There have been Puerto Ricans living in the mainland U.S.A. since the middle of the last century. But it was after the second World War, when traveling became cheaper and easier, that the greatest influx began. In 1946, Puerto Ricans could purchase, for a small amount of money, a one-way ticket to the mainland. As citizens they did not face immigration laws or quotas . . . and so they arrived by the tens of thousands, first by freighter and later by airplane.

A small percentage went to work as migrant workers in the rural areas of the country. The majority settled in New York City. Many went to live in Spanish Harlem, known as El Barrio, an older community of Spanish-speaking people, on Manhattan's Upper East Side. There they joined family and friends. Others moved into congested neighborhoods inhabited by the children of earlier immigrant groups. Thus, they formed new neighborhoods in Brooklyn and Manhattan's Lower East Side. One area in particular was heavily populated by these newcomers, and became an extension or suburb of Spanish Harlem. This was the South Bronx, known to the Puerto Ricans as "El Bronx."

These migrants and their children, strangers in their own country, brought with them a different language, culture, and racial mixture. Like so many before them they hoped for a better life, a new future for their children, and a piece of that good life known as the "American dream."

This collection of stories is about the Puerto Rican migrants and their everyday struggle for survival, during that decade of the promised future 1946 through 1956, in New York City's "El Bronx."

Nicholasa Mohr

A VERY SPECIAL PET

The Fernández family kept two pets in their small five-room apartment. One was a large female alley cat who was a good mouser when she wasn't in heat. She was very large and had a rich coat of grey fur with black stripes and a long bushy tail. Her eyes were yellow and she had long white whiskers. Her name was Maríalu.

If they would listen carefully to what Maríalu said, Mrs. Fernández assured the children, they would hear her calling her husband Raúl.

"Raúl . . . Raúl . . . this is Maríalu . . . Raúl . . . Raúl . . . this is Maríalu," the children would sing loudly. They all felt sorry for Maríalu, because no matter how long and hard she howled, or how many times she ran off, she could never find her real husband, Raúl.

The second pet was not really supposed to be a pet at all. She was a small, skinny white hen with a red crest and a yellow beak. Graciela and Eugenio Fernández had bought her two years ago, to provide them and their eight children with good fresh eggs.

Her name was Joncrofo, after Graciela Fernández's favorite Hollywood movie star, Joan Crawford. People would

repeat the hen's name as she pronounced it, "Joncrofo la gallina."

Joncrofo la gallina lived in the kitchen. She had one foot tied with a very long piece of twine to one of the legs of the kitchen sink. The twine was long enough for Joncrofo to wander all over the kitchen and even to hop onto the large window with the fire escape. Under the sink Mrs. Fernández kept clean newspapers, water, and cornmeal for the hen, and a wooden box lined with some soft flannel cloth and packing straw. It was there that they hoped Joncrofo would lay her eggs. The little hen slept and rested there, but perhaps because she was nervous, she had never once laid an egg.

Graciela and Eugenio Fernández had come to the Bronx six years ago and moved into the small apartment. Except for a trip once before to the seaport city of Mayagüez in Puerto Rico, they had never left their tiny village in the mountains. To finance their voyage to New York, Mr. and Mrs. Fernández had sold their small plot of land, the little livestock they had, and their wooden cabin. The sale had provided the fare and expenses for them and their five children. Since then, three more children had been born. City life was foreign to them, and they had to learn everything, even how to get on a subway and travel. Graciela Fernández had been terribly frightened at first of the underground trains, traffic, and large crowds of people. Although she finally adjusted, she still confined herself to the apartment and seldom went out.

She would never complain; she would pray at the small altar she had set up in the kitchen, light her candles and murmur that God would provide and not forget her and her

family. She was proud of the fact that they did not have to ask for welfare or home relief, as so many other families did.

"Papi provides for us. We are lucky and we have to thank Jesus Christ," she would say, making the sign of the cross.

Eugenio Fernández had found a job as a porter in one of the large buildings in the garment center in Manhattan. He still held the same job, but he hoped to be promoted someday to freight-elevator operator. In the meantime, he sold newspapers and coffee on the side, ran errands for people in the building, and was always available for extra work. Still, the money he brought home was barely enough to support ten people.

"Someday I'm gonna get that job. I got my eye on it, and Mr. Friedlander, he likes me . . . so we gotta be patient. Besides the increase in salary, my God!—I could do a million things on the side, and we could make a lotta money. Why I could . . ." Mr. Fernández would tell his family this story several times a week.

"Oh, wow! Papi, we are gonna be rich when you get that job!" the children would shriek.

"Can we get a television when we get rich, Papi?" Pablito, the oldest boy, would ask. Nellie, Carmen, and Linda wanted a telephone.

"Everybody on the block got a telephone but us." Nellie, the oldest girl, would speak for them.

