



# HAPPY YEAR

by Ana Crouch

## 13

My mom's flower shop is on the busy corner of Lincoln Avenue and Calle Jacinto Ignacio Mañon, in Santo Domingo. It's on the first floor of a blocky, white high-rise, and the parking lot smells of fresh paint and hot asphalt. Inside the shop, it's so cold from the air conditioning that everyone wears sweaters, and it smells like Windex and wet leaves. It's the summer of 1995, I'm thirteen, and working here is my first job.

My Aunt Maritza also works at the flower shop. She's the one who handles the customers; my mom does all the books. Ours is the second best flower shop in Santo Domingo. My mom and my aunt are obsessed

with driving by number one to check out their window display and tell each other how they can do better.

Aunt Maritza is ten years younger than my mom. She has the kind of face you normally see on birds of prey—big eyes, beaked nose, thin lips. I know it doesn't sound like she's attractive, but she is. She has great hair, for one. It's straight, which is weird because my mom's is curly. Aunt Maritza wears her hair long, and sometimes she puts a bright scrunchie in it. That summer, I start wearing my hair like hers. People like to say that I look more like her daughter than my mom's, but of course, she's too young to have a kid my age; she isn't even married. This year, she has a serious boyfriend: a guy getting an agronomy degree from UNPHU.

“He won't let her eat anything when they go out,” mom says. “So she eats in secret before. He says she's getting fat. And do you think I would let some man tell me I was fat? Not even your father, honey, and we're married.”

This is something they do—talk to each other through me. Mami is at her desk and Maritza is eating a Crunch bar while contemplating the display in our front window.

“Well, we could both lose some weight,” Aunt Maritza replies.

“You and him?” mom asks.

“You and me!”

“I’m fine thank you.”

A little time passes and then my mom tells me, “I used to have a real nice body, you know?”

She pulls open her desk drawer and pulls out a picture—her in a low cut orange dress. She looks young, and yeah, she had a great body. Enormous dark eyes. Furry lashes. I wonder if I’m ever going to look like that, and I understand why she keeps the photo in her desk.

“It’s hard to stay skinny after you have kids. It’s hormones,” she tells me. “And genetics.” She shrugs and gives me a sad sort of look. “But anyway, you father never throws it in my face.”

Aunt Maritza pretends not to hear her, but I know she does.

“You always say I need to lose weight.”

“That’s different. I’m your mother.” I see how it’s different, but I’m always on Aunt Maritza’s side, so I distract mom by asking about how she and dad met, which is a story she’s told me like five hundred times already, but she still loves to tell.



After closing, Aunt Maritza and I leave together—headed to her place for a sleepover. On our way to her car, we see two guys on a motorcycle pull up in front of one of our florists, Felicia, and try to snatch her purse. She doesn't give it up right away and they struggle.

“Ladrón! Ladrón!” Aunt Maritza screams.

Aunt Maritza is holding a little clay vase, and like she's Pedro Martinez at the mound, she winds up and pitches it at the guy driving the motorcycle. It catches him right on the side of the head. Even though he's wearing a helmet, he isn't expecting the blow. The motorcycle topples over slowly—the guy in back only letting go of the purse when it's too late for him to roll clear of the bike, which pins his ankle neatly to the ground. The driver escapes, and makes a run for it. Felicia, having recovered her purse, promptly starts beating the purse-snatcher with it. We have to drag her back in case he pulls a gun. He's still under the bike, screaming, when the police come. Aunt Maritza and Felicia are heroes. One of Nuria Piera's reporters interviews them on TV.

“What you did was brave,” the reporter says. Watching the interview, I think a lot about whether I would have reacted as well as Aunt Maritza if I’d been holding something heavy.

Everyone thinks Maritza is a hero, except her boyfriend. Maritza’s been secretive about her boyfriend, The Agronomist, but now she opens up a little. She tells me and my mom the things he says: “You’re so stupid. What if you’d been killed for a purse? What would people have thought of you? You should’ve gone inside and called the police.”

One day she announces that she’s stopped taking his phone calls, and not too much later that she’s broken up with him. Behind her back, my mom raises her arms up to heaven and mouths, “Gracias, Padre.”



