

BOOK 1

The Runaway Reflection

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CRISLUE
LAB



EL VALLE DE LAS ILUSIONES

CHAPTER 1

The Bathroom Mirror

“And if one day your reflection goes first, don’t scold it. Follow it.”

— GRANDMA



The city never went quiet.

At seven at night, from the bus window, Cris could hear all of it: car horns arguing at the stoplight, the steam whistle of the sweet-potato cart, a dog barking at a motorcycle as if the motorcycle owed him money.



It smelled like fresh-baked bread and like rain that hadn't made up its mind to fall yet.

Cris pressed his forehead against the glass. It was cold. Outside, hundreds of people walked along staring at their phones, all wearing the same "I'm late" face. Not one of them looked up.

"If I turned invisible," he thought, "nobody would even notice."

And then he laughed to himself, because it seemed like a pretty good joke.

That day at school, he'd done such a good impression of the principal—belly sticking out, trumpet voice, the "Young people, young people!"—that even Miss Lupita had to turn around to the board so nobody would see her laugh.



"You're such a clown, Cris," Memo said, crying with laughter.

"Thank you, thank you. Autographs after school."

But at recess, when the teacher came over and asked him quietly, "And how are you doing, Cris? You seem tired," he felt something tight in his throat, like when you swallow your gum by accident.

"Me? Fine, Miss Lupita. Fine fine. Fine squared."

She smiled, but not all the way.

Cris wound the tip of his scarf around one finger and ran off to play soccer.





His grandma had knitted him that scarf.

Cris remembered that summer at her little house in the village: the creak, creak of the rocking chair, the smell of beans simmering in a clay pot, the ice-cold hibiscus water, the calendar nobody had changed since March.

In the hallway hung an old mirror with a dark wooden frame, worn smooth by so many years. Grandma said it was older than the village, and sometimes, when she walked past it, she nodded hello, the way you greet a neighbor.

"That's how time stays in grandmas' houses," she used to say. "Still, but pretty."

His grandma knew things. She knew when it was going to rain before there were any clouds. She knew, over the phone, when he was sad, even when he said he wasn't.



On the last day, she wrapped the scarf around his neck. On the tip, in yellow thread, she had embroidered his name: CRIS.

"So you never forget who you are," she told him. And then, softly, very seriously: "And if one day your reflection goes first, don't scold it. Follow it."

Cris laughed. Grandmas say the weirdest things.

The apartment smelled like reheated noodle soup and fabric softener. On the fridge, under a pineapple magnet, was a note in his mom's round, bubbly handwriting:

There's soup. Don't stay up late. I love you to the moon. Mom.



His mom was a nurse, and that week she was working nights. His dad was asleep on the couch with his shoes still on and the TV talking soccer to itself. He snored softly, like a toy motor.



Cris took off his dad's shoes (one of them smelled like cheese, but he wasn't going to write that down anywhere) and covered him with the plaid blanket.

"Good night, Dad."

"Mmmh... good night, champ," his dad mumbled, without opening his eyes.



Cris ate the soup straight from the pot, lukewarm and nice and salty, and went to his room with his phone.

Videos. One of a cat falling off a table. Another of a man falling off a bike. Another of a cat falling off a bike.

Cris laughed in the dark, his face blue from the screen, surrounded by notifications that glowed and faded like fireflies, until the phone got hot in his fingers and warned him: 3% battery.

The screen went dark and the room fell silent.

A strange silence. A heavy one. Like when someone is about to say something important and then doesn't.



Cris listened to his own breathing. The tick-tock of the kitchen clock. The fridge humming like a giant bumblebee.

"I'd better brush my teeth," he thought. "Quick."

The bathroom was tiny and white, with a tile that had a crack shaped like a lightning bolt. The ceiling bulb buzzed—bzzzzz—and flickered every now and then, as if it couldn't be bothered to stay on.



Above the sink hung Grandma's mirror, the one with the wooden frame. It had arrived from the village a month ago, wrapped in newspaper, with a little note: *For my Cris's bathroom. So he can take a good look at himself.* "Your grandma and her ideas," his mom had said.

Cris hung his scarf on the towel hook and turned on the hot water. The steam rose, smelling of coconut soap. The mint toothpaste tingled on his tongue, cool and sweet.

And like every night, he practiced in front of the mirror.

"Good afternoon, young people," he said in his trumpet voice, sticking out his belly.



His reflection stuck out its belly. But a little late. Half a second. Like when a video lags.

Cris tried his best smile, the school-picture one. It came out crooked. For an instant, behind the foam, he saw a very tired boy who looked nothing like the class clown.

The mirror fogged up. And on the other side of the glass, a finger began to write.


It wasn't his finger. Both his hands were busy.
WHO ARE YOU?
SWIIISH
CRIS
Only the best-looking guy in the building! And the one across the street.
NOT THAT.
CRIS
Okay, okay... I'm Cris. My name.
WHAT IF IT'S ERASED?