The younger children, William, Olgita, and Freddie, would request lots of toys and treats. Baby Nancy would smile and babble happily with everybody.

"We gonna get everything and we gonna leave El Bronx," Mr. Fernández would assure them. "We even gonna save enough to buy our farm in Puerto Rico—a big one! With

lots of land, maybe a hundred acres, and a chicken house, pigs, goats, even a cow. We can plant coffee and some sugar, and have all the fruit trees—mangoes, sweet oranges, everything!" Mr. Fernández would pause and tell the children all about the wonderful food they could eat back home in his village. "All you need to get the farm is a good start."

"We gonna take Joncrofo, right?" the kids would ask. "And Maríalu? Her too?"

"Sure," Mr. Fernández would say good-naturedly, "even Raúl, her husband, when she finds him, eh?" He would wink, laughing. "And Joncrofo don't have to be tied up like a prisoner no more—she could run loose."

It was the dream of Graciela and Eugenio Fernández to go back to their village as owners of their own farm, with the faith that the land would provide for them.

This morning Mrs. Fernández sat in her kitchen, thinking that things were just not going well. Now that the holidays were coming and Christmas would soon be here, money was scarcer than ever and prices were higher than ever. Things had been hard for Eugenio Fernández; he was still working as a porter and lately had been sick with a bad throat. They had not saved one cent toward their farm. In fact, they still owed the dry-goods salesman for the kitchen curtains and two bedspreads; even insurance payments were long overdue. She wanted to find a job and help out, but there were still three small preschool children at home to care for. Lately, she had begun to worry; it was hard to put meat on the table.

Graciela Fernández sighed, looking about her small, clean kitchen, and caught sight of Joncrofo running frantically after a stray cockroach. The hen quickly jerked her neck and snapped up the insect with her beak. In spite of all the fumigation and daily scrubbing, it seemed there was always a cockroach or two in sight. Joncrofo was always searching for a tasty morsel—spiders, ants, even houseflies. She was quick and usually got her victim.

The little white hen had a wicked temper and would snap at anyone she felt was annoying her. Even Maríalu knew better; she had a permanent scar on her right ear as a result of Joncrofo's sharp yellow beak. Now the cat carefully kept her distance.

In spite of Joncrofo's cantankerous ways, the children loved her. They were proud of her because no one else on the block had such a pet. Whenever other children teased them about not having a television, the Fernández children would remind them that Joncrofo was a very special pet. Even Baby Nancy would laugh and clap when she saw Joncrofo rushing toward one of her tiny victims.

For some time now, Mrs. Fernández had given up any hope of Joncrofo producing eggs and had also accepted her as a house pet. She had tried everything: warm milk, fresh grass from the park, relining the wooden box. She had even consulted the spiritualist and followed the instructions faithfully, giving the little hen certain herbs to eat and reciting the prayers; and yet nothing ever worked. She had even tried to fatten her up, but the more Joncrofo ate, it seemed, the less she gained.

After thinking about it for several days, this morning

Graciela Fernández reached her decision. Tonight, her husband would have good fresh chicken broth for his cold, and her children a full plate of rice with chicken. This silly hen was really no use alive to anyone, she concluded.

It had been six long years since Mrs. Fernández had killed a chicken, but she still remembered how. She was grateful that the older children were in school, and somehow she would find a way to keep the three younger ones at the other end of the apartment.

Very slowly she got up and found the kitchen cleaver. Feeling it with her thumb, she decided it should be sharper, and taking a flat stone, she carefully sharpened the edge as she planned the best way to finish off the hen.

It was still quite early. If she worked things right, she could be through by noontime and have supper ready before her husband got home. She would tell the children that Joncrofo flew away. Someone had untied the twine on her foot and when she opened the window to the fire escape to bring in the mop, Joncrofo flew out and disappeared. That's it, she said to herself, satisfied.

The cleaver was sharp enough and the small chopping block was set up on the kitchen sink. Mrs. Fernández bent down and looked Joncrofo right in the eye. The hen stared back without any fear or much interest. Good, thought Mrs. Fernández, and she walked back into the apartment where Olgita, Freddie, and Baby Nancy were playing.

"I'm going to clean the kitchen, and I don't want you to come inside. Understand?" The children looked at her and nodded. "I mean it—you stay here. If I catch you coming to the kitchen when I am cleaning, you get it with this,"

she said, holding out her hand with an open palm, gesturing as if she were spanking them. "Now, I'm going to put the chair across the kitchen entrance so that Baby Nancy can't come in. O.K.?" The children nodded again. Their mother very often put one of the kitchen chairs across the kitchen entrance so the baby could not come inside. "Now," she said, "you listen and you stay here!" The children began to play, interested only in their game.

