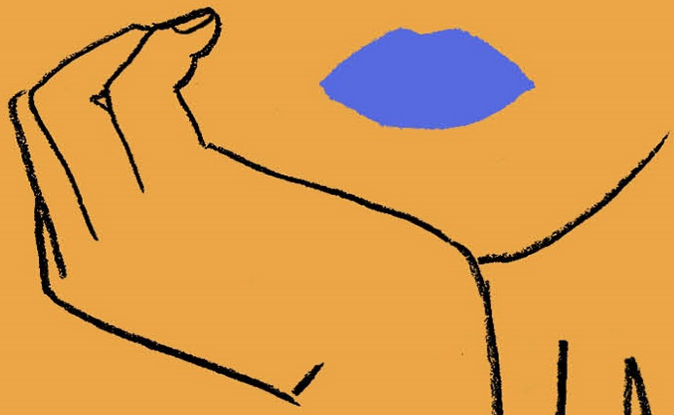
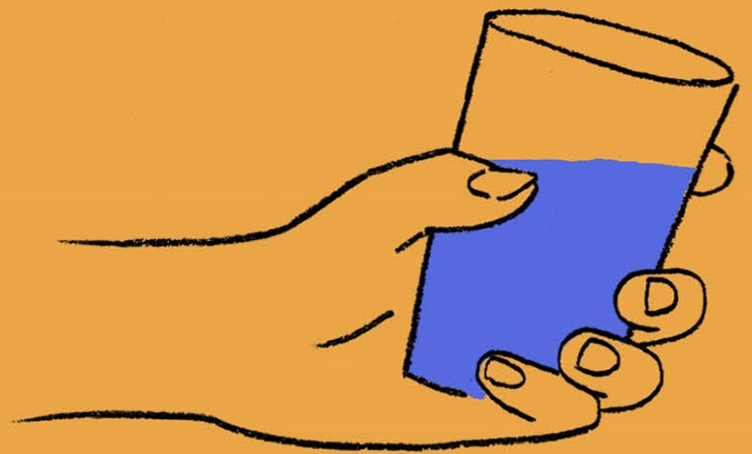
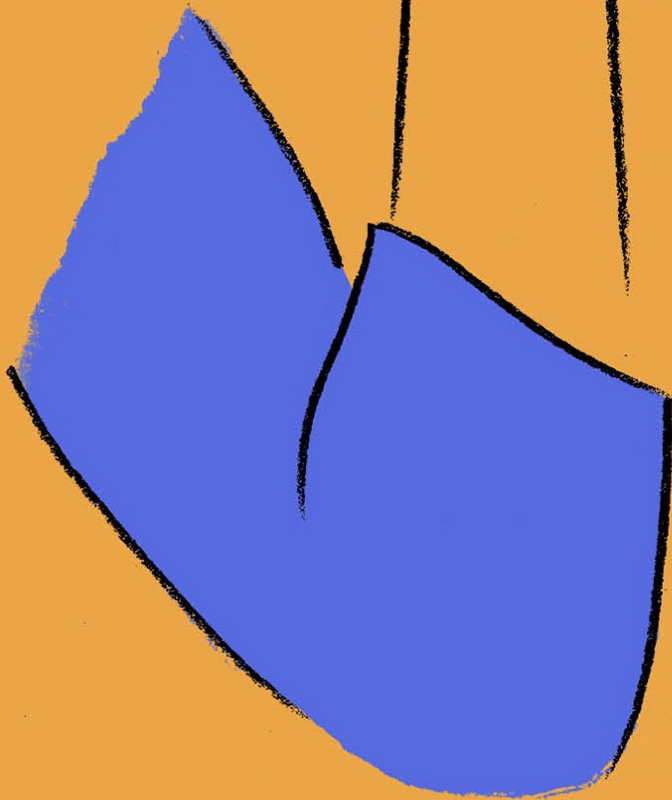


