess on the floor. It was a child, a very skinny child, exactly Mila's height. In the bad light, it looked like the bones and arteries in the child's face and arms were shimmering through its skin. I screamed first, followed by the others.

We ran to get Titi Graciela who was in the kitchen counting out the cans of beans left to feed us all through the rest of the hurricane. She brought a big flashlight with her to Ubén's room and shined the light on the creature. There was just a baby's brown fuzz of hair on its head and a few teeth in its mouth. It looked like there were phosphorescent nematodes and blue flatworms traveling under the luminosity of its pale face and arms and over the spatulas of its bones.

When Titi Graciela asked the girl with translucent skin what she was doing there, the creature bit into Titi Graciela's hand, which Titi Graciela pulled back quickly with a soft cry. By that we concluded the creature was hungry, and I went running to the main part of the house to open a can of beans and get Titi Marta.

Titi Marta came back with me. Her white hair had started to go yellow on the edges like the pages of an old book. She had a tarot deck she liked to fool around with and, two times out of five, Titi Marta had foreseen the future in the cards. From the tarot cards in the big pocket of her black-and-white flowered dress, Titi Marta pulled out two cards, the eleven of swords and the falling tower.

"It's a ghost," Titi Marta said. "An avenging spirit. The storm woke her up and let her come through the mirror." Titi Marta took the can of Goya black beans and spoon that I had brought from the kitchen, offering them to the creature.

The phantom of a girl threw the spoon on the floor, but drank the can of beans chug-a-lug style. Afterward, she burped and sat down on the floor, her legs splayed out like noodles.

“What are you here for?” said Titi Marta.

The creature let out a weak mewl. Then she stood up and vomited mashed black beans mixed with green and orange flecks on Titi Marta’s flowered dress.

Titi Marta examined the vomit splatter on her skirt as if she was reading her cards. “She’s come back for her revenge, but can’t quite remember what it was she’s supposed to avenge.”

Titi Marta suggested that we turn the creature out into the street so that the storm would fully wake her up into a sense of what she’d come back for.

Us girls, though, begged hard for our aunts to let her stay. Mila—who never said a lot, and just munched on her *chicharrones* while she watched TV—said more that day than she had all year. “Let her stay. Please. I feel bad for her.”

“Where can we keep her? We have a full house because of the hurricane,” Titi Graciela said.

“Keep Ubén and his friends in the storage room, and the ghost in Ubén’s room,” said Mila. Ubén was no favorite with us girls, but Mila in particular couldn’t seem to bear him, and flinched whenever she saw him flinging his arms around and talking about how high the waves had been the day before when he was surfing on the western coast of our island.

Titi Graciela said we could do that, but only while Ubén and his friends were still hung over. When they were back to themselves she would have to let them out of the storage room and the ghost would have to go.

On the third day after the hurricane, the wind stopped slapping people back into their houses, and our neighbors soon learned that we were haunted. Several of them called to suggest that we have an exorcism. One of them said she thought it would make a great interview on the local television show hosted by the giant puppet, *La Comay*. By now, the sky was clear and even poinsettia trees that had lost branches in the storm were starting to sparkle with crimson leaves. Most of our extended family, who had been stuck in the storm, had gone to their own houses. When Titi Graciela let Ubén’s three friends out from the storage room, Ubén was slouching against the shelves, drinking from a bottle of Bacardi, his hair looking like he’d just been for a swim. He was wearing only jeans, and no shirt, exposing his broad shoulders and a stomach as supple as a coiled snake that the sun had cured to a blood sausage color when he went surfing.

“Where did you get the rum?” Titi Graciela said. Ubén backhanded Titi Graciela in the face. She slammed the door shut, locked it against his curses, and

burst into tears. That night, she refused to even feed him. By now it was just Titi Graciela, Angelita, Mila, and me.

Titi Graciela suggested that we kids take the ghost girl to the mango tree, play with her there, and then when it was time to come inside, leave her out there so she could fade away as ghosts were supposed to do.

We tried to pull her out of Ubén’s room, but it was hard getting hold of her. Angelita put her hand on one of the ghost girl’s wrists, but the girl flicked it off, and Angelita then grabbed the ghost’s shoulder but tripped and lost her grip. She shouted that she could feel only electrically charged currents of air where the girl’s hand and shoulder were supposed to be. Whenever I tried to touch the ghost girl, I couldn’t even get close to her. She seemed to jump back over to where the closet was. She was in front of us one moment, and out of sight the next, and letting out a slow creaky sound as if she was trying to clear out the rust deep inside her.

