

# A House of Light and Stone

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# Secrets of the Days and Nights

**T**HAT CHRISTMAS WHEN I was still ten, there was more than just the big red book from Mr. St. John for me under the tree. Mama gave me a collection of the Brothers Grimm Fairy Tales. And one big, shiny white book about myths for children, by a guy whose last name was Kingsley. That was the best of the two. The myths.

Barbie got a sewing kit in a round blue basket, with a pincushion in the shape of a tomato. And a new pink brush-and-comb set. She wouldn't let me touch it, hissing, "For blonde hair only. *Don't* even think about using it."

Chance got a magician's cape with a top hat and a play wand. Mama was real good with presents when Christmas came around.

Mama invited Mr. St. John, our social worker, this Christmas. He gave us a slim book for the whole family, called *The Prophet*. Mama was touched. You could see it in her face. My big brother Artie opened that gift up, after Mama read the tag and handed it to him. We all reached for it but he held it up over our heads yelling, "Hold it. I'm doing this. *Pero primero siéntense*. Siddown."

So all us kids sat down in the wrappings and ribbons and then Artie went through the table of contents, reading the chapter titles and whose name Mr. St. John had written next to them. I felt very proud hearing Artie say my name, "On Self-Knowledge. *Duffy*."

Because then he turned to the page and read out from the chapter, “Your hearts know in silence the secrets of the days and the nights...” Justine and Artie both nodded at that. They’re the oldest of us five, so I figured maybe later I’d ask them what it was supposed to mean.

Mama’s chapter was ‘Reason and Passion.’ I found that out after, when I got the book to hold and flip through. Artie must have missed it, ’cause he hadn’t read that out loud. The drawings were nice, kind of fluffy, but only in one color.

“Duffy. Coffee.” Mama said, and I ran to the kitchen to put a pan of water on to boil. Coffee was one of my jobs. You have to use matches to get the burner going. And you have to be sure to blow out the match, then run it under water from the sink, and then you still can’t just drop it into the trash. Just in case. So there’s lots of steps. But most of the time I was good at it.

I ran back to the Christmas, and Mr. St. John and Mama were on the sofa, laughing over something. Her eyes were bright, and I was glad it was a nice morning with nothing going wrong. Everybody was smiling. Chance kept granting wishes to the girls. “Wishes for ladies!” he called, tossing the cape back over one shoulder. “I got wishes for ladies here.” The top hat was too big for his five-year-old head, and only his ears kept it from falling onto his nose.

I scooped up *The Prophet* and brought it over to Mama. “Mama, here’s you,” I said, holding out the book to show her the chapter in the list.

While she was reading the title from my hands, Mr. St. John said, “You two have the nicest dark hair.” Mama liked that compliment. With Mr. St. John just back from the Peace Corps she thought he’d be a good person for Artie to be around.

Mama said, “Let’s see the chapter,” and I flipped to it. Holding the book out like a waiter at a table with a steak on a plate. Like they do in the movies. She was still smiling at his comment, and I added, “But Mama’s has the coppery red in it.”

She couldn't have gotten too far in reading when she reached up and laid her hand on my shoulder; her thumb didn't move much, but the fingers, unseen by Mr. St. John, with her long red nails, they dug into the back of my shoulder. I straightened up. The burning was hard, but I didn't bend at the knees. Didn't cry out. I saw I'd done something wrong, maybe I showed off. So I closed the book and held it on the side she didn't have a grip on. I pulled the book away, unhurried, till it was behind my back. And still she didn't let go.

"Thank you, m'hijita," she said in a low voice. Then she released me and folded her hands in her lap, turning back to Mr. St. John being nice to her.

"Aannny wish you want..." Chance cried out.

BARBIE YELLED FROM the kitchen, "The coffee water's boiled off again!" And then my knees did tremble. If Mama got mad the Christmas was ruined. But Justine jumped right up, saying, "I got it, Mama." And Mr. St. John, he stood up, too, straight and tall like a hero, "I need some gum. Duff—want to walk with me to the corner store?" And like Cary Grant, he grabbed up his coat and me, and we stepped to the front door.