Mrs. Fernández returned to the kitchen, smoothed down her hair, readjusted her apron, and rolled up her sleeves. She put one of the chairs across the threshold to block the entrance, then found a couple of extra rags and old newspapers.

"Joncrofo," she whispered and walked over to the hen. To her surprise, the hen ran under the sink and sat in her box. Mrs. Fernández bent down, but before she could grab her, Joncrofo jumped out of her box and slid behind one of the legs of the kitchen sink. She extended her hand and felt the hen's sharp beak nip one of her fingers. "Ave María!" she said, pulling away and putting the injured finger in her mouth. "O.K., you wanna play games. You dumb hen!"

She decided to untie the twine that was tied to the leg of the sink and then pull the hen toward her. Taking a large rag, she draped it over one hand and then, bending down once more, untied the twine and began to pull. Joncrofo resisted, and Mrs. Fernández pulled. Harder and harder she tugged and pulled, at the same time making sure she held the rag securely, so that she could protect herself against Joncrofo's sharp beak. Quickly she pulled, and

with one fast jerk of the twine, the hen was up in the air. Quickly Mrs. Fernández draped the rag over the hen. Frantically, Joncrofo began to cackle and jump, flapping her wings and snapping her beak. Mrs. Fernández found herself spinning as she struggled to hold on to Joncrofo, who kept wriggling and jumping. With great effort, Joncrofo got her head loose and sank her beak into Mrs. Fernández's arm. In an instant she released the hen.

Joncrofo ran around the kitchen cackling loudly, flapping her wings and ruffling her feathers. The hen kept an eye on Mrs. Fernández, who also watched her as she held on to her injured arm. White feathers were all over the kitchen; some still floated softly in the air.

Each time Mrs. Fernández went toward Joncrofo, she fled swiftly, cackling even louder and snapping wildly with her beak.

Mrs. Fernández remained still for a moment, then went over to the far end of the kitchen and grabbed a broom. Using the handle, she began to hit the hen, swatting her back and forth like a tennis ball. Joncrofo kept running and trying to dodge the blows, but Mrs. Fernández kept landing the broom each time. The hen began to lose her footing, and Mrs. Fernández vigorously swung the broom, hitting the small white hen until her cackles became softer and softer. Not able to stand any longer, Joncrofo wobbled, moving with slow jerky movements, and dropped to the floor. Mrs. Fernández let go of the broom and rushed over to the hen. Grabbing her by the neck, she lifted her into the air and spun her around a few times, dropping her on the floor. Near exhaustion, Mrs. Fernández could hear her own heavy breathing.

"Mami . . . Mamita. What are you doing to Joncrofo?" Turning, she saw Olgita, Freddie, and Baby Nancy staring at her wide-eyed. "Ma . . . Mami . . . what are you doing to Joncrofo?" they shouted and began to cry. In her excitement, Mrs. Fernández had forgotten completely about the children and the noise the hen had made.

"Oooo . . . is she dead?" Olgita cried, pointing. "Is she dead?" She began to whine.

"You killed Joncrofo, Mami! You killed her. She's dead." Freddie joined his sister, sobbing loudly. Baby Nancy watched her brother and sister and began to cry too. Shrieking, she threw herself on the floor in a tantrum.

"You killed her! You're bad, Mami. You're bad," screamed Olgita.

"Joncrofo . . . I want Joncrofo. . . ." Freddie sobbed. "I'm gonna tell Papi," he screamed, choking with tears.

"Me too! I'm gonna tell too," cried Olgita. "I'm telling Nellie, and she'll tell her teacher on you," she yelled.

Mrs. Fernández watched her children as they stood looking in at her, barricaded by the chair. Then she looked down at the floor where Joncrofo lay, perfectly still. Walking over to the chair, she removed it from the entrance, and before she could say anything, the children ran to the back of the apartment, still yelling and crying.

"Joncrofo. . . . We want Joncrofo. . . . You're bad . . . you're bad. . . ."

Mrs. Fernández felt completely helpless as she looked about her kitchen. What a mess! she thought. Things were overturned, and there were white feathers everywhere. Feeling the tears coming to her eyes, she sat down and began to cry quietly. What's the use now? She sighed and thought,

I should have taken her to the butcher. He would have done it for a small fee. Oh, this life, she said to herself, wiping her eyes. Now my children hate me. She remembered that when she was just about Olgita's age she was already helping her mother kill chickens and never thought much about slaughtering animals for food.

Graciela Fernández took a deep breath and began to wonder what she would do with Joncrofo now that she was dead. No use cooking her. They won't eat her, she thought, shaking her head. As she contemplated what was to be done, she heard a low grunt. Joncrofo was still alive!

Mrs. Fernández reached under the sink and pulled out the wooden box. She put the large rag into the box and placed the hen inside. Quickly she went over to a cabinet and took out an eyedropper, filling it with water. Then she forced open Joncrofo's beak and dropped some water inside. She put a washcloth into lukewarm water and washed down the hen, smoothing her feathers.