Aunt Maritza joins a gym for women. I do, too. We go shopping for bright spandex outfits: matching shorts and tank tops. Her friend Mayra joins the gym too, and so three days a week we sweat to the instructor’s copy of Jock Jams. I don’t lose any weight, but Maritza does, which makes me a little jealous.

One night, as Maritza and Mayra and I are leaving the gym, there's a vaguely familiar gray car with tinted windows parked behind us, blocking us in. The driver's door opens and out comes The Agronomist. He advances on us furiously, and for a moment I think he's going to pop Aunt Maritza in the face. She cowers back from him. I feel Mayra take my arm and shove me behind her. She's the one who says, "What the hell do you want?"

"What are you doing? You think you're a big man, following me around? You think you can scare me?" Aunt Maritza asks. But I can see she's shaking. I'm not at all brave—covered in goosebumps and my mind, blank.

"Who do you think you are?" he asks, outraged. "You're gonna be sorry you broke up with me. You won't find another guy like me."

"God willing!" Mayra lobs back, and Aunt Maritza sobs once.

I hear the door of the gym open behind me, and then the gym's security guard appears. "Is there a problem here?" he asks, and that's how it ends.

"Don't tell your mom, ok?" Aunt Maritza asks me a little later, and I promise her I won't. It feels weirdly good to share a secret; I would never tell.

“He’s just sad,” she says. “Everyone acts differently when they’re sad. Some people get angry. But he’d never hurt anybody, really.”

## 15

The year I turn fifteen, Aunt Maritza is dating a divorced chef named Pepe. My mom likes him better than The Agronomist, and I think he’s great. He’s handsome, with a streak of white hair like the dad on *The Nanny*, which we started getting on cable recently. He has two sons older than me, and one my age. He takes them surfing on weekends. Aunt Maritza goes with them. She claims she’s stood up on a board, but my mother doesn’t believe her. I do, though I can’t picture it. I wish she’d invite me to go surfing with them, but she never does, and they can never seem to make it when my parents ask them over for dinner. Pepe is so busy, Aunt Maritza claims.

She glows when she tells people, “I wasn’t even sure I wanted kids and now I’ve got three of them. That’s life, right?”

If my mom is within earshot she always reminds Aunt Maritza that they’re not her kids, but Aunt Maritza ignores her. I don’t know any happy,



grown women without kids. Actually, happy isn't the right word. The right word is successful. Women who don't have kids seem to always live in houses with two older ladies, relatives, who spend every waking hour of the day making demands of the younger woman. This worries me sometimes, on my aunt's behalf, though I can't picture her taking orders from old ladies any more than I can picture her surfing.

As a treat for making honor roll, Aunt Maritza takes me to dinner at the Jaragua Hotel, where Pepe works. The hotel faces the seafront, and it feels glamorous, with the massive lit-up marquee over the monumental portico. We have a three-course meal. Aunt Maritza has a glass of wine with each course, and she lets me take a sip or two from each glass. The dessert is Crêpes Suzette, which Pepe brings out to the table on a cart and lights on fire in front of us. Aunt Maritza gasps, but I take it in stride. I've had Crêpes Suzette before.

After dinner, Pepe changes out of his uniform, Aunt Maritza smears red lipstick and mascara on me, and we sneak into the casino, to hear the band. The air is heady with nicotine, and I'm giddy from the few sips of alcohol I had, plus the noise of the casino and the band. Euphoria builds.

I turn around, and Maritza and Pepe are making out—his hand on her ass. She's shed the blazer she was wearing; now she's in a mini and a

camisole. Their blatant PDA eventually embarrasses me. I wander off. I remember that my mom has told me that the Jaragua is always kicking out prostitutes, and I wonder for an instant whether I could be mistaken for one. Definitely not in these flats and slacks, I decide.

I watch the roulette table for a bit, but I don't understand it. I find Maritza and Pepe again at a table right by a frenzied, jam-packed dance floor where everyone is dancing salsa at speed. They're yelling little intimacies at each other. I've never seen two people look so in love outside a movie, gazing into each other's eyes, his hand on her shoulder, her hand on his face, his neck. I see my parents embracing sometimes, but they look like two trees that have fallen against each other in a storm, propping each other up. I suppose they used to be like Maritza and Pepe, once.

