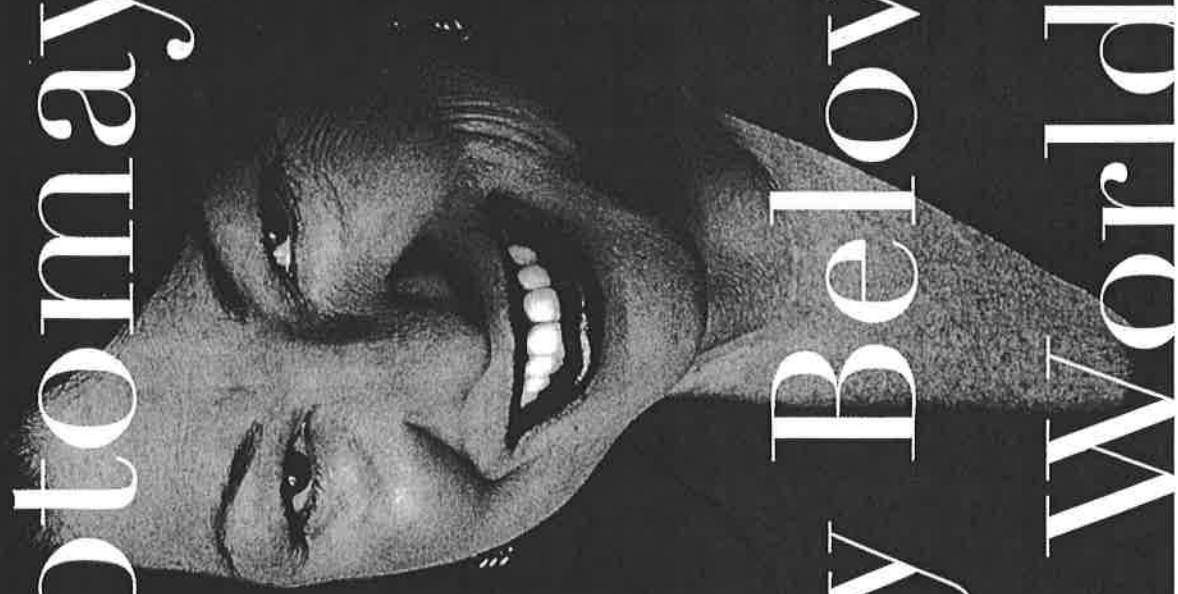


**Sonia**

**Sotomayor**

**My Beloved  
World**

#1  
New York  
Times  
Best Seller



## *Preface*

Since my appointment to the Supreme Court, I have spoken to a wide variety of groups in different settings, answering all sorts of questions. Many people, predictably, have asked about the law, the Court, and my journey as a judge. But many more, to my surprise, have asked about my personal story, curious to know how I had managed and been shaped by various circumstances in my early life, especially the ones that didn't naturally promise success.

At a conference on juvenile diabetes, a six-year-old asked plaintively if living with the disease ever gets easier. Elsewhere, a child who had recently lost a parent asked how I had coped with losing my father at an early age. Minority students have asked what it is like to live between two worlds: How do I stay connected to my community? Have I ever experienced discrimination? Many young lawyers, men as well as women, have asked how I balance my personal life with the demands of career. Most perplexing of all was the question that inspired this book: How much did I owe to having had a happy childhood? I struggled with that one; until this book I have not spoken publicly about some of my darker experiences growing up, and I would not have considered myself unqualifiedly happy as a child. Ultimately, though, I realized I did have sources of deep happiness, and these bred in me an optimism that proved stronger than any adversity.

Underlying all these questions was a sense that my life's story touches

people because it resonates with their own circumstances. The challenges I have faced—among them material poverty, chronic illness, and being raised by a single mother—are not uncommon, but neither have they kept me from uncommon achievements. For many it is a source of hope to see someone realize her dreams while bearing such burdens. Having caught people's attention in this way, I've thought long and hard about what lessons my life might hold for others, young people especially. How is it that adversity has spurred me on instead of knocking me down? What are the sources of my own hope and optimism? Most essentially, my purpose in writing is to make my hopeful example accessible. People who live in difficult circumstances need to know that happy endings are possible.

A student recently posed another question that gave me pause: "Given that there are only nine Supreme Court Justices, each with life tenure, can anyone realistically aspire to such a goal? How do we hold on to dreams that, statistically, are almost impossible?" As I tell in these pages, the dream I first followed was to become a judge, which itself seemed far-fetched until it actually happened. The idea of my becoming a Supreme Court Justice—which, indeed, as a goal would inevitably elude the vast majority of aspirants—never occurred to me except as the remotest of fantasies. But experience has taught me that you cannot value dreams according to the odds of their coming true. Their real value is in stirring within us the will to aspire. That will, wherever it finally leads, does at least move you forward. And after a time you may recognize that the proper measure of success is not how much you've closed the distance to some far-off goal but the quality of what you've done today.