Eventually, though, she wanted another can of beans. Angelita held it out at the room’s entrance like milk to tempt a cat, while Mila and I went in again. This time she stood still in front of us, a small little ghoul with a large head, pink-rimmed, sepia colored eyes, and black spindly claws on hands and feet. She growled and showed three yellow teeth that looked human enough. Mila growled right back and that made the ghost tip her head in surprise and, then, respond deep from her stomach, a kind of “mmmmmmm” sound. Mila mmmmmmed, too, and they started to sound like a singing duo.

Her interest in humming made her follow Mila around. That was how we were able to get the ghost girl outside under the mango tree next to the old pool in the fenced-in patio. On one side of the patio was a neighbor’s yard; on the other was a field of grass that led up to the steep side of a hill. There was a paved street next to the field. In the aftermath of the hurricane, we all breathed in deep the green sap smell of every plant in the world. The *coquí* frogs were chanting their endless song, neither happy nor sad, just holding to the rhythm of the steamy heat. In the olive light under the mango tree, next to the swampy water in the old pool, the ghost seemed more like a girl. It was clear now that her dress was just a man’s tattered shirt. Mila and I wanted to stay the night there with her, but Angelita, like a miniature, scolding, adult, wouldn’t let us. We left the ghost girl under the mango tree vomiting up yet again the can of beans she had just eaten.

Early the next day we found television reporters and camera people all lined up against the fence around the tree. They were filming the ghost girl who was wandering around the patio pulling up the tuberoses and rubbing their buds on her wrists and sniffing them with a half-grin, half-grimace. When Titi Graciela shouted at the reporters to leave, a tall, brown woman, in a pink suit spoke into

her microphone, and said she was Viviana Marte from Telemundo. Did we have any sense of why we were being haunted? Before Titi Graciela could answer that, Viviana Marte offered to pay her for an exclusive interview with the ghost and the family.

By then, a crowd had gathered around the fence. Some thought the girl was not a ghost, only somebody left behind, to starve to death. Others wanted to count her mmmmmms to see if there might be some numerological sign in them regarding the island's future. Viviana Marte, leaning into her microphone in front of her camera man, said, "To me, her translucent skin is a clear sign of her phantom nature. I believe that local scientists should study this creature to see if we can establish a clear link here to the world of spirits."

Father Alonso, the parish priest who was from Spain, with curly hair and the sculpted legs of a soccer player, arrived while Titi Graciela was talking to Viviana Marte. He led the spiritual retreats that Titi Graciela attended every weekend. Angelita and I took him into the patio where the tiny ghost girl was sheltering under the mango tree, her eyes closed against the brightness of the noonday sun. The priest noted that she looked more like a skeleton wrapped in spider webs than a wandering soul doing some purgatorial penance. Indifferent to her possible eventual stardom on the local television channels, the ghost girl squinted at Father Alonso while he intoned, "Ave Maria," three times in greeting. The ghost girl only yawned in response.

"Ghosts don't yawn," he said aloud, but Angelita had already moved away from him to the *marquesina*. Standing at the entrance to the patio, I could still hear and see what he was doing. The priest peered at the strange girl more closely. He reached out to touch the black claws on her hands and feet, but she ducked out of his reach. He was starting to notice, I thought, that her claws were nothing but dirty nails so overgrown they had curled into root tuber shapes. He covered his nose against her smell of urine, earthworms, and tuberoses and I could tell that what he saw through her skin was not another world but shrunken muscles, chicken bones and, right under her clavicle, the beginning of a very pink aorta. He spoke to her in five languages including Latin, and she only growled at him. When he tried to touch her hand, she snatched it back and mumbled something that sounded like, "Heh thuht meeh." The priest didn't appear to know what that meant. Finally, he approached the people standing outside the fence listening to Viviana Marte's interview of Titi Graciela, and started giving a sermon noting that only the priesthood of the Roman Catholic Church could distinguish spirits from flesh. He said that ghosts usually disappear into thin air when the Hail Mary is chanted three times in Latin, as he had just done, and he noted the

unlikeliness of a ghost exhibiting the impropriety of a girl wearing nothing but a shirt to cover her body.

