



Dear Reader,

Many months ago, I sat with my editor, Virginia, in her New York office. I'd been writing about Marisol for a while and confessed that I was having trouble finding her voice. Virginia listened patiently, then said: "Why don't you write about yourself at that age?"

I scoffed. No one would want to read that book, I said. "I wasn't an interesting kid. I wouldn't even climb trees. I was scared of everything."

She raised her eyebrows, as if to say: *Well, there you go.*

That was the beginning of a renewed draft.

After that, it was easy to understand Marisol, because I *was* Marisol.

When I was a little girl and couldn't sleep (which was often), I would sneak into the living room and watch the old-movie channel, which showed silent films at that hour. No volume needed. The first silent movie I saw was Charlie Chaplin's "The Circus," and I still remember how much the ending affected me. The circus pulled away and Charlie was left all alone, in the dust, while I sat all alone, in my living room. But he shrugged and carried on. His movies made me laugh *and* cry—all without a single spoken word.

Silent films keep Marisol company, too.

When I was Marisol's age, I believed that all objects—animate and inanimate—had feelings. This included my stuffed animals, of course, but it also included things like the coffee table or the door. If I accidentally hurt the coffee table's feelings—by banging against it too hard, for example—I would whisper an apology. Marisol, too, assigns personalities to various objects in her life. Everything from the refrigerator to the couch.

I no longer apologize to coffee tables, but I *do* have names for my car, teakettle, iPad, and desktop computer, among other things. Their names are Polly, Owly, Ignatious, and Dr. Theopolis, respectively.

Marisol has a best friend, Jada, who is very smart. I had a best friend, Rosalind, who was very smart. (She ultimately became a lawyer and Louisiana state congresswoman.) Marisol's mother is Filipino; her father is white. Same as mine. Marisol has an older sibling. Me, too.

At the heart of this novel, however, is a girl and a tree.

It is the perfect tree for climbing, or so she is told.

She's afraid to climb, because she's convinced she will fall.

I've fallen many times in my life, but I've managed to get back up. But I've still never fallen from a tree—because I still haven't climbed one.

Don't worry, though. I have a friend who promises to catch me when I do.

Like Marisol, I loved cats
and had cat pillows and
stuffed animals. I also
had cats named Whiskers,
Pepper, and Chaplin. This
is Pepper.