

The Kids

My mama, Marta, was in the bathroom when Papa grabbed me under the arms and swung me back and forth so I could waddle up to the door to push it open. Mama looked down at me while Papa tilted my head to look at her. She was standing by the sink, holding a test strip. I had seen them enough times to know what they were.

“Whatcha doin’, Mama?” Papa said in the sweet, kidlike voice he used to speak for me.

“Not now, Julio,” she said, closing the door in Papa’s face.

He set me against the wall, then gently opened the door.

“Sweetie, you’re testing already?” he said.

Mama didn’t say anything. I could picture her sad face.

“Oh, mi amor,” Papa said. He probably hugged her. “We’ll get there some day.”

The test must have been negative.

That was after she lost the first baby.

Mama named me after Charlie Chaplin, one of her favorite movie stars. He was a troublemaking scamp just like me. And since I’m a tiny teddy bear, Mama and Papa like to call me Little Charlie.

I look like a polar bear cub. I have brown marble eyes and a big black thread for a smile. Some of Mama and Papa’s other kids—like Choco the Bear or Chepita the Lamb—don’t have mouths, or smiles, but I’m always smiling. That’s probably why Mama and Papa like me a lot. No matter what, I always look happy and hopeful.

Mama found me at a fiber optics convention. I was one of the giveaway toys at a company booth. Once she spotted me, she pretended to be interested in their products just so she could get me. She was happy to bring me home. It was right after she first started dating Papa. That’s why I feel

like *their* kid, even though—between the both of them—they also have Choco, Chepita, Sandy, Pinky, and me.

They've made me into a rambunctious teddy boy with dreams as high as the stars above. My big wish is to get a rocket ship so I can explore outer space, especially the Milky Way, because I think there might be moons made of chocolate chip cookie dough. At least that's the dream Mama gave me. She even drew a chalk painting of me looking out the window of a great big rocket ship as I zoom through space toward a yummy-looking chocolate chip cookie moon.

Papa has nurtured my daredevil antics, too. He's turned an old cardboard clothes hanger into a nifty hang glider. He'll put it over my back and stretch out my arms like I'm grabbing it so he can take me swooping and gliding through our apartment, turning the wings left and right while he makes whooshing sounds. I like to yell aaaaaahh! before I crash-land and tumble on their bed or couch when Mama's watching TV, which Papa likes to call "the boob tube" even though he's not an old guy.

We have a lot of fun together.

They're the best Mama and Papa I could have ever had.

A couple of months after she lost the first baby, Mama came to the living room. It was gloomy outside. I was sitting on the armchair next to Choco and Chepita, Papa's two kids. I could tell something was wrong. Mama was grimacing. She sat at the end of the couch and wrapped her arms around her knees like she wanted to curl up and hide. "Please, no," She said and groaned in pain. She sat still for a long time. Then she moaned again. After a while, she got up slowly and walked to the bathroom, dragging her feet like they were filled with lead.

I could hear Mama call Papa over to the bathroom. "I'm bleeding," she said. After he ran to the bathroom, I could hear Papa make an oh-sound like when a cartoon character gets socked in the stomach.

Mama sat back down on the couch and groaned when she bent over. Papa didn't know what to do. He just stood there and stared at the floor. I remember his hair was all squiggly from getting out of bed.

"Our little blueberry," Mama said in a low, low voice. "We're losing it."

Papa looked like he wanted to cry but couldn't.

Mama had been pregnant for six weeks, just like the first time. Each week, she read a newsletter on her laptop that talked about what was happening with her baby. The last one said it was about the size of a blueberry.

They were really quiet the rest of that morning. Papa made breakfast in

the kitchen without playing his rock 'n' roll music like he usually would. He got dressed and trudged around with keys jingling in his pocket like he was ready to take her to the hospital again.

Then Mama went to the bathroom for a long, long time. She called Papa over.

“What should we do with it?” I heard her say.

I couldn't hear what Papa said.

But a while later, Mama walked through the living room carrying a small plastic bag. She went to the balcony and put her hand shovel in the bag.

Mama cried to herself a lot that night.

After she lost their little blueberry, Mama didn't laugh at Papa's jokes as much. She stopped using the test strips. I heard them say that they were afraid of getting pregnant again.

One day, Mama came home with a grocery bag and a six-pack of beer. She never brought beer home. That's what Papa would do, but not her. She came to the living room, holding a bottle. She set it on the coffee table and scooped me up along with her phone. She nestled me against her chest and stretched out on the couch while she looked at a website with a bunch of pictures of messed-up cakes. Usually, these pictures made her crack up but she just drank her beer and held me close to her side. Papa came home soon after. He stepped into the living room. “Whoa, you picked up some beer?” he said.

“Yeah, help yourself,” she said. “There's more in the fridge.”

Mama didn't notice because she was stuck looking at the internet but when Papa walked away he made a face like his tummy didn't feel so good. All those months they were trying to have a baby Mama didn't drink any booze because she didn't want to lose a baby. She was that careful.

Later that night, Papa took me through the kitchen riding my hang glider. He was trying to make it fun at home. I crash-landed on the table and sat there during dinner, keeping them company. Mama was drinking a second beer. She ate her food like a slowpoke. She kept looking away, like she was thinking about something.