"I'm gonna take you with me," Pepe is saying, and Maritza is nodding, but ironically, lips pursed, like she doesn't believe him. Aunt Maritza looks beautiful—the warmth of the room has gilded her skin. With her eyes half-closed, she looks flush, like she won at roulette.

"If I don't get a better offer," she purrs.

Pepe is surprised, maybe even a little stung, though clearly it's a joke. He pulls away from her embrace and hunches over, his elbow on the table. He makes a petulant sort of face, odd on a grown-up.

"Take her where?" I blurt.

"I'm going to the bathroom," Aunt Maritza announces before Pepe can answer, and she motions for me to follow her.

Inside the bathroom, the thumping of the music is muffled. It smells like crotch and cheap perfume. I pee, ceremonially. Aunt Maritza is harassing her face in the mirror when I come out, radiating smug contentment.

"Isn't this great?" she asks, and there's something proprietary about it, like just because Pepe is the head chef here, she owns the place.

"Sure," I say, but looking around, the hotel is losing its glamor by the minute. The eggplant-colored bathroom carpet has dark wads of gum ground in. The faucet handles are loose and spin and spin under my hand before any water comes out.

"Where are you going?" I ask.

"Nowhere!" says Aunt Maritza. I want to believe her.

“What took you so long?” Pepe asks when we come back from the bathroom. Instead of answering him, Aunt Maritza leans in for a kiss, her mouth going all pouty. He turns his head away and she kisses his ear, making a loud, fake noise.

Pepe drinks beer after beer. I’ve never seen him drunk. I’ve never seen a mean drunk at all. It makes me nervous, and I can see from the tension in her shoulders that Aunt Maritza doesn’t like it either, but she doesn’t say anything. Pepe tells Aunt Maritza that the waitresses at the hotel are always coming on to him, and I can see her shrink inside her skin. She bums a cigarette off an older man, a stranger.

“You can’t help it, can you?” Pepe asks when she sits down again. “You always have to have some guy looking at you, or what? You’ll disappear?”

She gives him a tight smile. I almost say something, but waver: if it goes on much longer, if it gets worse, I’ll say something. *Stop talking to her like that.* Later, I’ll feel ashamed that I didn’t.

“You’re upsetting her,” Aunt Maritza points at me, and Pepe looks at me, his eyes shiny and bloodshot.

“I’m sorry,” he says, folding himself away in his chair. He chuckles. “Look,” he says, extending his hand to me, “I’m sorry. I’m just drunk.”

“I’ll drive us home,” Aunt Maritza says, finishing her cigarette and putting on her blazer.

## 16

I’m surprised when Aunt Maritza calls to invite me to visit her in Fort Lauderdale. At first, my mom doesn’t want to put me on the phone. She has felt betrayed ever since my aunt quit the flower shop with barely two weeks’ notice. That was almost a year ago.

“Long time, no talk,” Aunt Maritza says over the clicking phone line.

I wasn’t angry that she left, only that she didn’t talk to me about it first. Pepe got a job on a cruise ship, and they moved to Fort Lauderdale, where the ship sails from, together.

“What have you been up to?” Aunt Maritza asks.

“Just starting to think about college, doing research, you know?”

“Oh, you’re going to get in everywhere.”

*What do you know about it?* I don't say.

She says, "Come see me."

I tell her I'll think about it.

After I hang up, mom says, "You don't have to go. We don't owe her anything."

But I still miss Maritza. My Aunt Maritza. Sometimes it feels like she's disappeared, like this new Maritza has body-snatched her. I picture her sitting by her phone, waiting for me to call, slumped and silent as a doll. I tell my mom I want to go.



Aunt Maritza picks me up at Miami International, and the first thing she does is drive me to South Beach to let me have a look around. It's hot and super pastel down there. Aunt Maritza is overly thin and tan. She has on big, round sunglasses that don't seem like something you'd wear seriously, but she is. She's highlighted her hair. It used to be jet black, now she has glaring, brassy that doesn't suit her. From far away she looks wan, as if she's fading.