HOW NOT TO
DROWN



A Novel

IN A GLASS
OF WATER



ANGIE CRUZ

*Author of
Dominicana*

HOW NOT TO
DROWN
IN A
GLASS OF WATER



Angie Cruz



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*Para las madres, tías, vecinas y comadres who know how to
resolver and take care of nuestra comunidad. For the ones who've
experienced rechazo.*

SENIOR WORKFORCE PROGRAM

New York, United States

The Senior Workforce Program is designed to provide career counseling, job listings, and similar employment-related services. All participants receive extended unemployment benefits for the twelve weeks they participate in the program to subsidize prevocational training that includes communication skills, interviewing skills, and punctuality to prepare them to reenter the workforce.

The final report will assess if the participant is job ready or not.

The following are the twelve sessions and documents that may or may not have supported the final report and recommendations.

SESSION ONE

My name is Cara Romero, and I came to this country because my husband wanted to kill me. Don't look so shocked. You're the one who asked me to say something about myself.

Before we begin, can you permit me to have a glass of water? Ay, yes. Thank you. Why am I so nervous? I know, I know, we're just talking. And this water, is it from the bottle? Does it taste strange to you? No?

I've never done something like this before. I didn't think I was going to have to look for a job at this point of my life. La Profesora from La Escuelita said that you'll help me. You're dominicana, no? She said if you know a lot about me you can find me a job. Is that true? Ay, good, because I need a job. The factory closed in 2007, right before Christmas. Can you believe that? Almost two years I don't work.

In reality, El Obama has been very generous. After the factory closed, I received fifty-three checks, then El Obama gave me thirteen checks, then twenty more. Did he have a choice? No. There are no jobs—my factory left to Costa Rica! You know they're never coming back. And after these twelve weeks that I meet with you—I'll receive no more checks! Like my neighbor Lulú says, El Obama is good, but not God.

I'm lucky because I'm fifty-five years old—wait, did I say fifty-five? I'm fifty-six! I stopped counting. If I don't, I'll be in a coffin sooner than I'm ready. The point is that I qualify for your Senior Workforce Program. Me, a senior? I told Lulú I'll be a senior for the checks but not for the canas. Ha!

★ ★ ★

You want to know how I found out about La Escuelita? OK, I can tell you. One year ago we received this letter from the government that we must report to La Escuelita to take classes. If not, no more unemployment checks. I did not want to go to La Escuelita because it was far away in

Harlem. So, in the first day, I paralyzed. I had to fight to get out of the bed. I sleep maybe one hour or two, almost nothing. I couldn't even drink my café that morning. It was like I forgot how to dress. Does that ever happen to you? When the easy is impossible? But you have to understand, I stopped working in the factory and for twelve months I only wore my inside clothes. My belts, my blazers, my dresses—lost in the closet.

Thank God for Lulú who came to get me that morning. I tell you, on the first day of La Escuelita, Lulú appeared in my apartment with banana bread she makes at home, with nuts and chocolate, warm from the oven and said, You have fifteen minutes.

I didn't want to make Lulú late, so I speed up. She knew I would never go to La Escuelita by myself. And for this I pay the price, because for the rest of my life she will say, What would you do without me?

But don't worry, I don't need Lulú to take me to work—I'm ready to confront life. Look, already I'm losing some weight so I can fit into my blazers. Don't you think I look good with this one? You like it? Of course you do.

I never wear brown. My color is black. With my black eyes and hair, black makes me look elegant. This brown blazer is Lulú's. She looks good in this color because she dyes her hair blond—well, it's more like anaranjado because she does it from the box. But the color still looks good on her because her skin is like a penny. Not like a brilliant penny, more like an old penny. And she's only fifty-four. I tell her to drink more water so she gets more glow. But she doesn't listen. She is also more fat than me. But that doesn't matter. We're all more fat since losing our jobs. Lulú more than me. In fact, this blazer doesn't fit her anymore, even when she wears the faja. She never takes off the faja. Never. Not even to sleep. OK, maybe sometimes to sleep. But even in the dreams she wants to look like a botella de Coca-Cola. But when I tried the blazer, you should've seen her face: arrugada. But it's OK—jealousy. I'm accustomed to it. I know I was born with sugar in my pockets.