“What's the matter?” Papa said.

“Nothing.”

“Come on, I can tell something's the matter. Why don't you try telling me?”

Mama sighed.

“My coworker who got pregnant at the same time as our first one is

already starting to show a belly. I can't help but look at her and think that should be me, too."

A few days later, Mama heard the little boy next door running and yelling in the hallway outside. She went to the front door to look through the peephole. She stood and watched for a while. Papa walked past her.

"I would *never* treat our kid like that," she said, stomping into the kitchen.

"What happened?" Papa asked.

"The boy next door was standing by the elevator, all by himself, yelling and yelling for his mom and when she finally came she shouted, "Damn it, I'm coming!" She kept pressing the elevator button like she just wanted to be rid of him. And why doesn't she *ever* hold his hand? She never does! It's like she doesn't even want him around, so why did she have him in the first place?"

Mama's eyes got watery. "It's just not fair."

All Papa could do was hug her and rub her arm. He didn't tell her it would all be okay. There's no way they could know.

I could tell Papa was trying to stay positive. He would come home and bring me quarters and nickels so I could put them in the piggy bank Mama gave me so I could save money to buy a rocket ship. He would lift me up and stretch my arms out and have me fly through the apartment while he said, "Is that a bird? Or a plane? No, it's Super Charlie!" before I would land on Mama's lap with one arm raised. Mama would chuckle sometimes and say, "Oh, Little Charlie," before I would leap up to give her a smooch on the cheek.

But then late at night, I would hear Papa walk through the apartment in the dark. He would grab his bottle of whiskey from the kitchen cupboard. I know he chugged some because I would hear the bottle clink against another one and then he would tiptoe to the living room and make little coughs like he does after he drinks from the bottle. Even though it was dark, I would see Papa sit against the couch and eat from a can of peanuts. After he crunched and ate some, he would take deep breaths until he would yawn a bunch of times and go back to bed.

After Mama lost the second baby, Papa came to the living room a lot in the middle of the night. That's how I know he was also having a hard time.

One day, Papa came home before Mama. The sun was shining through the blinds. I was sitting on the couch between Sandy the Rabbit's legs

while Papa read about sports from his laptop. Then we heard the door lock rattling.

“Mama’s home!” he said, and grabbed me. Papa hid behind the corner. We waited for her to open the door.

“You beat me,” she said, after she stepped in. Papa made me peek out from the corner to wave to her. “Hey, Little Charlie,” she said.

Papa and I gave her a big hug.

“Traffic was horrible,” she said. “It took over an hour to get here.”

“Oh, that sucks,” Papa said. “I’m sorry to hear that, mi amor.”

Mama sighed. “I want to go away somewhere.”

Papa scrunched his eyebrows like he does when he’s thinking.

“We *do* need a getaway,” he said. “We’ve lost two babies here, and we can’t just avoid coming here since it’s our home.”

Mama nodded.

One morning, Mama carefully tucked me into her flowery blue purse. “I’ll let you out when I can,” she said, and zipped it up. When she opened it, I was on the floor and Papa was sitting next to Mama in an airplane. He was staring out the window. Mama nudged him. He turned and looked down at me and smiled. She quietly pulled me out and handed me to Papa. He let me look out the window.

“We’re going to fly, Little Charlie,” Mama said. “To New Mexico!”

“Oh boy oh boy!” Papa said for me. I got excited looking at all the airplanes.

Mama took a picture of me staring out the window. I was like a traveling gnome, except I was a traveling teddy. She was giggling when she showed Papa the picture on her phone. It had been a long time since I heard her laugh.

The plane was really loud when it took off! It scared the heck out of me. I had been bugging Mama and Papa about getting me a rocket ship with rocket boosters, but I wasn’t sure I wanted them anymore. Not after that flight.

That night, we stayed in a hotel. Mama and I sat up on the bed and watched Papa drink beer and get rowdy while he watched his favorite team, the Golden State Warriors, win a basketball game. Afterward, when he was smiley, Mama told him she was ready to see her doctor again. She wanted to get blood tests so they could help her keep their next blueberry. Papa smiled. He hugged and kissed her. When we went to bed, all tucked out, Papa cupped a hand over her belly. Mama fell asleep with me in her arms.

The next day, she sat me in the backseat of their rental car.

"Where are we going, Mama?" Papa said in my voice. "To Chuck E. Cheese's?"

"No, Little Charlie. We're going to Taos!"

"Towels?" Papa said for me. "Is that a town where they make a bunch of towels?"

"No, no. We're going to *Taos*. It's an old mountain town. It's supposed to be really pretty."

Papa flicked through the radio stations while I sat on his lap. A really cool rock 'n' roll song came on. Papa stood me up and raised one of my arms while I bobbed my head back and forth to the beat. Headbanging, he calls it. And he did it too. Mama shook her head and grinned. Even though I wasn't their blueberry, I'm happy we had those kind of moments together.

A while later, Papa lifted me up so I could peer out the window as we drove up the mountains. The sky seemed so big up there. There were no clouds in sight. I saw myself in the rearview mirror, staring out the window, watching everything pass by.

Papa sat me on the dashboard. It was toasty from all the sunshine. I stared at the highway as we drove toward the great big blue sky over the mountain.