We came to Macún when I was four, to a rectangle of ripped metal sheets on stilts hovering in the middle of a circle of red dirt. Our home was a giant version of the lard cans used to haul water from the public fountain. Its windows and doors were also metal, and, as we stepped in, I touched the wall and burned my fingers.

"That’ll teach you," Mami scolded. "Never touch a wall on the sunny side."

She searched a bundle of clothes and diapers for her jar of Vick’s VapoRub to smear on my fingers. They were red the rest of the day, and I couldn’t suck my thumb that night.

“You’re too big for that anyway,” she said.

The floor was a patchwork of odd-shaped wooden slats that rose in the middle and dipped toward the front and back doors, where they butted against shiny, worn thresholds.

Papi nailed new boards under Mami’s treadle sewing machine, and under their bed, but the floor still groaned and sagged to the corners, threatening to collapse and bring the house down with it.

"I’ll rip the whole thing out," Papi suggested. "We’ll have to live with a dirt floor for a while..."

Mami looked at her feet and shuddered. A dirt floor, we’d heard, meant snakes and scorpions could crawl into the...
house from their holes in the ground. Mami didn’t know any better, and I had yet to learn not everything I heard was true, so we reacted in what was to become a pattern for us: what frightened her I became curious about, and what she found exciting terrified me. As Mami pulled her feet onto the rungs of her rocking chair and rubbed the goose bumps from her arms, I imagined a world of fascinating creatures slithering underfoot, drawing squiggly patterns on the dirt.

The day Papi tore up the floor, I followed him holding a can into which he dropped the straight nails, still usable. My fingers itched with a rust-colored powder, and when I licked them, a dry, metallic taste curled the tip of my tongue. Mami stood on the threshold scratching one ankle with the toes of the other foot.

“Negi, come help me gather kindling for the fire.”

“I’m working with Papi,” I whined, hoping he’d ask me to stay. He didn’t turn around but continued on his knees, digging out nails with the hammer’s claw, muttering the words to his favorite chachachá.

“Do as I say!” Mami ordered. Still, Papi kept his back to us. I plunked the can full of nails down hard, willing him to hear and tell me to stay, but he didn’t. I dawdled after Mami down the three steps into the yard. Delsa and Norma, my younger sisters, took turns swinging from a rope Papi had hung under the mango tree.

“Why can’t they help with the kindling?” I pouted.

Mami swatted the side of my head. “Don’t talk back,” she said. “You girls keep away from the house while your father is working,” she warned as we walked by my sisters having fun.
She led the way into a thicket behind the latrine. Twigs crackled under my bare feet, stinging the soles. A bananaquit flew to the thorny branch of a lemon tree and looked from side to side. Dots of sun danced on the green walls of the shady grove above low bushes weighted with pigeon peas, the earth screened with twigs, sensitive *morivivi* plants, and french weed studded with tiny blue flowers. Mami hummed softly, the yellow and orange flowers on her dress blending into the greenness: a miraculous garden with legs and arms and a melody. Her hair, chocked at the nape with a rubber band, floated thick and black to her waist, and as she bent over to pick up sticks, it rained across her shoulders and down her arms, covering her face and tangling in the twigs she cradled. A red butterfly circled her and flew close to her ear. She gasped and swatted it into a bush.

"It felt like it was going right into my brain," she muttered with an embarrassed smile.

Delsa and Norma toddled through the underbrush.  
"Mami, come see what I found," Delsa called.  
A hen had scratched out a hollow and carpeted its walls and floor with dry grass. She had laid four eggs, smaller and not as white as the ones our neighbor Doña Lola gave us from time to time.

"Can we eat them?" Delsa asked.  
"No."

"But if we leave them here a snake will get them," I said, imagining a serpent swallowing each egg whole. Mami shuddered and rubbed her arms where tiny bumps had formed making the fine hairs stand straight up. She gave me a look, half puzzled, half angry, and drew us to her side.