We walk down Lincoln Road, lost in a sea of fragrant Europeans and people who want to look like Europeans. I'm wearing jeans and a t-shirt and big sneakers because my mom said sandals wouldn't be warm enough on the plane. I feel out of place; Miami Beach doesn't feel like America. Or, at least, it doesn't feel like New York, which I loved when my parents took me there last year.

I feign nausea, and Aunt Maritza loads me into her second-hand Ford Aspire that smells faintly of mold. She drives up Collins Avenue, which is chaos in the form of passing brown bodies, palms, sand, and ocean.

“Is Pepe meeting us for dinner?” I ask.

“No, he decided to leave a day early for his trip. He said he wanted to make sure he got a good berth this time—there's a nude beach in there!” She points suddenly to our right. “You want to go see it?” she asks.

Of course I do. We park the car and walk across the street, past a public bathroom and under a road.

Naked. Men. Everywhere.

I can't stop giggling. Aunt Maritza screeches close by my ear in that totally delighted way women do. There's so much flesh that it's hard to take

in details, but I try anyway. Are men beautiful? Some are sculptures roasting brown in the sun.

“Can you believe it? They’re all gay. What a waste,” Aunt Maritza says. She shrugs, grinning. “I knew you’d like it. You’ll like the apartment, too. There are more books in there than I’ve ever seen anywhere. Pepe’s uncle is a big reader.”

Aunt Maritza is living in a borrowed apartment for now. She doesn’t like it on the cruise ship. She gets seasick. She and Pepe are going to save up to get a place. They aren’t married yet, so Maritza doesn’t have a visa that lets her work. She’s been here too long on her tourist visa, but she doesn’t have money to fly home and come back, and Pepe says he can’t spare the money for the fare yet. I don’t ask why they don’t get married; I’m old enough to know you can’t ask things like that.

“We’ll get married, I’ll get a job, and then we can get a place,” she tells me.

“What about his kids?” I ask. “Won’t he want to go back eventually?”

“That’s why we gotta save up. We need at least two or three bedrooms for when they come visit.”



We stop for dinner at a famous Vietnamese restaurant that smells of fried pork. We split an enormous bowl of hot soup and noodles. There is something about sharing food this way that makes me happy; it feels like old times. Aunt Maritza lets me have a sip of her beer when the waiter isn't looking.

After we eat, Aunt Maritza pulls a box of cigarettes out of her purse.

“You carry your own cigarettes now?” I ask.

“Oh yeah,” says Maritza. She shrugs and I can feel that there are a lot of things in that shrug, including a sort of resignation that I don't understand.

“Lemme have one,” I say, but she laughs at me.

“I'm almost seventeen,” I remind her, and for a second she looks surprised, like she'd forgotten.

“Maybe later,” she says, quirking an eyebrow.

Our bill arrives, and with it come two fortune cookies. Mine says *you have a great fondness for animals*, and Maritza's says *you will have a happy year*. Mine's not even a fortune. I complain about it and Aunt Maritza offers to switch with me.

“You can’t switch fortunes,” I snap. “Duh.” The depth of my irritation surprises me. It’s not like I want *her* fortune; I just don’t want the one I got.



We finally make it to the apartment. It’s clearly an old, rich guy’s home: the plush furniture, the water view. The living room is lined on one side in bookcases and on the other in mirrored panels that make the space feel expansive. It smells of old books and cigar smoke, at once rich and stale. I love it immediately. It’s everything an apartment ought to be, I think. I wish I could meet this uncle of Pepe’s, who’s clearly the sort of person I’d get along with. I have a fleeting fantasy where I’m his apprentice in... something. And we have one of those odd-couple friendships that people love to make movies about.

“You can sleep with me,” Maritza says.

“Doesn’t this couch pull out?” I ask.

“No,” says Maritza with a laugh, like I was joking.