And just that fast I was outside and safe.

HE DIDN'T NEED me to get any gum, but I was glad for the rescue just the same. The Union Pacific train whistle sounded low and long a few blocks away and I thought of the hobos and the glue sniffers who hung around the tracks. Artie warned us about staying away from them. I figured if Mr. St. John could have a talk with them, maybe they'd all go join the Peace Corps too, so Chance and I could go and find bottles along the tracks to sell. That might make Mama happy, us helping out by bringing her a loaf of bread or a quarter worth of sandwich meat.

Coming out of the corner store, Mr. St. John walked on the outside of the curb, like I was a lady. I thought of something ladylike to say, because I wanted the Peace Corps stuff to rub off on me, too. "Thank you for the book, Mr. St. John."

"Oh, you're welcome, Duff. I'm sure you're going to get a lot from it as time goes by." He smiled down at me from way up high. His sky-blue eyes were still strange to see, here in this neighborhood. Here we were all mostly Mexican. Even the other kids in my family, half-white, all but me, but they didn't have eyes as blue as that.

"Tell me something I don't know?" I asked. It was a game we played whenever he visited. He was the only one who wasn't mad that I'd been skipped up two grades; that was something kids in East L.A. weren't supposed to do.

"Hummm. Look at your hand, Duff. You see these lines?" he asked, pointing to his own hand. "Here? This one and this and this one?"

I looked at mine. "Uh-huh."

"They're very important. That top one's your heart line. That one's your head line." He reached and ran his nail along that second line and my fingers curled. I giggled. He went back to his own palm. "This last one here's your life line; look, see how long and deep that one is? Know why?"

I looked at the deep brown line running off my palm and into my wrist. "Cause I'm Mexican?"

"Close," he said. "It's because you've got an abundance of energy. You'll be very determined to reach any goal you're questing after."

"—like a lucky charm?" It was a really deep line.

"Sure. That line says you have what it takes to get anywhere you aspire to."

Like a lucky charm. Right there in my hand. I'd never drop it. And no one could come take it away.

"Can I ask you something, Mr. St. John?"

“Sure, Duff.” We walked slow, and it was nice to not be hurrying.

“When you said to reach any goal I’m questing after. You mean like Theseus and the Minotaur? Through a labyrinth?”

“Sure. That’s right, like a Quest. You accept this challenge and you’ll be rewarded at the end.”

“What challenge?” I asked.

“The one from your chapter in *The Prophet*; ‘On Self-Knowledge.’”

“What’ll I get?”

“What do you want, Duff?”

I thought a moment while I concentrated on not stepping on any of the sidewalk cracks. My own Quest, boy!

“To be somebody,” I decided.

“You are someone. You’re Duffy Chavez. The girl with the lovely dark hair.” He swung my arm all playful when he said it, and spun me around like we were headed back to the store, but I stopped walking and got serious in my eyes, so he knew I wasn’t goofing around. I needed to be clear. I wanted him to understand. I looked back behind me to my house and then real low I told him: “No, I mean to *be* somebody, to not be invisible.”

“Ah.” He nodded. “Well, yes. I believe that’s a fitting reward.”

He didn’t make us start walking on again. He put his hand on my shoulder. It really hurt from when Mama had grabbed me.

I waited for the special words of the Challenge, like in the myths. But he was looking far off down our street. Way beyond the brown of Mama’s front door. And finally I asked,

“If I accept your challenge can I have that as a prize? Can I end up being somebody?” I looked up into his face.

“Yes, Honey,” he said. “With self-knowledge you can definitely be somebody.”

“Should I kneel or something?”

He smiled down at me, “No, this is 1965. The New Frontier and all. Very advanced. How about we shake on it?” And he took

his hand from my shoulder and held it out to me. I liked it better on my shoulder. Even through the hurt.