But let's face it, people on our island get a thrill out of ghosts. Spirits, flying saucers, and the *chupacabras* are more real most of the time than the platitudes of priests and, for a week, the story was news in all of the island's media. A rumor spread that even tapping the fence surrounding the patio would grant one wish for a sincere supplicant. That's when the carloads of people started arriving, turning Titi Graciela's yard into a makeshift concert stadium. By the next day, when us girls were tired of the shin splints we got from picking up so many soft drink cans, soggy diapers, and empty *platanutre* bags that the revelers had thrown away, Titi Graciela decided she would charge a dollar for letting people come up against the fence to see the ghost.

Students on vacation from colleges and high schools swarmed the house followed by loads of town dwellers arriving by *carro público* and tourists by taxi. Even one big busload of Japanese salsa dancers visiting the island for a contest came, and one of the dancers commented aloud in perfect Puerto Rican Spanish that our ghost was much more wild-eyed than any she'd seen in Asian horror films. For five dollars Titi Graciela would allow people to touch the ghost, which was only possible when Mila walked with the jittery creature up to the fence where people would stick a finger through the wire so they could hold one of her broom-handle wrists between a thumb and a forefinger. Some people thought that holding on to her would give them relief from health problems: a man with angry rash lines on his face that doctors had not been able to cure; a woman who had chronic daily headaches; and one of the Japanese dancers who always had sore ankles but didn't want to give up salsa. Most of those coming however were islanders who thought they'd be able to find jobs if only they could get a spirit to carry their petitions to the other world. During the constant parade of visitors and TV interviews, Titi Graciela, whose mouth was usually downturned, started smiling every day. She was making good money from the interviews, and she stopped taking sleeping pills. Mila told the ghost girl her recurring dream in which she walked alone. In the dream she saw no light, only visibly dark shapes, which she stabbed at many times, but couldn't kill. The ghost girl mmmmmmed every time Mila told the dream. Angelita and I were just grateful that Ubén was locked up for a few days.

Only the ghost girl took no pleasure in her own gig. When Mila wasn't showcasing her at the fence, she flitted from the mango tree to the ironwork gate, back and forward constantly, pressing her webbed phalanges into the floating veins on her skull. It was as if she was preoccupied with some ghostly obsession, only stopping at night when the outdoor nightlight went on and she curled up

under the mango tree, next to the pool filled with old rainwater and leaves. She groaned and held her lower stomach as if it ached. We tried to get her to eat salt, which according to Titi Marta and our favorite TV show, *Supernatural*, would make her vanish into thin air. There must have been some truth to it, because she screamed when we brought her bowls of pure salt. She wouldn't touch them, and if we added salt to the canned beans, she refused to eat them. Maybe it was the salt in the beans that made her throw up to begin with. But really, the only real supernatural power she seemed to have was her ability to tell if someone was coming up behind her, even if they were in the parking lot. That was how she was able to avoid being touched unless Mila coaxed her. The gentle, twenty-year-old feral cat, Alcibiades, made her scream if he approached her from behind, and she started sobbing in nervous anticipation right before the nightingales sang each morning. Even the soft trilling sound of the gray-winged *pitirres* was so intolerable to her that she *pitirred* right back at them in a rage until they simply stopped showing up in the patio. Only the chirping of the *coquis* at twilight seemed to soothe her vigilant pacing into a relatively calm seated posture under the tree, and then she would be quiet, biting into the chicken wing bones of her fingers.

Titi Graciela might have become rich off the TV interviews and visitors if it hadn't been for the death of the twenty-three-year-old old boxer Cristobal Parao in San Juan. His family held a public wake for him in a fake boxing ring in the Marín funeral home. The dead man stood in the far corner of the ring, wearing sunglasses, black satin shorts, and a black satin jacket with a yellow hood that covered his head. His boxing gloves were blue. The mortician was so skilled that not only did Parao's coffee-colored skin glow with more health than it had in life, but members of the public swore that when they went up to him, the man would say hello, and whisper how sorry he was to have gotten mixed up with the thugs who shot him to death. The boxer looked so golden skinned and penitent in death, and was so chatty and friendly, it was no surprise that people liked him much more than the standoffish ghost girl who couldn't even walk through a wall.