"Joncrofo," she cooed softly, "cro . . . cro . . . Joncrofita," and stroked the hen gently. The hen was still breathing, but her eyes were closed. Mrs. Fernández went over to the cupboard and pulled out a small bottle of rum that Mr. Fernández saved only for special occasions and for guests. She gave some to Joncrofo. The hen opened her eyes and shook her head, emitting a croaking sound.

"What a good little hen," said Mrs. Fernández. "That's right, come on . . . come, wake up, and I'll give you something special. How about if I get you some nice dried corn? . . . Come on." She continued to pet the hen and talk sweetly to her. Slowly, Joncrofo opened her beak and tried to cackle, and again she made a croaking sound. Blinking

her eyes, she sat up in her box, ruffled her feathers, and managed a low soft cackle.

"Is she gonna live, Mami?" Mrs. Fernández turned and saw Olgita, Freddie, and Baby Nancy standing beside her.

"Of course she's going to live. What did you think I did, kill her? Tsk, tsk . . . did you really think that? You are all very silly children," she said, and shook her finger at them. They stared back at her with bewilderment, not speaking. "All that screaming at me was not nice." She went on, "I was only trying to save her. Joncrofo got very sick, and see?" She held up the eyedropper. "I had to help her get well. I had to catch her in order to cure her. Understand?"

Olgita and Freddie looked at each other and then at their mother.

"When I saw that she was getting sick, I had to catch her. She was running all around, jumping and going crazy. Yes." Mrs. Fernández opened her eyes and pointed to her head, making a circular movement with her right index finger. "She went cuckoo! If I didn't stop her, Joncrofo would have really killed herself," she said earnestly. "So I gave her some medicine—and now . . ."

"Is that why you got her drunk, Mami?" interrupted Olgita.

"What?" asked Mrs. Fernández.

"You gave her Papi's rum . . . in the eyedropper. We seen you," Freddie said. Olgita nodded.

"Well," Mrs. Fernández said, "that don't make her drunk. It . . . it . . . ah . . . just calms her down. Sometimes it's used like a medicine."

"And makes her happy again?" Olgita asked. "Like

Papi? He always gets happy when he drink some."

"Yes, that's right. You're right. To make Joncrofo happy again," Mrs. Fernández said.

"Why did she get sick, Mami, and go crazy?" asked Freddie.

"I don't know why. Those things just happen," Mrs. Fernández responded.

"Do them things happen on the farm in Puerto Rico?"

"That's right," she said. "Now let me be. I gotta finish cleaning here. Go on, go to the back of the house; take Baby Nancy . . . go on."

The children left the kitchen, and Mrs. Fernández barricaded the entrance once more. She picked up the box with Joncrofo, who sat quietly blinking, and shoved it under the sink. Then she put the cleaver and the chopping board away. Picking up the broom, she began to sweep the feathers and torn newspapers that were strewn all about the kitchen.

In the back of the apartment, where the children played, they could hear their mother singing a familiar song. It was about a beautiful island where the tall green palm trees swayed under a golden sky and the flowers were always in bloom.

A NEW WINDOW DISPLAY

On a cold, bleak Monday morning early in January, Hannibal and Joey walked along the avenue. They were on their way to school. But first, as usual, they stopped in front of the FUNERARIA ORTIZ and looked at the new window display. Sometimes the other kids would be there waiting, but this morning Hannibal and Joey were the first to arrive.

"Man," said Hannibal, "it sure is cold today. Maybe it'll snow."

"I hope so," said Joey. "A whole lotta snow, and we can build some forts. . . . Neat! Huh, Hannibal?"

Hannibal nodded and turned to look at the storefront. "They got a new one today, but it's an old man."

"Again?" Joey asked.

Every Monday, the funeral chapel had a new window display of color photographs showing the recently deceased from different angles, including close-ups. The inscription on every wreath was clearly visible. Hannibal pointed to a large photograph of an older man in a white-satin-lined coffin. His grey hair was neatly combed back, showing a receding hairline. His face was a dark orange, with a pinkish

red spot on each cheek, and his lips were a deep purple-red, pushed back into a fixed smile. His eyes were shut. He wore a dark-blue suit and a clean white shirt with a black tie. His hands were folded over the lower part of his chest. They appeared very pale in contrast to his face; almost a greyish white. He wore a plain gold wedding band.

"They got a new one?" someone asked. Hannibal and Joey turned and saw Ramona, Mary, and Casilda.

"Well?" asked Ramona.

"They got an old man," answered Hannibal.

Ramona and the two girls stepped up and looked inside the storefront window. "Again?" Ramona asked.

"Yeah, all they got is old mens," Mary said.