I have ventured to write more intimately about my personal life than is customary for a member of the Supreme Court, and with that candor comes a measure of vulnerability. I will be judged as a human being by what readers find here. There are hazards to openness, but they seem minor compared with the possibility that some readers may find comfort, perhaps even inspiration, from a close examination of how an ordinary person, with strengths and weaknesses like anyone else, has managed an extraordinary journey.

My law clerks will no doubt be aghast to see how often I've broken my own very strict rules about formal writing, which include injunctions against the use of contractions and split infinitives. Every rule, however, is bound by context, and a personal memoir requires a different style than a legal opinion.

Neither is a memoir the same as a biography, which aims for the most objective, factual account of a life. A memoir, as I understand it, makes no pretense of denying its subjectivity. Its matter is one person's memory, and memory by nature is selective and colored by emotion. Others who participated in the events I describe will no doubt remember some details differently, though I hope we would agree on the essential truths. I have taken no liberties with the past as I remember it, used no fictional devices beyond reconstructing conversations from memory. I have not blended characters, or bent chronology to convenience. And yet I have tried to tell a good story. If particular friends or family members find themselves not mentioned, or are disappointed to see their roles rendered as less prominent than they might have expected, I hope they will understand that the needs of a clear and focused telling must outweigh even an abundance of feeling.

Some readers may be disappointed that I have chosen to end this story twenty years ago, when I first became a judge. I've made this choice because of the personal nature of what I wish to tell. For though I believe my personal growth has continued since that time, it was by then that the person I remain was essentially formed. On the other hand, I have no such perspective or sense of completion regarding my judicial career. Each stage of it—first on the district court, then on the court of appeals, and now on the Supreme Court—has been unique; and I can't say with any certainty how any part will inform what I may yet accomplish as a Justice. In the meanwhile, it seems inappropriate to reflect on a course still taking shape, let alone on the political drama attending my nomination to the High Court, however curious some may be about that.

A final, more private, motive for writing this book bears mention. This new phase of my career has brought with it a profoundly disconcerting shift in my life. The experience of living in the public eye was

## PREFACE

impossible to anticipate fully and has, at times, been overwhelming. The psychological hazards of such a life are notorious, and it seems wise to pause and reflect on the path that has brought me to this juncture and to count the blessings that have made me who I am, taking care not to lose sight of them, or of my best self, as I move forward.

# MY BELOVED WORLD

# Prologue

I WAS BARELY AWAKE, and my mother was already screaming. I knew Papi would start yelling in a second. That much was routine, but the substance of their argument was new, and it etched that morning into my memory.

"You have to learn how to give it to her, Juli. I can't be here all the time!"

"I'm afraid to hurt her. My hands are trembling." It was true. When my father made his first attempt at giving me the insulin shot the day before, his hands were shaking so much I was afraid he would miss my arm entirely and stab me in the face. He had to jab hard just to steady his aim.

"Whose fault is it your hands tremble?"

Uh-oh, here we go.

"You're the nurse, Celina! You know how to do these things."

Actually, when Mami gave me the shot my first morning home from the hospital, she was so nervous that she jabbed me even harder, and hurt me even worse, than Papi would the next day.

"That's right, I'm the nurse. I have to work and help support this family. I have to do everything! But I can't be here all the time, Juli, and she's going to need this for the rest of her life. So you better figure it out."

The needles hurt, but the screaming was worse. It made me feel tired, carrying around the weight of their sadness. It was bad enough when

they were fighting about the milk, or the housework, or the money, or the drinking. The last thing I wanted was for them to fight about me.

"I swear, Juli, you'll kill that child if you don't learn how to do this!" As usual, she walked away and slammed the door behind her, so she had to scream even louder to continue the fight.

If my parents couldn't pick up the syringe without panicking, an even darker prospect loomed: my grandmother wouldn't be up to the job either. That would be the end of my weekly sleepovers at her apartment and my only escape from the gloom at home. It then dawned on me: if I needed to have these shots every day for the rest of my life, the only way I'd survive was to do it myself.

The first step, I knew, was to sterilize the needle and syringe. Not yet eight years old, I was barely tall enough to see the top of the stove, and I wasn't sure how to perform the tricky maneuver with match and gas to light the burner. So I dragged a chair the couple of feet from table to stove—the kitchen was tiny—and climbed up to figure it out. The two small pots for Mami's *café con leche* were sitting there, getting cold while they fought, the coffee staining its little cloth sack in one pot, *la nata* forming a wrinkled skin on top of the milk in the other.