“Okay, Mr. St. John. I accept this challenge.” I shook his hand real hard.

THAT MORNING AFTER Christmas, when the rest of the house was sleeping, I opened up the Writer’s book he’d given me and on that inside page I wrote: “Duffy Pilar Chavez, Age 11, 1966.” Even though it was still 1965, and I was going to stay age ten until July came again. And even though “Duffy,” a nickname, was my sister’s way of saying DeFoe when we’d been babies and either one’s a silly name for a girl to have, anyway.

IT WAS THE beginning of January when we heard the news that Mama had found us a new house and we couldn’t stay here on Hockert Street any more. She told us over dinner. All five of us at the table and her at the kitchen doorway, standing like she was getting ready to run if we took the news bad. Artie and Justine and Barbie, all blonde and older than me, Chance, the baby, and blonde too. Then me, just Duffy, with the brownest eyes and as jet-black hair as you could get. All looking and waiting for Mama to say more.

She’d made us flank steak tacos with all the toppings in pretty little colored bowls, set out up and down the table, and a big casserole dish of Spanish rice, and some zucchini with melted jack cheese on it for the vegetable. And we had red Kool-Aid, too: Chance’s favorite dinner. Mama always made what he liked best, her baby boy. Although Artie, being the oldest of us all, was the champion of eating the most tacos.

“It’s a bigger place, a nicer neighborhood.” Mama’s cough broke into her words, “—no trains.” She covered her mouth with the crook of her elbow, then breathed in big to keep talking. “—and I think it’s a good move.” None of us answered. Mama

reached up with the heel of her palm, cigarette pointed up to the ceiling between two fingers, and wiped back a curl off her forehead.

Because Justine was the oldest girl I figured she'd be the first to say something. But no one spoke up. Barbie started in softly tapping the table leg with her foot, till each tap grew into a kick, her blonde bangs jumping. Tick, tick, tock, tock, whap, whap, the noise went, till her short pageboy haircut was doing the same jump around her ears, the noise growing from mild to mean. Justine let out a breath, and Chance asked if anyone was going to eat the last taco.

I reached over to put it on his plate. Justine finally said, "Okay Mama, we'll start packing after dinner." Mama took another drag from her cigarette, ran her finger around the top of her cup, started to say one more thing, then stopped herself; she turned and left us to eat.

After doing the dinner dishes and sweeping the kitchen, we met in the back bedroom, the one with the bunk beds and my rollaway cot. Artie stood us in a row, tall to small, and handed us each two dimes. "If it's a trick and we're gonna be picked up for foster homes again, you keep these dimes," he said. "There's an extra in case you lose one. If they take these away from you, just find some bottles to sell and hide that dime somewheres they won't find. No one's gonna do us like the last time."

We all nodded, except Chance, who'd been born while we were all away those five years. He didn't really know about how it was, except for my stories. He just held his palm up, moving it so his dimes caught light and threw it up onto the ceiling, switching from foot to foot. Artie rested his hand on Chance's shoulder, and then Chance looked up at us, finally listening.

"Anybody tries anything this time, and we'll run to a phone booth and call the cops. Just dial 0 and a lady will help. Got it?" All of us nodded; if the worst came this time, we'd be ready—we had



dimes, we wouldn't let it happen again, we had a plan, we'd made a pact.

AFTER THAT WE walked back into the living room and Artie asked if we should take all our stuff or not. Mama frowned at us, a strange look in her eyes—like she'd been fooled by the question. “Of course. We're not leaving anything. Pack it all.”

But she might've been lying, and we needed to know for reals. The Foster Homes were still in our minds and she really didn't see what a brave thing it was for Artie to step up and ask.

BUT MR. ST. John, he didn't come the next day with the others to take us away in separate black cars. Like those times before. That was the part I hated the most, seeing Justine kneeling and looking back at me while I did the same from a car going the other way. Me alone in another car riding farther and farther away from the rest.