"This guy got a mess of flowers. Look at all them decorations," said Joey. "Let's start reading them, O.K., Hannibal? Or . . . maybe we should wait for Papo and Little Ray." Joey looked at Hannibal, waiting for him to make the final decision.

"He's late, man, and it's cold. I say we start reading," Hannibal replied.

"Maybe we should wait a little bit. You know Papo always has to bring his cousin to school. . . ." Ramona said.

"No!" Hannibal said. "Let's read now." He looked at Ramona defiantly. She shrugged her shoulders.

"To our dear departed—" Hannibal began to read the inscription on one of the wreaths.

"Wait!" Ramona interrupted. "You going first again. You went first the last time."

"I don't remember going first last time," Hannibal said.

"Oh, yes! Right? Ask anybody." Ramona looked at the two girls standing beside her. They both nodded silently.

"What do you think, Joey? Do you think I went first before?"

"I don't remember. I don't think so," Joey replied quickly.

"You see?" Hannibal said to Ramona. "Now let me read!"

Ramona made a face and whispered something.

"What?" asked Hannibal. "What did you say, girl?"

"Nothing," Ramona said, sighing. "Go on."

"To our dear departed Uncle Felix," Hannibal read, "from his loving niece and husband and children, Rojelia and Esteban Martínez, Gilberto, María Patricia and Consuelo."

"Para un gran amigo," Joey read from another wreath, "Felix Umberto Cordero. De la familia Jiménez, 5013 Kelly Street, Bronx, New York."

"From your loving sister, María Elena Martínez and . . ." Ramona took the next turn. Then Mary and Casilda read. It usually went in that order unless Papo and Little Ray were there. Then the girls would be the last ones. Papo was a year younger than the others, and his little cousin was almost two years younger than Papo. Little Ray and his parents had arrived a few months ago from Puerto Rico. They always saved one inscription written in Spanish for him, because he read Spanish better than English.

The children finished reading all the inscriptions. "I guess they are real late, or they ain't coming. We better split or we are gonna be late," said Hannibal.

The group started once more toward school. They walked quickly, feeling the cold wind against their faces and bodies. They turned the corner of Prospect Avenue and headed down Longwood Avenue toward P.S. 39.

Except for a term in the second grade and once in the fourth grade, the group had been in the same classes since kindergarten. This term, they were all in the fifth grade except Papo, who was in the fourth. New in the group, he had become their friend when he moved to the Bronx about a year ago.

Little Ray was always with Papo, who had to look after him. In the four months since he had arrived, he had become the group's favorite. At first he had spoken no English, but now he was almost fluent. He spoke with an accent, which amused the other children, and he would get back at them by correcting their Spanish.

"That's not the way you say it." Little Ray would smile and gently correct them, giving them the proper pronunciation. They would laugh at him, but they could not help being impressed with his ability to speak so well.

"Man . . . Little Ray talks Spanish as good as my grandmother and parents and everybody!" Joey had said.

"Yeah," Ramona agreed. "He sure knows a lot for such a little kid."

The group had become protective of Little Ray, and they soon included him in everything they did. They were always anxious to see and hear his reaction to something different, or new, that he had never seen before.

"Qué fenomenal!" Little Ray would always shout with excitement. Everyone laughed and giggled. After a while, it got to be a game; they would wait for Little Ray to

react, and then in unison they echoed, "Phenomenal!"

It was Little Ray's favorite word.

"He may be little but he's got a lotta heart, man. He's phenomenal! . . . And no squealer either," Hannibal had said admiringly, the day that they had all decided to take some potatoes from the vegetable stand in the outdoor market on Union Avenue.

Little Ray and Casilda were assigned to keep the man at the stand busy while the rest of them stuffed their pockets with roasting potatoes. Later, in an empty lot, they skewered the potatoes on long, thin pieces of wood, roasting them over an open fire, waiting for the skin to turn black and the inside soft and hot.

As they ate, a superintendent from one of the nearby tenements came over and began to question Little Ray suspiciously in Spanish. He assured the man, speaking to him in Spanish, that they had all brought the potatoes with them from home. After the man left, they laughed.

"He's the best little kid in El Bronx!" Ramona had said. "Right?"

"Phenomenal!" everyone had shouted in agreement.

Hannibal and Joey rushed on ahead, almost running, and left the girls a few yards behind.

"What do you mean the most flowers?" Hannibal argued with Joey.

"Yeah . . . today that man had the most decorations I seen so far."

"Get out, Joey. Remember the old lady with the wig that time? And the little baby—remember him? Now he had like a hundred decorations."

"Oh yeah, that's right," said Joey. "Do you think that was a real baby?"

"Of course it was! What do you think it was, a dummy?"

"No, but maybe . . . it was like a doll," Joey said.