★ ★ ★

I loved La Escuelita. It opened my mind a lot. But it's not easy. When we started, La Profesora said she could teach us to keep numbers. How to use the computer. Even to read and write English! Ha! I have been in this

country twenty-five—wait, no, almost twenty-seven years. I speak English good. You understand me, right? OK. But to read and write English? ¡No me entra! How you say a word in English is not how you write it. Why is that? You laugh, but it's true.

I told La Profesora—she dresses like a teacher from the TV, with the blusa buttoned all the way up to her neck—I'm too old to learn.

No, Cara. If you apply yourself, you'll learn to write English. I promise you. You can even go to college.

Ha! I laughed so hard I peed in my panties. This is what happens to women who have their babies natural. I carry extra panties in my purse and never leave my house without a Kotex.

How many children do you have? ¿Cómo? What are you waiting for? You don't want to have children? Listen to me: Don't wait until you get too old.

Lulú says that a person is never too old to do anything, especially to study. She said our neighbor La Vieja Caridad can go to college if she wanted to.

She's ninety years old! It makes no sense.

But why not? Lulú says. In New York, a lot of old people go to college.

Imagine if I live until ninety like La Vieja Caridad. I could go to college and work for another twenty years in una oficina or something.

★ ★ ★

In the Dominican Republic it's not easy to progress, but in New York La Escuelita is making me think I can dream. I learned many new things. I even have an email now. Did you know that?

Lulú is LuLu175 and I am Carabonita.

Hola, Lulú. ¿Cómo estás? Soy yo, Cara.

Ding! The computer tells us we got email.

Hola, cabroncita! Soy yo, Lulú.

Ding!

It's Carabonita!

Ding!

I know, cabroncita.

Ding! Ding! Ding!

And now I get many emails. Most of them are from Alicia the Psychic. One day, when I looked for my horoscope, I found Alicia through a button: FREE PSYCHIC READING. Of course I clicked it. It was La Profesora who said that the best way to learn how to navigate the internet is if we explore our interests.

Dear Carabonita,

I am delighted to hear from you. I can see that you are anxious for news to unblock all the obstacles in your path. Open my invitation to learn more about what awaits. For a small fee ...

Your loving friend,
Alicia

In the beginning, Lulú read them for me, but the emails kept coming every day, and so Lulú showed me how to translate the email from English to Spanish. So easy. *Click*.

I am enchanted to know about you.
I have news from your personal protector.

When I get that email, I swear to you, the lights on the ceiling went on and off like in a discoteca.

Alicia the Psychic wrote to me even though I never sent her money.

She's a robot! Lulú said.

Impossible, I said.

Every time I checked my email there was a message from Alicia the Psychic who told me she was losing sleep because my protectors were keeping her awake at night.

La Profesora said to be careful of scams. Email is full of them. She said people like us are the perfect target.

People like us?

I told her and Lulú that I know what is real and not. I am not a pendeja.

★ ★ ★

Tell me, you educated dominicana taking all those notes: What do you really think about me? You think there's hope for me? Ay, qué bueno.

When La Escuelita recomendó I join this program so I can do interview practice, I said, Interview for what? And La Profesora said, For *all* the jobs you'll try for! Ha! Between you and me, she's very positiva, so

she's hard to trust. Be honest: Do you really believe there's a job for me? Really? I've never heard of people that find a job without a key.