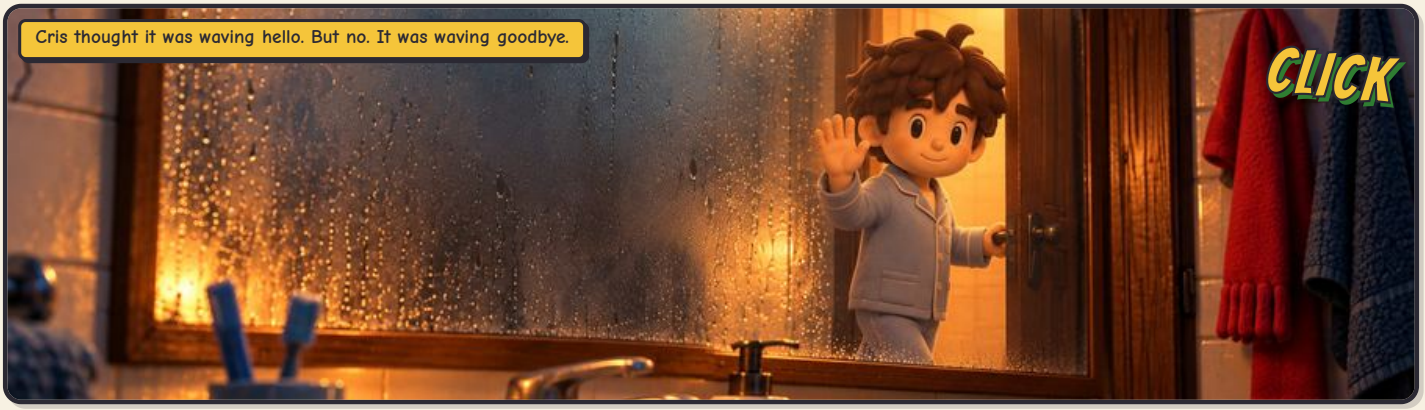

CRIS
Then... I'm my body.
THE ONE FROM FIVE YEARS AGO?

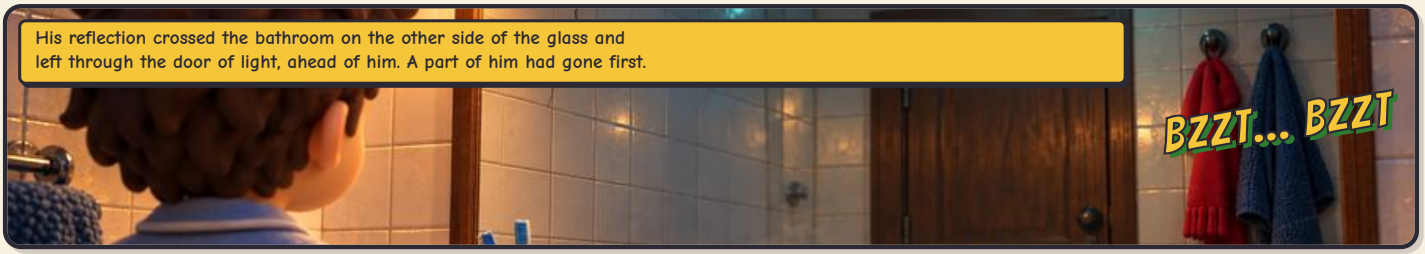

CRIS
I'm what I think!
AND WHEN YOU'RE ASLEEP?


Cris opened his mouth. Not a single joke came out.


AND WHEN NOBODY SEES YOU?


He stopped. His reflection didn't.
SCRUB-SCRUB-SCRUB
PTUI!
CLINK... CREEEAK
CRIS
Hey! Come back! Reflections can't just leave!
REFLECTION
Why not?
WHOOOOO


Cris thought it was waving hello. But no. It was waving goodbye.
CLICK


His reflection crossed the bathroom on the other side of the glass and left through the door of light, ahead of him. A part of him had gone first.
BZZT... BZZT


CRIS
Dad! My reflection left!


His dad never, ever forgot his name.
DAD
Aw, mijo... uh... what's your...? Sorry, I'm totally out of it.



Cris walked back to the bathroom slowly, counting the tiles so he wouldn't be scared. One, two, three... eleven.

He took the scarf off the hook. It still smelled like his grandma's little house: like the rocking chair, like simmering beans, like long afternoons.

He unrolled the tip.

The embroidery said: _RIS.

The C had come loose. A little yellow thread dangled, trembling, as if it were cold.



Cris felt a chill in his stomach, a chill that didn't come from the floor. And then, as if his grandma were whispering it in his ear, he remembered:

If one day your reflection goes first, don't scold it. Follow it.



Outside, the city sounded the same as always: a horn, a dog, the motorcycle.

Nobody in the whole building knew that something had just left through a mirror.

Cris got into bed with the scarf still on and pulled the covers up to his nose. He didn't fall asleep. He lay there staring at the bathroom mirror through the crack in the door.

Very late, the tip of the scarf lifted all by itself, slowly, like when a breeze comes in through a window.

And it pointed at the mirror.



There, deep in the glass, a little golden light blinked once.

As if someone, very far away, were waiting for him.

End of Chapter 1