"It was no doll. Man, Joey, what's the matter with you? Why they gonna give all them flowers to a doll and everything?"

"Well," Joey said. "Anyway, that was no hundred decorations he had. Wasn't even fifty!"

"Well, maybe not a whole hundred. But it was more than fifty and more than that old guy today got. . . ." Hannibal continued trying to convince Joey as they raced to reach school before the late bell rang.

"To Our Dear Departed Brother and Uncle, Carlos Rodríguez . . ." read Hannibal.

"Rest in Peace, Co-Worker. From . . ." read Joey. As usual, they all stood together looking at another new window display. This Monday morning, the weather was quite pleasant, unseasonably warm; and the sun shone brightly. Then it was Papo's turn.

"I'm gonna read the one in Spanish for Little Ray, even though he ain't here today," Papo said. "Querido Esposo, Padre, y Abuelo . . ." he finished reading.

"This guy didn't have so many decorations," said Casilda.

"Yeah, not like the last guy," Joey said. "Look, even the coffin ain't so fancy."

"Yeah."

"Uh huh."

"That's right."

"How is Little Ray?" asked Hannibal. "He ain't been around now for about almost two weeks, right?"

"Yeah . . . well," Papo answered, "I think he's gotta go back to P.R."

"Puerto Rico?" asked Joey. "No kidding?"

"He got something in his chest, like—and they say it's the bad weather here that causes it. It's real bad and he's very sick. They say he gotta go back."

"Aww man, that's too bad!" said Hannibal.

"That's terrible," said Mary.

"When does he gotta leave?" asked Ramona.

"As soon as he gets better, so he can travel," answered Papo. "And he don't like the idea at all, let me tell you. Little Ray says they are very strict down there and that here he is much more free. He likes to hang out with us and play and everything."

"Do you think, Papo, that if he gets really well and all better, that maybe they will let him stay here?" asked Ramona.

"I don't know." Papo shrugged his shoulders. "His parents definitely say he gotta go back and stay with his aunt and uncle down there."

"Too bad," said Casilda. "He's nice."

"He's a real good kid," Hannibal agreed.

"Yeah."

"Uh huh."

The mildness in the air and the bright sun put the children in high spirits. They all walked to school at a slow pace, enjoying the January thaw.

"What a drag," Hannibal said; "going to school on such

a day. It feels like springtime. How about cutting today?"

"Get out, Hannibal!" Ramona said quickly. "You better not start that business again and get into trouble. And you better not listen to him, Joey."

"Goody Two-Shoes," Hannibal said, making a face at Ramona.

Ramona stuck her tongue out at Hannibal.

"Whew . . . qué fea . . ." he said good-naturedly. "Ugly as sin." Ramona responded by shrugging her shoulders. Neither of them could really feel angry this morning.

The group strolled along and turned the corner onto Longwood Avenue.

"Hey . . . maybe if the weather changes and it keeps on being warm, they will let Little Ray stay. Then he can come back to school and stick around with us," said Joey.

"I sure hope so," said Papo, smiling. "Except after he gets well, then I hope it snows. He's never really seen snow—he's only seen like a little bit. Like flurries, so far. But I mean a real big storm. This way we could all build a fort, and have snowball fights and everything, you know. . . ."

"Yeah," said Mary, "that's right. Remember, we told Little Ray all about it. He was looking forward to it."

"Right now, let's just hope it stays warm," said Ramona. "That way he can come back and be with us real soon."

"Sure."

"Right."

"Absolutely."

A whole month had passed since Little Ray was buried. Many neighbors had attended the funeral mass. The group

did not go, except for Papo. However, the members of the group had gone once to the funeral chapel with their families to pay their respects to Little Ray and his family. By now, things had gone back to normal except that the children no longer met in front of the storefront window of the FUNERARIA ORTIZ on Monday mornings. They just walked past the new window display on their way to school, not looking or stopping. No one ever spoke about it.

This morning, wet snow melted instantly as it hit the concrete pavement and black-tar streets. Hannibal and Joey rushed to school feeling cold and damp. As they approached the funeral chapel, they saw Papo, Ramona, Mary, and Casilda standing right in front of the storefront window.

"Hannibal, Joey—look!" Ramona called out, pointing to the new window display. "Papo told us."

Hannibal and Joey looked inside the storefront window and saw many photographs of Little Ray. There were so many floral wreaths that the small coffin was hardly visible. A large close-up showed him in a powder-blue, silk-lined coffin. His dark curly hair was oiled, combed and parted on the side. Little Ray's eyes were shut and his face was colored a light pink. Each cheek had a dark pink spot. His lips were bright orange and slightly parted. He looked like he was smiling, dreaming a pleasant dream. He wore his dark-blue First Holy Communion suit, with a white satin sash tied on his left sleeve, a white starched shirt, and a dark-blue tie. His small pale hands held a white missal and a set of white rosary beads with a gold cross.