The news said this country is in a crisis! Nobody has jobs. It's the most great recession since the Depression, when the people didn't have cars and still made pee in pots. Well, maybe our building had toilets, but you understand what I'm saying. La Vieja Caridad, who lives in my building, remembers. She came from the revolutionaries of Cuba, José Martí and all those people. They lived in New York before the telephone and the electricity. For sure, they had no toilets that flushed. Our building didn't exist. She says there were more trees than people.

Yesterday in the news, I saw a lawyer with two children and a wife, so desperate that he took a job in Wendy's around here—not even downtown. Things are bad. More bad than bad. It's just like in Santo Domingo: when there is no fresh bread, you eat casava. I never thought the banks in the United States would rob people. But now I see that this country is like that fisherman with fast hands on the beach who shows you the big fat fish, but when he cooks, he says it shrink.

★ ★ ★

My money situation? It's OK right now because I get El Obama checks, but the only people I know who are prepared for the crisis are my sister Ángela and her husband, Hernán. They saved money for many years to buy a house in Long Island. Hernán doesn't want to leave our building because he can walk to work in the hospital every day, but Ángela, she detests Washington Heights. Pero detests. So every weekend they go to look for houses.

Remember early in the nineties, when things were so bad that you could buy an apartment downtown for \$100,000? Maybe you're too young to remember. What age do you have? Thirty-five? Forty?

Wait, I didn't mean to offend. Of course, you look like a teenager.

What I wanted to tell you is that in the past Ángela and I, every weekend, went to look for apartments to dream. Now she dreams with Hernán. But I remember seeing an apartment in the street Eighty or Eighty-one, in front of Riverside—you know, where the rich live? You couldn't put an entire bedroom set in those rooms, only a bed, maybe a queen, and one of those tall bureaus. But the windows looking to the trees:

wow. In those days, there were so many apartments like that, cheap. Now that same apartment costs more than one million dollars. I'm serious. Look it up!

Ángela talks about those apartments like they're the man who got away. From the day she arrived to this country she was determined to leave Washington Heights. To do this she counted her money and calculated how many years it would take for the down payment. And when she met Hernán, she told him immediately the plan. She said, If you want to be with me, saving is a family project.

Every day for breakfast, they talk about their goal: a down payment for the house. With a yard. A room for each child. A porch for the swing. She writes the progress on the refrigerator. Every time they save \$1,000, they buy a small cake from Carrot Top and celebrate with the children. That way, the children learn that dreams only become real with hard work and saving money.

Hernán and Ángela save \$50 a week. That's \$200 a month. And that's \$2,400 a year. In ten years, they saved \$24,000. And we think ten years is a long time. But look at me, I worked in that factory for twenty-five years. And my son, Fernando, has been gone for ten.

Why do you say sorry? Ay, no. My son is not dead. He abandoned me. Maybe one day, si Dios quiere, I will tell you about Fernando.

But what I was saying is that time passes in a blink. If I would've saved even \$10 a week maybe I wouldn't be in so much trouble now. The little bit I put aside I sent to the banks in Santo Domingo. I converted my dollars to pesos because the interest was higher. Yes, of course you shake your head. It was stupid! What a mistake. Overnight, the change rate went from RD\$13 for \$1 to RD\$45 for \$1.

★ ★ ★

Talking to you makes me remember the days Ángela and I got along. Now I can't remember the last time we were in the same room without her getting angry with me.

How old is she? Ángela is fifteen years younger than me. She's my sister and we look the same age, but she could be my daughter. Maybe that's why, like my son, Fernando, she thinks everything I say is wrong. For example, tell me you—was I wrong to say that we should relax

Yadiresela's hair? That's my niece. It looks like a broom when I brush it. Ángela gave me a lecture about chemicals and the damage it will make. She told me not to brush the children's hair. But how do I get out the knots? The fury she puts on me could burn down a forest. So now I say nothing.

Do you have a sister? Oh good, so you understand. Sisters don't always get along. But even when we fight, we eat dinner together, like a religion. Always we are two apartments but one house.