We take turns showering in the cavernous master bath. I go first. American water pressure! I’m in there forever, luxuriating in the never-

ending supply of hot water pelting my skin. I come out of the shower steamed lobster red. I put on my new pajama set, bought for the trip. It's blue with pink piping all along the hems of the shorts and down the front.

While Aunt Maritza showers, I pick out a book: *The Count of Montecristo*. I've read it before, but in Spanish. I come back into the bedroom just as Aunt Maritza's coming out of the bathroom, a towel wrapped around her chest. It's too small, and I can see the pale top of one thigh where the towel gapes open. There are five bruises there splayed out in the shape of a hand. I feel myself blush, and avert my eyes. I get into bed, pull the covers up to my chin, open my book and stare at the first page without reading. What do those bruises mean, I wonder. Are they the result of violence or sex? Both are deeply embarrassing, and both have been covered in health class. Domestic Violence: the words ring in my head, alarmingly clinical.

"I'm changing! Close your eyes," Maritza says.

"I'm reading, not looking," I say.

"Ok," she says, and I hear her drop her towel and the rustle of clothes.

I don't want to think about the bruises. I put them out of my head, resolute.

*On the 24th of February—*

Should I call my mother and tell her?

*On the 24th—*

No, I shouldn't tell anyone. Or maybe I should. I need to think about it. Not tonight.

*On the 24th of February 1810, the look-out—*

I shut the book.

“Done already?” Aunt Maritza asks, getting into bed with me.

“No, but I'm too tired to start.”

“Turn the light off, then.”

I reach for the bedside lamp, and as I do, I see that mine must be Pepe's side of the bed, because there's a picture of his three boys on the table. I turn the light off, and the room blinks to black. I can hear Aunt Maritza breathing on her end of the bed, the warmth of her body seeping into the cool sheets between us, which are smooth the way only freshly washed linen is smooth. Even the air in the apartment has been cleaned: when we arrived, Maritza had the window open, airing out the room. Still, Pepe's presence seems to linger in his room and in the bed. It becomes impossible not to imagine him and Maritza having sex in the bed, right

where I'm lying. I grimace in the dark. Nothing about picturing it is appealing. I think of his penis, springing out of a thatch of dark hair with a white streak in it. I think of his hands grasping Aunt Maritza's flesh too tightly. I shake my head, to clear it, and then ask Aunt Maritza if I can have the light back on to read some more.

"Sure," she says, "but remember to turn it off before you fall asleep."

I don't remember, but it is off when I wake in the middle of the night to find Maritza gone. I have a moment of disoriented panic before I remember where I am. I get out of bed, and just stand there for a second, letting my breathing even out.

Aunt Maritza isn't in the bathroom: I can see the open bathroom door, a blacker opening in the dark room.

I go to the door of the bedroom and turn the knob softly, letting in the light from the hall. The air conditioning kicks in just then; I hear the murmur of it coming to life, but it seems to deepen the silence of the apartment. By sticking my head out into the hallway, I can see that that the light is off in the living room. I wonder if my aunt went out.

I walk out into the hall, going quietly. Certain kinds of silence demand to be continued. The living room is empty.

There is a balcony overlooking the ocean all along one side of the living room, accessible by a wall of glass sliders. The doors are closed, but I can see my aunt out on the balcony, sitting and smoking, looking out over the dark water. She looks fine. Normal. But then she seems to crumple forward, her shoulders hunching. She takes a drag of her cigarette and blows out a cloud of pale smoke, which rises ghostly in the moonlight. I supposed she's kept the lights off so as not to risk waking me.

I debate whether to go outside or not, and then finally decided I will. I pull open one of the sliders, and I hear Maritza gasp. Her face is wet and the hand in which she holds her cigarette is shaking.

"What's wrong?" I ask, frightened to hear the answer.

She shakes her head, her mouth pinched.

"Go back to bed," she gasps. I take an uncertain step back. I wish I were older; I feel like if I were twenty, then I'd know what to do. Whatever Aunt Maritza's problem is, I'd be able to solve it.

"No," I say.

Maritza sobs, a ragged sound.

"Is it because *he* hits you?" I ask, pointing back at the apartment, the bedroom within it, as if they might stand in for Pepe.