"I thought we should stop. . . ." Papo hesitated. "My

parents told me last night, and I figured that it would only be right . . . for us to come here. For Little Ray."

The group remained silent for a while.

"Wow!" Hannibal said, breaking the silence. "He sure looks different, don't he?"

"Yeah," Joey said. "I never even seen him with his hair combed before. He even looks healthy, like he got a sunburn."

"My father says they do a good job here," said Papo, nodding. "They made him look like he was making his Communion again. They made everything perfect."

"He looks nice," Mary said.

"Oh . . . yeah, he does," said Casilda. "Like a little angel. Right?"

"He sure does." Ramona nodded.

"Now," Hannibal said. "He's the one that got the most flowers of anybody I ever seen!"

"That's right!" said Joey. "Even more than that little baby."

"Uh huh."

"The most!"

"Absolutely."

The children stood quietly and looked into the storefront window. The wet snow continued to fall. They were all damp and chilly, but no one moved. After a while, Papo asked, "Do you think we should read?"

The children looked at each other and shrugged. Then everyone turned to look at Hannibal.

"O.K.," Hannibal said, "who's gonna go first?" Everyone

was surprised. Hannibal had never asked anyone to be first before.

"You go first," said Ramona. "Like you always do." Hannibal opened his mouth to protest, but Ramona stared at him and, folding her arms, said quickly, "Go on!" Hannibal read slowly.

"To the Santiago family in their Hour of Bereavement . . ." He read on, looking at Joey when he finished.

"Beloved Son, Ramon Luis . . ." Joey read.

Each took a turn. There were so many wreaths that they went twice around, and Hannibal and Joey had to read a third time. Finally they were all finished.

"I still miss him, you know," Papo said. "I never even minded taking care of him . . . like he was no bother. Other little kids, man, you know, they can really be pests. But not him."

"He was really a good kid," said Hannibal.

"It's kinda funny, because like I know he's not gonna be around no more, yet like I can't believe he's gone." Papo paused for a moment, then continued, "Anyway, my parents ordered some of them pictures and this way we can remember him like he looked."

They walked silently toward school. It began to snow harder, and large snowflakes stuck to the pavement, piling up. Areas of sidewalk were covered by a soft white blanket. The children felt the soft crunch under their feet, so different from the familiar hard concrete.

"Hey!" yelled Joey. "We got us a real big snowstorm!"

"Hurray!"

The group shouted, sliding and turning.

"Oh, boy, imagine if Little Ray were here and seen this!" said Papo excitedly.

"Oh man! He would be so happy!" Hannibal smiled. "And we all know what he would say. . . ."

"Phenomenal!" everyone shouted.

"ONCE UPON A TIME . . ."

Bouncey, bouncey, bally,
My sister's name is Paulie.
She gave me a smack,
I gave her one back.
Bouncey, bouncey, bally.

"Now it's my turn," said another girl. "Give me the ball." She too bounced the ball on the black tar roof of the tenement, throwing her right leg over the ball every third bounce.

One, two, three a nation
I received my confirmation
On the Day of Decoration
Just before my graduation.
One, two, three a nation!

"Me now," said the third girl, and took the Spalding ball, bouncing it the same way.

Once upon a time
A baby found a dime.
The dime turned red,
And the baby fell down dead!

"Me again," said the first girl and, taking the ball, began, "Bouncey, bouncey, bally, My sister's name is . . ."

After she finished, she handed the ball to the second girl, and then the third girl took a turn. They repeated this a few times and decided to stop playing.

"It's too hot up here," said the first girl. "Look, the tar is melting and getting stuck to my shoes."

"Ugh, yeah."

"Let's go."

They walked along the rooftops, going from building to building. Each building was separated from the next by a short wall of painted cement, stretching across the width of the building, no higher than three and a half feet. When they reached each wall the girls climbed over, exploring another rooftop.

"It's too hot out here; let's find a hallway to play in," said the second girl.

"O.K.," agreed the third girl, "but let's get a place where they don't throw us out."

"How about the building over there?" The first girl pointed to a tenement several rooftops away. "Most of them families in that building moved out, so probably no one will hear us."

They headed in that direction, eager to be out of the hot sun.

"I hope the entrance ain't locked," said the third girl.

They climbed the last dividing wall and went straight to the entrance, which jutted out of the rooftop at a slant. The third girl pulled at the large metal door; it wouldn't budge.

"It's locked," she said to her companions.

"Try it the other way," said the first girl. "Let's push in."

They pushed the door, and it opened slightly.

All three girls pushed with all their might, and slowly the door began to open.

"A little more and one of us can slide in and see what's making it get stuck," said the third girl.

The door opened about one and a half feet.