"All right, let's get our sticks together and bring them to the kitchen." As she picked hers up, she looked carefully around.

"One, two, three, four," she chanted. "One, two, three, four."

We marched single file into our yard, where Papi stacked floorboards.

"Come look," he said.  
The dirt was orange, striped in places where crumbs had slipped through the cracks when Mami swept. Papi had left a few boards down the center of the room and around his and Mami's bed, to stand on until the ground was swept and flattened. Mami was afraid to come into the house. There were small holes in the dirt, holes where snakes and scorpions hid. She turned swiftly and threw herself off balance so that she skipped toward the kitchen shed.

"Let's go make supper!" She singsang to make it sound like fun. Delsa and Norma followed her skirt, but I stared at the dirt, where squiggly lines stretched from one wall to the other. Mami waited for me.

"Negi, come help in the kitchen."

I pretended not to hear but felt her eyes bore holes in the kick of my head. Papi stepped between us.

"Let her stay. I can use the help."

I peered between his legs and saw her squint and pucker her lips as if she were about to spit. He chuckled, "Heh, heh," and she whirled toward the kitchen shed, where the fire in the *fogón* was almost out.

---

**latrine:** an outdoor, shared bathroom  
**bananaquit:** a small, colorful bird commonly found in warm climates  
**morivivi:** a flower common in Puerto Rico and other parts of the Caribbean  
**miraculous:** like a miracle; marvelous  
**nape:** the back of the neck  
**Doña:** in Spanish, a respectful title for a woman  

**fogón:** Spanish word meaning "fireplace" or "furnace"
"Take these boards and lay them on the pile for the cooking fire," Papi said. "Careful with the splinters."

I walked a broad circle around Mami, who looked up from her vegetable chopping whenever I went by. When I passed carrying a wide board, Mami asked to see it. Black bugs, like ants, but bigger and blacker, crawled over it in a frenzy.

"Termites!" she gasped.

I was covered with them. They swarmed inside my shirt and panties, into my hair, under my arms. Until Mami saw them, I hadn't felt them sting. But they bit ridges into my skin that itched and hurt at the same time. Mami ran me to the washtub and dunked me among my father's soaking shirts.

"Pablo!" she called, "Oh, my God! Look at her. She's being eaten alive!"

I screamed, imagining my skin disappearing in chunks into the invisible mouths of hundreds of tiny black specks creeping into parts of my body I couldn't even reach. Mami pulled off my clothes and threw them on the ground. The soap in the washtub burned my skin, and Mami scrubbed me so hard her fingernails dug angry furrows into my arms and legs. She turned me around to wash my back, and I almost fell out of the tub.

"Be still," she said. "I have to get them all."

She pushed and shoved and turned me so fast I didn't know what to do with my body, so I flailed, seeming to resist, while in fact I wanted nothing more than to be rid of the creepy crawling things that covered me. Mami wrapped me in a towel and lifted me out of the tub with a groan.

---

frenzy: a state of wild excitement
furrows: grooves, like the tracks left by a plow
flailed: moved as though beating or striking something

Hundreds of black bugs floated between the bubbles. She carried me to the house pressed against her bosom, fragrant of curdled milk. Delsa and Norma ran after us, but Papi scooped them up, one on each arm, and carried them to the rope swing. Mami balanced on the floorboards to her bed, lay me beside her, held me tight, kissed my forehead, my eyes, and murmured, "It's all right. It's over. It's all right."

I wrapped my legs around her and buried my face under her chin. It felt so good to have Mami so close, so warm, swathed by her softness, her smell of wood smoke and oregano. She rubbed circles on my back and caressed the hair from my face. She kissed me, brushed my tears with her fingertips, and dried my nose with the towel, or the hem of her dress.

"You see," she murmured, "what happens when you don't do what I say?"

I turned away from her and curled into a tight ball of shame. Mami rolled off the bed and went outside. I lay on her pillow, whimpering, wondering how the termites knew I'd disobeyed my mother.