MAMA WASN'T FOOLING; we really were moving—all of us—to a newer, bigger house; she was taking all of us with her. Even me. The one who got Mama mad all the time. Sometimes, I thought if we were Indian that would be what the tribe would call me: The Mad-Getter.

When we had just moved back in with Mama she would blow up some times. Like a sudden monster you forgot to think about in a TV show. Then she'd line us all up for a punishment—even when only one of us had done something wrong. Like playing so hard something would get broke. “Which one of you idiots is going to be first?” she'd ask.

And I'd always wait a breath; send a word from my mind to the guilty one. But they never moved from the line. So then I'd step forward. Just to be done with it. She hated me doing it that way. Maybe it made her feel bad that we were all idiots all the time. Maybe it was that she liked, really liked, to fight. And I failed her.

'Cause she would get madder and yell, "Dammit—fight with me!"  
But I couldn't.

So we packed the house up. And we didn't complain or whine, like I think Mama thought we would. She kept walking from room to room, looking in at us, something like confusion in her eyes. With me, when our eyes met we stayed that way for a moment, there was that disappointed look—then she just turned away and I didn't look again.

Mama told us we just needed a truck for the boxes and the washing machine. The furniture was being moved for us. She was nervous when the furniture company came and took all the beds and chests and lamps and the sofa and chairs.

But we'd been moved lots of times before, and this was nothing new. Like Artie always joked, we'd been born into captivity. She was the only one who wasn't used to it. Her and baby Chance.

THE MORNING AFTER the guys in the 1st Street Furniture truck took everything, Mama yelled, "Duffy, come get these milk bottles!" I'd just been thinking how great it was that the store we got the sofa and beds from was kind enough to take our stuff to the next house too, their store's jingle circling and circling under my breath.

We were eating breakfast standing at the counters in the kitchen and Mama waited for me at the front door. She wasn't in a good mood. She'd been fighting with Justine all morning, there was nowhere to sit, and now she was starting in on Artie. She slammed the front door closed as I came near, and she walked back into the kitchen. Yelling more.

I pulled two of the half-gallon bottles from the wood and metal milk crate, and walked back to the kitchen with each of them pulling on my arm sockets. There'd be three other trips to get them all.

“What’s this gonna cost me, buster?” she was asking Artie. She’d set to work on making the lunches. Five of them. The boys got a full baloney and cheese sandwich and a full peanut butter-and-jelly one, too. Us girls got the lunchmeat and cheese, but only a half of the peanut butter and jelly. Chance was standing on an old milk crate at the counter, waiting to drop in the apples, one to each lunch bag. The voice on the radio sang “Trece Treinta! K-W-K-W!” and then the man said, “Ahora, más.”

On the last trip through the living room with the last of the milk my fingers gave out, and one of the bottles slipped from my grip and shattered on the wood floor. I froze but couldn’t stop myself; I started crying, thinking of the beating that was coming next.

Mama came out and held the other kids back with her outstretched arm, “Artie get a mop. Chance stay out of here, you’re barefoot.”

I looked up at her; she looked like she wanted to cry, too. “It’s okay. Just stand still,” and she wasn’t mad.

I’d been trying so hard. She reached in and plucked me from the flood and she kept repeating, “It’s okay. Only milk. Don’t cry.” And while Artie mopped and swept up the glass, she leaned against the wall and slid down to sitting with me in her arms, against the wall and out of the huge milk puddle. She held me and the surviving bottle in her lap, and stroked my hair, and softly, in Spanish, she kept saying, “No *estoy ojado*.” It’s okay.

THAT NIGHT BEFORE the moving day we spent sleeping on the floor, using clothes and sheets to make lumpy pallets. I told Chance that this was how cowboys slept—out on the range, under the stars. The blue shadows of the empty room and the boxes piled high like far-off mesas helped the story as I whispered it to him. “The cowboys, they get to sing to the cattle, low and soft ’cause it’s night and they don’t want to wake up any coyotes.”