We couldn't really complain. Titi Graciela had made enough money from the TV interviews to buy some of the land next to the hill and build a pool as well as two new rooms so that Mila didn't have to sleep in the same bed as Angelita, and I could have my own room when I visited. Titi Graciela also joined a gym and started losing weight. And she bought herself a red-haired wig with a French braid, like the ones all the fashionable middle aged women were wearing that year, along with a whole set of embroidered cotton tunics to wear over her pants.

Eight days after the hurricane had hit—after the reporters and visitors had stopped hanging out outside the gate—Titi Graciela remembered that Ubén was

still in the storage room. Not even Angelita had thought it worthwhile reminding her. When we opened the door, we saw him sitting on the floor without his jeans or any underwear. The storage room smelled of shit and piss. His hair still had that wet-looking shininess, and his skin hadn't yet lost the flame-edged brown color of a blood sausage. He looked up, his eyes as hard and hollow as *guanábana* seeds, and bared his teeth at us. He tried to get up, and knocked over some cans of Goya beans on a shelf, but he was too weak to slap Titi Graciela in the face, as he so often had done. Eventually, without bothering to pull on his pants, he limped to his room, his sex hanging like a mollusk on his hairy thighs. Angelita turned away, Mila touched her stomach and frowned, but I followed, curious to see what he would do.

When he saw that his always-locked door was ajar, he said, "Holy fucking, mother of shit and cunts and their hell holes." He kicked around in the mess of his room, and his curses against little *averiguadas puta* bitches were so loud that one of the stragglers still hanging outside the fenced-in patio shouted from the outside, "Is there a demon in your house now?"

But it was the ghost who surprised us. She heard Ubén's curses and started wailing in language we could finally understand, "No, please, no! No, no, no!"

Ubén went running towards the patio but before he could go to the mango tree, Mila shut the ironwork gate, and blocked him from the ghost with her pil-lowy body.

Ubén leapt on the ironwork trellis and clung to it. "How in hell did you get out, you little whore?" The girl stayed under the tree, wailed louder, and looked away from him.

Mila grabbed his hair, but her hand slipped off it, so she yanked one of his hands off the ironwork. "So you hurt her, too, *hijo de puta*?"

Ubén punched her in the face, and Mila held her face in her hands without crying out. "Get away from me, you fat sack of shit," he snarled. "You got too fat, I don't know what I ever saw in you."

Mila threw herself on him, and clutched his exposed balls, which to me looked like the pink, hairy, embryos of some unknown creature; she smiled slightly and squeezed them hard. A jagged yowl rent the air, the sound of a cat having its legs smashed by a door, but then Mila let him go, and he ran back to his room. He slammed the door of his room shut, and we could hear him throwing his dresser drawers against the wall and yelling that he was going to find the machete his dead father had left him and use it to decapitate all of the women in the world. I guess that meant us.

But that didn't happen. It was then that we started to suspect the truth that eventually led us to call the police. Weeks later, the girl, and Mila, too, would

tell their stories. Years ago, when she still looked like a girl, Ubén had taken her from a house near the beach where he used to surf. He had gagged her, locked her up and raped her repeatedly in his bedroom where he pretended to be an underworld king. There she became a stranger to herself, watching her other self's skin turn translucent like a worm under a rock, watching a ghost trapped in the otherworld of the mirrors.

Renia White

36C

the first time a boy asked me about my breasts
we were on the front steps of Abyssinia Baptist
and those boys everybody knew wasn't saved,
just brothers, had rode in with us
on the vacation bible school van
with that heavy door you had to dislocate
your shoulder just to close.
and I can't say I wasn't intrigued
but something about the moment felt
like maybe girl, go prove you talk to God
like you know him, so I tattled
and my church uncle grabbed that boy,
just a brother, up by his ear with a twist
so hard I heard it pop like a knuckle.
and if I knew then those brothers
would remain as unsaved as before,
that no vestibule assault would
take his eyes off my sprouting,
that just 'cause you've got a ticket
doesn't mean you'll get in
I would've told him, *36C like grown women*
like I wanted, like it was some shame to know
all by myself so I had to let him in
and maybe he'd have saved me,
that boy, just a brother, all black and real
solid, real wiry, in on the joke so soon
he couldn't help himself