She makes me pudín de pan. I tell her it's too sweet and then everything is OK. Food, I tell you, fixes things.

* * *

Yes, yes, I know. I am here to talk about getting a job.

But my point is I know how to save money too. When I was able to make a little extra, I saved. And when times were good, I always made extra, like in the winters when I did mandaos for La Vieja Caridad. Back then I helped her a little, now I help her every day, especially after she fell on the steps in front of our building because the super let the snow turn to ice. But listen to this, she didn't even think to sue the building. We all told her to do it. But she said, I'm my father's daughter, and then sang, Yo soy un hombre sincero, de donde crece la palma. Do you know that song? Yes? It's a good one.

La Vieja Caridad calls me and says, Cara, can you do me a favor and pick up something in the store? I would do it with pleasure for nothing, but she insists on giving me her money. She is good to give me her money because, without her even asking, I know what she needs. With the years we've known each other, she is like family. I clean her apartment. And not only on the tippy-tippy of things like the dust on the TV and the shelves. No. I get on my hands and knees and scrub the floors and clean the faucet and the drains. I organize her refrigerator so she can find everything easy. I put in order her forks, knives, and the spoons in the drawers. You know, small things that make a big difference in the life.

Toma, La Vieja Caridad says, and puts \$20 in my hand.

No, no, I say to her. I don't need the money.

Take, take, we all need.

She folds my fingers around the money like I do with children. I tell

you, her skin, so thin and soft, like she's never worked hard in her life.

We do the dance, you know?

She never had children. You don't find that strange? No husband, no children. All her life, she lived with her childhood friend. When they walked together, they held on to each other. They fought in public like husband and wife. But no one knows for sure because until her friend died, I had never stepped into that apartment. It's not my business. But it's strange, right?

You don't think so? Ha!

Her companion now is the dog. Ay, how she loves that Fidel! Feeds him comida orgánica, you hear me? Home-cooked food delivered frozen. If not, the dog makes poop in the wrong place. But the dog is tiny, the size of my purse, so it's no problem to clean the mess. But I prefer to take him outside to make poop.

Yes, I walk the dog. In the morning and in the night—even when it rains and when it snows—because to me it's not hygienic to poop in the house. I also don't want no dog stinking the apartment. It doesn't take more than ten minutes to walk the dog. Between us, when I walk him, it feels nice to feel the fresh air hit my face.

★ ★ ★

What did you say? Yes, of course I want to find a job, that's why I'm here!

Please write that down: Cara Romero wants to work.

What is a person without an occupation? Since I could walk, Mamá taught me how to take Papá's shirt, put it into a ball, and scrub the devil out of it with a bar of jabón de cuaba. If Ángela, Rafa, and me didn't work, they hit us. If we worked wrong, they hit us. If we tripped, they yelled. If we looked to them wrong, cocotazo. If we cried from the cocotazo, another cocotazo.

Ay, don't look to me like that, like you feel sorry for me. All of that made me strong, you know? I had to be strong because what waited for me in this life. ¡Uf!

Let me tell you this: compared to my parents, my husband, Ricardo, was good to me. In the beginning, we were happy. But even the moon and the honey go dark and rancid. And I tell you, if I stayed in Hato Mayor, I would be dead.

Wait. One second. Permit me to drink some water.

Yes, I'm OK.

Maybe you've lived long enough to understand what I'm going to tell you: My husband Ricardo hadn't touched me since my son was born. Two years! That's *una vida entera* for a woman like me. I mean, look at me, you think I look good now, but imagine me thirty-eight years younger with brilliant eyes and all my hair. But suddenly you look in the mirror, and time bites off your face. All those years to not be caressed by somebody made me a dead person.

And then, Cristián appeared.

When somebody looks at you—pero *really* looks at you—and takes your hand and slides their finger up your lifeline. It is impossible not to fall. And I fell. Even if my son was sleeping in the other room.