"Sonia! What are you doing? You'll burn the building down, *nena!*"

"I'm going to give myself the shot, Mami." That silenced her for a moment.

"Do you know how?" She looked at me levelly, seriously.

"I think so. At the hospital they had me practice on an orange."

My mother showed me how to hold the match while turning the dial, to make the flame whoosh to life in a blue ring. Together we filled the pot with water, enough to cover the syringe and needle and some extra in case it boiled down. She directed me to wait for the bubbles and only then to start counting five minutes by the clock. I had learned how to tell time the year before, in first grade. After the water had boiled long enough, she said, I would still need to wait for the syringe to cool. I watched the pot and the invisibly slow creep of the clock's hand until tiny, delicate chains of bubbles rose from the glass syringe and the needle, my mind racing through a hundred other things as I marked the time.

Watching water boil would try the patience of any child, but I was as physically restless as I was mentally and had well earned the family

nickname Aji—hot pepper—for my eagerness to jump headlong into any mischief impelled by equal parts curiosity and rambunctiousness. But believing that my life now depended on this morning ritual, I would soon figure out how to manage the time efficiently: to get dressed, brush my teeth, and get ready for school in the intervals while the pot boiled or cooled. I probably learned more self-discipline from living with diabetes than I ever did from the Sisters of Charity.

Fainting in church was how it all started. We had just stood up to sing, and I felt as if I were suffocating. The singing seemed far away, and then the light from the stained-glass windows turned yellow. Everything turned yellow, and then it went black.

When I opened my eyes, all I could see was the principal, Sister Maria Joseph, and Sister Elizabeth Regina, their worried faces upside down and pale inside their black bonnets. I was lying on the tile floor in the sacristy, shivering cold from the water splashed all over my face. And scared. So they called my mother.

Although I went to Mass every Sunday, which was obligatory for students at Blessed Sacrament School, my parents never did. When my mother arrived, the Sisters made a big fuss. Had this ever happened before? Come to think of it, there was the time I'd fallen off the slide, the sudden dizziness as I stepped over the top of the ladder before the ground came rushing up to me in a long moment of panic . . . She had to take me to the doctor, the nuns insisted.

Dr. Fisher was already firmly established as a family hero. All of our relatives were under his care at one time or another, and his house calls did as much to ease fears and panics as they did aches and pains. A German immigrant, he was an old-fashioned country doctor who just happened to be practicing in the Bronx. Dr. Fisher asked a lot of questions, and Mami told him I was losing weight and always thirsty and that I had started wetting the bed, which was so mortifying that I would try not to fall asleep.

Dr. Fisher sent us to the lab at Prospect Hospital, where my mother worked. I didn't see trouble coming, because I perceived Mr. Rivera in the lab to be a friend of mine. I thought I could trust him, unlike Mrs. Gibbs, my mother's supervisor, who had tried to hide the needle behind her back when I'd had my tonsils out. But when he tied a rubber

tube around my arm, I realized this was no ordinary shot. The syringe looked almost as big as my arm, and as he got closer, I could see that the needle was sliced off at an angle with the hole gaping like a little mouth at the end of it.

As he approached, I screamed, "No!" Knocking the chair back, I ran across the hall and right out the front door. It seemed as if half the hospital were running right behind me, shouting "Catch her!" but I didn't turn around to look. I just dove under a parked car.

I could see their shoes. One of them bent down and stuck his nose into the shadow of the undercarriage. Shoes all around now, and hands reaching under the car. But I scrunched up like a turtle, until someone caught me by the foot. I was hollering so loud as they dragged me back to the lab that I couldn't have hollered any louder when the needle went in.

When we went back to Dr. Fisher after they took my blood, it was the first time I'd ever seen my mother cry. I was outside in the waiting room, but his office door was open a crack. I could hear her voice break and see her shoulders quaking. The nurse closed the door when she noticed I was watching, but I'd seen enough to understand that something was seriously wrong. Then Dr. Fisher opened the door and called me in. He explained that there was sugar in my blood, that it's called diabetes, and that I would have to change the way I ate. He reassured me that the bed-wetting would end when we had things under control: it was just the body's way of getting rid of excess blood sugar. He even told me that he also had diabetes, although I understood later that he had the more common type 2, while I had the rarer juvenile diabetes, or type 1, in which the pancreas stops producing insulin, making daily injections of insulin necessary.

Then he took a bottle of soda from the cupboard behind him and popped the top off. "Taste it. It's called No-Cal. Just like soda but without sugar."