“No!” Aunt Maritza says. “What?”

“You have a bruise on your leg,” I say, gesturing at my own hips.

For a moment, she is silent. Then gasps, convulsively. I sit down in the chair next to hers, and begin to rub her back in little circles. This feels alien and strange. I’ve never comforted an adult before.

“I slept with a tennis instructor; a guy I met downstairs at the pool. He lives on the 5th floor.”

She pauses to sob.

“Pepe wants me to clear out before he gets back. I won’t do it,” she says. “I love Pepe. It was just the one time. It was an accident.”

I’m shocked, but try not to let it show. I don’t know what to say. Poor Pepe, I think, but then that feels disloyal. If Pepe kicks Aunt Maritza out, she’ll have to come back to Santo Domingo. My mom might take her back, but then again she might not. Aunt Maritza would have to move in with my grandmother and my great-aunt. I can almost feel the pull of that unwanted life, where she would fit in snug as a brick in a wall. It makes it easy to forgive her for lying to me earlier when she was telling me about all her plans with Pepe. These days I don’t expect her not to lie to me anyway.

“Why don’t we go for a walk down on the beach?” I ask. “It’ll calm us down.”

I go and get the pink windbreaker my mom put into my suitcase just in case some cold weather surprised us. My aunt and I walk out over the dunes. The sand is cool under my feet. Maritza blows her nose loudly into a handkerchief.

Aunt Maritza is a cheater. A cheater, a cheater: in my head, I chant the word. It summons up images of women in *telenovelas*, slapping the hell out of each other, hair flying. I feel nervous laughter bubbling up in my throat. I tamp it down.

“Why’d you do it?” I ask her, after a while.

“Ugh,” she says. “I don’t know. I just... I wanted to do it, so I did it. I feel trapped in that fucking apartment when Pepe’s on the water, with nothing to do all day.”

We walk down the beach in silence for a long time, the salt wind coming off the ocean, blowing our hair back.

I spot a strange shape in the distance, right near the water, moving. As we get closer, the thing resolves itself into a big turtle, awkwardly climbing the sand, leaving behind it an even track like a little bulldozer.



“Look,” I say. She does.

“Freeze,” whispers Maritza. “It’s one of those sea turtles. If it sees us it’s probably gonna crawl back in the water before it lays eggs. I saw on TV how they’re endangered.”

We stand there in silence, watching the turtle.

“Can we turn around or something?” I ask.

“I want to watch,” says Maritza. “Sit down. Not everyone gets to see this. This is a real piece of luck.”

Her eyes are bright in the moonlight, happy. She sinks down into the sand, and I next to her. For the moment, she looks flush again, as if she’s in possession of something valuable.

“I can’t believe it,” she whispers. “I didn’t think I’d get to see this.”

“We gotta go home and get some sleep,” I say.

“I’m staying,” Maritza says.

Do I want to stay? Not really, but Maritza looks like she wants me to. She puts her arm around me and we watch the sea turtle dig her nest, its finny back legs scrabbling in the sand, tossing it up in the air. All the while it makes a deep, throaty sound. I think it must be a labor sound.

“This is what it’s like,” Maritza tells me suddenly, her voice blurry with tears. “It’s nature. It’s such hard work being a woman.”

I almost laugh, but I don’t. People say all sorts of things when they’re upset, I tell myself. Still, I can’t help but find her ridiculous, and I turn away. The night is clear, but the sky is dotted with only a couple of stars. The phrase *bright lights, big city* pops into my head and buzzes around, annoying. On the ground, the turtle continues its work. I wonder if I’ll ever see anything like this again, and if I’ll ever get to be the sort of person who is touched by it. That’s for a different kind of girl, maybe, and then I feel something open up between Maritza and me, as wide as an ocean, and I know it’s full of ponderous, lonely things, and I don’t know if it’s always been there, but I know it’s there now.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ana Crouch Ureña is a fiction writer originally from the Dominican Republic, now living in Charlotte, NC. Her writing will next appear in the Spark Anthology. She earned her MFA from Queens University of Charlotte and is working on a novel about women in 16th century Santo Domingo.

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