It was only one time. I thought, *Who will know?* But men talk when they drink, and the words travel. My husband lost his head.

One night, he went to the house where Cristián lived, carrying a machete the length of his arm. Cristián lived down the road in the big house with the gates and the fancy cars that came and went. He was a quiet man with a reputation of being good. He never made trouble for nobody. Cristián was asleep, I'm sure, and just like that, Ricardo cut off his leg. One clean chop.

My mother always said, Don't mess with a butcher. And Ricardo could kill and skin a goat in five seconds.

Believe me, when I heard the scream, I understood that I was in trouble. I got up and pulled Fernando out of the bed, packed whatever I could carry in a garbage bag, and ran. Thank God Mamá lived only one mile away. The night, so dark I couldn't even see my hands in front of me. Better that way. I don't even want to think about what else was out in that dirt road.

Have you been to the monte in Dominican Republic? Have you? No? Oh.

Well, imagine, my son crying against my chest. Me, trying to *shh* him so not to wake the dogs, the snakes, the rats, the pigs. Not a car in sight. How many women have disappeared walking on that road? But I had no time to be afraid of the night or what waited for me. Better the earth eat us both than me to return to Ricardo. Ese salvaje. He would kill me to end the humiliation he felt. Forget about the million women he had fucked—but

the one time I do it, the *one* time. *Pfft!*

Ay, I could feel all my skin, all my life, exploding. I was afraid my mother was going to send me back to Ricardo. She had said it too many times, she couldn't feed one more mouth, forget about two. She later asked, Why did you get under another man?

Yes, I was lonely, but I knew then and I know now: I did it because I wanted to change my life. That's what we have to do. We step in the shit on purpose so we're forced to buy new shoes. You know what I'm saying?

Why do you look at me like that? What I'm feeling?

I don't know. I don't feel nothing.

I know, I know. All of this sounds like from a movie. But I tell you the truth—that night on the road a car came speeding. And because life is life, another car came from the other direction, and right in front of me they crashed. Head-on. Like two crushed cans. A man went flying through the window and his body fell to the ground like, *prá!* My son Fernando cried. I tried to look for the body, but even with the lights of the car, it was not enough. The other driver was not moving, a river of blood coming out of the head.

I yelled. But who could hear me? How many people have died this way?

I knew in that moment that if I stayed in Hato Mayor, I might as well be left to die like those two men on the road. Who knows where they were speeding to that night. Maybe they were good men. But life was finished for them.

★ ★ ★

You look worried for me. Don't worry. I am OK.

Write that down: Cara Romero is strong.

Lulú always says that when someone asks me about mangoes I talk about yuca.

Next time, I promise we will talk about how you will find me a job.

I've said enough for today. Don't you think?

APPLICATION
THE JOB YOU WANT & CO.
Washington Heights, New York, NY

Please fill out all the sections below:

Applicant Name: Cara Romero
Address: Washington Heights, NYC
Email: carabonita@morirsonando.com
Date of Application: Spring 2009
Are you a citizen of the United States: No
If not, are you authorized to work in the U.S.? Yes

The oral interview is to assess the following:

1. Interest in attaining employment
2. Personal character
3. Judgment
4. Ability to plan and organize tasks to meet deadlines
5. Ability to develop alternative solutions to a problem
6. Ability to understand verbal instructions
7. Ability to be self-motivated, responsible, and dependable without close supervision
8. Ability to work smoothly with others and to complete a task
9. Ability to remain calm in an emergency
10. Ability to communicate effectively

JOB APPLICATION, CONT.

THE JOB YOU WANT & CO. is an equal opportunity employer. This application will not be used for limiting or excluding any applicant for employment on a basis prohibited by local, state, and federal law.

Education and Training

High School: The yellow house on the hill near the colmado.
Location: Calle Sin Nombre.
Year Graduated: I learned my numbers and letters. My teachers said I was the most intelligent.
Degree Earned: Survival.