I took a sip. "I don't really think so." Poor Dr. Fisher. My mother insisted that we always be polite even if that meant softening a strong opinion, a lesson that stuck with me. Perhaps my eventual enjoyment of being a litigator owes something to the license it gave me to disagree

"Well, there are lots of other flavors. Even chocolate."

I thought to myself: This doesn't add up. He's making it sound as if it's no big deal. Just skip dessert and drink a different soda. Why is my mother so upset?

We went straight from Dr. Fisher's office to my grandmother's home. Abuelita tucked me into her bed, even though it was the middle of the afternoon and I had long outgrown naps. She closed the curtains, and I lay there in the half dark listening as the front door kept opening and voices filled the living room. I could hear my father's sisters, Titi Carmen and Titi Gloria. My cousin Charlie was there too, and Gallego, my step-grandfather. Abuelita sounded terribly upset. She was talking about my mother as if she weren't there, and since I didn't hear Mami's voice at all, it was clear that she had left.

"It runs in families, *como una maldición*."

"This curse is from Celina's side, for sure, not ours."

There was speculation about whether Mami's own mother had died of this terrible affliction and talk of a special herb that might cure it. Abuelita knew all about healing with herbs. The least snuffle or stomach ache had her brewing noxious potions that would leave me with a lifelong aversion to tea of any sort. Now she was scheming with my aunts to get word to her brother in Puerto Rico. She would tell him where to find the plant, which he was to pick at dawn before boarding a flight from San Juan the same day so she could prepare it at the peak of potency. He actually pulled it off, but sadly Abuelita's herbal remedy would prove ineffective, and this failure of her skill in a case so close to her heart would disturb her deeply.

Abuelita's obvious anxiety that afternoon, and the talk of my other grandmother's death, did achieve one thing: it made me realize how serious this situation was. Now my mother's crying made sense to me, and I was shaken. I was even more shaken when I learned that I had to be hospitalized to stabilize my blood sugar levels, which was routine in those days.

IN 1962, when I was first diagnosed, the treatment of juvenile diabetes was primitive by today's standards, and life expectancy was much

shorter. Nevertheless, Dr. Fisher had managed to locate the best care for the disease in New York City, and possibly in the entire country. He discovered that the Albert Einstein College of Medicine, a leader in juvenile diabetes research, ran a clinic at Jacobi Medical Center, a public hospital, which by luck happened to be located in the Bronx. The vastness of Jacobi Medical Center awed me. It made Prospect Hospital seem like a dollhouse.

Every morning, starting at eight o'clock, they would draw my blood repeatedly for testing. Hourly, they used the thick needle with the rubber tube on my arm, and every half hour they would slice my finger with a lance for a smaller sample. It continued until noon, and the next day they did the same thing over again. This went on for an entire week and part of the next. I didn't holler and I didn't run, but I have never forgotten the pain.

Other things they did, though less painful, seemed strange. They attached electrodes to my head. They brought me to a classroom in the hospital where I sat facing rows of young doctors who stared at me as an older doctor lectured about diabetes, about the tests they had done and more they still had to do. He rattled off terms like "ketones," "acidosis," "hypo-this and hyper-that," and much else that I didn't understand, all the while feeling very much the guinea pig and terrified.

BUT EVEN MORE THAN the clinical procedures, it was my absence from school for so long that set off my inner alarm. I knew I had to be seriously sick for my mother to allow it. School was just as important as work, she insisted, and she never once stayed home from work. Equally worrying, she brought me a present almost every day I was in the hospital: a coloring book, a puzzle, once even a comic book, which meant she was thinking hard about what I would like instead of what she wanted me to have.

My very last day at the hospital started again at eight o'clock with the big needle and the lances. My arm was aching, and my fingers were burning right from the very beginning. I made it through the first two hours, but just as they were lining up their instruments for the ten o'clock torture, something inside me broke. After all those days of being brave

and holding it in, I started crying. And once I started, I couldn't stop. My mother must have heard me because she burst in, and I flew sobbing into her arms. "Enough!" she said, fiercer than I'd ever seen her. Fiercer even than when she fought with my father. "We stop now. She's done." She said it in a way that nobody—not the lab technician standing there with the syringe in his hand, not any doctor in Jacobi Medical Center—was going to argue with her.

"DO YOU KNOW how much to give, Sonia?"

"Up to this line here."

"That's right. But do it carefully. You can't give too little and you can't give too much. And you have to be careful, Sonia, not to let any bubbles get into the needle. That's dangerous."

"I know how to do this part. But it doesn't make sense to say I'm giving it, Mami. I'm the one who's *getting* the shot."

"Whatever you say, Sonia."

"I'm doing both."

And I did. I held my breath, and I gave myself the shot.