I went on and on about cactus and rattlers and the moon on the hills in the distance, till I could hear his breathing slowing down for sleep. I rolled over and scrunched even closer to him to keep warm. He lifted his head and whispered in my ear, “Duffy, can we be cowboys when we get big?”

“I thought you wanted to dance on the TV.”

“Can’t we do both?”

ME AND CHANCE sat in the back of a truck, stuffed in between the boxes and the washing machine. Artie whistled as he tied a tarp, flat, over us, wrapping the ropes tight, high up against the truck’s fence sides; turning the sky to a circus tent. Though we could see out the sides still. He wiggled his fingers to us and patted the truck’s slat-sides. The girls, Barbie and Justine, were up in the cab next to Mama, and then Artie got to driving—tall behind the wheel, even though he was only just past fifteen by a month or two.

The streets slipped past us, and I watched them go from out the back of the truck slats. There was the liquor store Mama sent me running to, to get her cigarettes. The Amigos’ Burger where she’d meet us after work each payday, to treat us to hot dogs and soda, all of us each getting to choose anything we wanted from the menu board. It was all getting away—the school, the playground. All of it.

I tried to make each place a story in my brain. Something to hold and remember for my New Year journal. Something to retell Chance late at night. Something saved, because Artie was going to be on the freeway soon headed someplace only he and Mama knew how to get to, going so fast I knew we’d never see any of this again.

“Once, on Hockert Street, I met Mama for the first time,” I told Chance. “I was little, as small as you are now.”

He hunched his shoulders down and leaned his head in close, to hear me over the rush of the freeway noise. “Were you in kinnergarden like me?”

“No, I got to skip that, you gonna listen? Well, Mama, she was the most beautiful lady I’d ever seen up close. Like a movie star. Like Sophia Loren.”

Chance added, “An’ she wore a red dress with a big shiny black leather belt.”

“And big black, round earrings, too,” I said. “There on the front porch, with the four of us waiting and inside a baby was crying. She took me aside and told me, ‘If you’re good and you help me with all the others, I’ll let you in and you can stay.’”

“An’ you peeked in the door to see the noise and saw me asleep, barely a baby, and that’s why you’re my guardian angel.” He nodded. This was one of the “How I Met You” stories I’d told Chance over and over again. He knew most of them by heart. You have to do that coming from Foster Homes. No one else knows if I cried as a baby, or if I was sweet or good, no one ever will. I wanted for Chance to have things different. And from now on I’d have to add the Hockert Street stories to them, too.

The freeway’s wind was rushing over our curved backs now, hitting us under the tarp-sky. The force of it keeping us low, wrapped into ourselves: a punishment. And then it came to me all at once, the secret of the days and nights. A new place wasn’t just new to whoever moved there. Me and Chance, we were gonna be new too.

The back of my neck tingled with the thought and suddenly that freeway wind wasn’t hurting me anymore. It was washing all of my life away. Cleaning me up to any new person I wanted to be once we got to whatever new street Mama had for us. I could pick out the best of me and only be that. I could win the challenge and never drop a bottle of milk again in my whole new life. I could teach Chance to do the same.

I turned my head from the smell of gas around us to his ear, and raised my voice loud over the noise of freeway.

“Once, when we were locked out and it was getting dark, and Mama was still at her job, Artie and Justine were nowhere to be found—”

“An’ my stomach was hurting ’cause I was hungry—” Chance added.

“—an’ I found a big box and stood on it, I lifted you up on my shoulders, up against the house. Even though your feet wobbled, and you were a-scared and shaking, you were brave. You crawled through the little window up over the bunk beds in the back room. You let us in and saved the day.” I never told Chance the part about me not wanting to jump up on the box and climb through the window myself with him below watching: a-scared to do it because he’d see under my dress, that I had dirty underwears on and maybe he’d laugh at me. I was new now; I could change my stories like I wanted. My underwear secret I’d save for the journal.

Chance grinned down into his knees, remembering how he’d saved the day. “We ate the rice from the refrig-alater.”

So, I said, “And the moral is, even the smallest have gifts to share.”