College / University

Name: One that doesn't cost anything.

Location: I heard the school in the Bronx is good.

Year: Maybe one day, who knows?

Degree Earned: Lulú calls me La Doctora because I can smell the sickness.

Vocational School / Specialized Training

Name: Pastry school? I can cook, but the oven and I fight.

Location: Close to the apartment.

Year Graduated: Si Dios quiere.

Degree Earned: The best tasting Dominican cake in Washington Heights. It's not pretty, but eating it, you die dreaming.

Previous Employment

Employer Name: The factory of little lamps.

Job Title: Whatever job needs to be done.

Supervisor Name: The good one or the bad one?

Employer Address: You cross the George Washington Bridge.

Dates Employed: 1980–2006

Reason for Leaving: The factory left to Costa Rica.

Position(s) Applying for: All the positions available.

How did you hear about this position?

Neighbors, families, friends, La Escuelita.

What days are you available for work?

Every day.

What hours or shifts are you available for work?

All the hours. All the shifts. Except between 8 to 10 at night, because I see the telenovelas. And not before 7 in the morning because I need the sleep. After 10 at night, I am not so good. On Sundays, I like to clean and do laundry and visit Ángela and Hernán and the children. I have to come home by 5 to make the dinner. But yes, I am available all the hours.

If needed, are you available to work overtime?

You don't have to ask.

On what date can you start working if you are hired?

Yesterday.

Salary desired:

Suficiente to live. They paid me \$11 per hour. I started with \$3.35 in the factory. But without overtime it was not enough.

Personal reference and relationship:

Lucía (Lulú) Sánchez Peña. She's my neighbor. Mi comadre. Like family. I would put my sister Ángela, but I can't predict what she'll say about me.

How many years have you known your personal reference?

A life.

Are you 18 years of age or older:

Unfortunately, yes. But I look like a teenager. Ha!

Are you a U.S. citizen or approved to work in the United States?

What do you think?

What document can you provide as proof of citizenship or legal status:

I have the papers.

Will you consent to a mandatory controlled substance test?

What kind of person do you think I am? Do I look like a teacata to you?

Do you have any condition which would require job accommodations?

I have veins like rocks, up and down my legs. A job that doesn't destroy me would be nice.

Have you ever committed a criminal offense?

Well ... it depends.

(Note: No applicants will be denied employment solely on the grounds of conviction of a criminal offense.)

SESSION TWO

You are so serious today. Yes, I know we have a lot of work to do, but first I will get myself some water if that is no problem for you. Yes? OK.

What's this paper? More questions?

What are your strengths?

Ha! Is this not clear to you already?

What are your weaknesses?

Pfft! This question is a trick? OK, OK. I will play the game with you.

What is my strength? Hmm ... first let me put on lipstick. It helps me to think.

But in serious, strength? When you ask, my mind paralyzes.

Maybe sometimes I'm too strong. But a mother needs to be strong.

Like one time, when my son, Fernando, had thirteen years, he wanted to go outside to be with some tígueres from the street. Ángela was living with us. Recently arrived. It was nice to have her with us but she always gave me ojo when she saw me with the chancleta in my hand.

Fernando tried to leave the apartment, even after I said no. He was a head-size taller than me. He tried to get to the door, and when he saw I was standing in the middle, his nose flared out to here, and his eyebrows came together like this. So I pushed him away from the door. He fell back and hit his head on the wall.

There was no blood. He was OK—it was an accident. I just didn't want him to go outside. Those delinquents give the children money to deliver packages. It's my responsibility to keep him safe! Look at that boy Jorge in my building who was suspended from the university for selling the drugs. He was in one of the best schools in the country, maybe even the world.

But you know what Fernando did the next day? He told his teacher I pushed him and showed her the small bump in the back of his head—a mosquito bite. And the teacher gave a report of abuse to the authorities.