"Good. Let's go in and see what's making it stuck." The first girl slipped through. "Ouch," she said. "There's a man sleeping, I think." She quickly came back out.

"Well?" the second girl asked.

"Wanna come in and see him?" the first girl replied. "It's dark in there. But it was a man; and he was sleeping real sound. He didn't make no noise when I stepped on him."

"Let's go on in and see," said the third girl.

"What if he should wake up?" asked the second girl.

"We'll run real fast," said the first girl.

"Yeah," said the second girl. "Down the stairs. Otherwise he might catch us on the roof. What do you say? O.K.?"

They agreed and slipped in through the partially opened door. They entered the dark hallway carefully, avoiding the body that lay on the floor between the door and the wall.

"See?" The first girl pointed. "He must be fast asleep."

They concentrated as they stared at the body, trying to make things out. After a while, their eyes adjusted to the dark and he became more visible.

"Oh, look! He's got a jacket, and it's from that club," said the third girl.

He lay curled up, facing the wall; they could see his back

clearly. He wore a bright orange jacket. A large picture of the head of a leopard baring its teeth was decaled across the back. Underneath, the words PUERTO RICAN LEOPARDS were stenciled in black.

"It's one of them guys," said the first girl. "You know?" she continued. "He's not moving. Maybe . . . maybe he's dead!"

The girls rushed away from him, going down a few steps into the stairwell.

"What do you think we should do?" asked the second girl.

"Maybe we should find out who he is," the first girl responded.

"He might wake up if we get too near," said the second girl.

They looked at one another and then at the young man. He had not moved and still faced the wall, his body curled up.

"Who's gonna look and see who he is?" asked the first girl.

"Not me."

"Not me."

"Not me neither, then."

They stood silently for a while, and finally the third girl said, "We should go and tell the super of the building."

"That's right. Good idea!"

"I say we should still know who it is," said the first girl. "Let's find out—come on!" She went up the steps.

"Wait," called the second girl. "Be careful; he might wake up."

She stopped and nodded in response, then quickly

stepped up to the young man. Leaning over, she looked at his face and ran back to her friends.

"Well, who is it?" they asked.

"It's their leader. You know, that real tough guy. Frankie-Chino!"

"No kidding, him?"

"Wow."

"Yes. And you know," said the first girl, "his eyes are closed . . . and he's not breathing!"

"Really?"

"Honest?"

"Go see for yourself," she told her friends.

"I'm scared he might wake up," said the second girl.

"He won't. He's not breathing," said the first girl.

Holding hands, they went up to him and quickly bent over, looking into his face. They ran back down, a little less scared than before.

"I think he's dead," the second girl said. The third girl nodded in agreement.

"What should we do?" asked the first girl. "I know," she went on, "let's go tell them about it at their clubhouse. It's down in the basement, right next to the candy store on Wales Avenue, off Westchester."

They all looked at each other and shrugged their shoulders.

"Let's do it," said the first girl. "Come on."

"All right."

"Sure."

All three ran down the stairs and out into the street. They hurried, talking in short, anxious sentences, planning how they would tell their story.

"They are real tough guys. Wow, my mother better not find out we went there," said the second girl.

"Oh, we won't tell nobody. It's our secret. Right?"

"Also, we have to promise that we won't let nobody else know . . . about him. Except the Puerto Rican Leopards, of course."

They all promised.

They reached Wales Avenue and went down the old tenement steps leading to the basement clubhouse of the Puerto Rican Leopards. They got to the door and knocked; no one answered. They knocked again and again, waiting for a response. After a while, the first girl tried the doorknob; the lock released, and the door opened.

They walked in slowly, entering a large unkempt room that was damp and dark. A studio couch with large holes, where the stuffing spilled out, was against the center wall. Several old rusted metal kitchen chairs were scattered about the room, some overturned. A broken radio was set on two wooden crates. The center of the cement floor was covered by a large piece of broken and peeling linoleum. Dirty paper cups and plates were strewn about. The room looked dusty and neglected.

"Nobody's here," said the second girl.

"It looks deserted," said the third girl.

"Let's get out of here," said the first girl. All three walked out of the dark basement and out into the street. The afternoon sun shone brightly; it was hot and humid.

"Whew," said the first girl, "it was so much more cooler down there."

Slowly, they walked along tossing the ball to one another until they got back to their building.

"What do you think?" asked the second girl. "Should we tell somebody what we seen?"

"I think we should just forget it. That guy was probably sleeping and woke up already," said the third girl.

"Yeah. We better not; then they'll ask us what we was doing up on the roof and all," said the first girl.

"Let's have another game of ball," said the second girl.

"Let me go first," said the third girl. "I was last before."

"O.K."

"All right."

Bouncing the ball and throwing her leg over it on every third bounce, she sang,

Once upon a time
A baby found a dime.
The dime turned red,
And the baby fell down dead!