Abuela\(^1\) knocks on my bedroom door. She has come to my room this morning to watch me choose my outfit for Who You Are Day at school. This is a day when we are allowed to dress in clothes that we think tell the world who we really are. (Within reason, our principal warned—no extremes will be tolerated. I hope that her definition of the word *extreme* is the same as my friend Whoopee’s. Nothing that she will put on this morning has ever been seen on this planet, much less at school.)

Abuela makes herself comfortable on my bed as I put on my costume of myself made up of pieces of my life. I thought about my Who You Are Day outfit a lot. Mr. Golden told us in English class to think about our choices: are you going to walk around as a joke or as a poem? I have a suspicion that our teachers have allowed us this chance to dress up as ourselves for a reason. Our school is already a united nations, a carnival, and a parade all at once. There are students from dozens of different countries, and we do not always get along. Most of us are too shy to talk to others outside our little circles, and so misunderstandings come up. The principal has tried almost everything. The Who You Are Day is another of her crazy ideas to get us to communicate. In each of my classes, the teacher said, let us know something about what has made you who you are by what you wear to school tomorrow. It all sounds like a *conspiracy* to me. But I like dressing up so I do not complain like the boys have been doing. Most of them hate the idea! \(^{10}\)

Abuela looks at my choices hanging on the door and shakes her head, smiling, like she did when we went to see *Cats*. It is a smile that says, I do not understand, but if it is important to María, I will bear it the best I can. She is elegant even at 7:00 a.m. in her embroidered silk robe and red velvet slippers. She has wrapped a shawl over her shoulders because she is always cold in our *cueva,\(^2\)* as she calls the apartment. The shawl was handmade by her mother and it is Abuela’s most prized possession. As a little girl, I liked to put it over

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1. Abuela (ä-bwâ’lä) *Spanish*: grandmother.
2. cueva (kwa’vä) *Spanish*: cave.

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**Analyzing Visuals**

Based on the details in this painting, what impression do you get of the girl?

**CENTRAL CHARACTER**

What can you infer about the community in which Maria lives?

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my head because the pattern of sequins made a night sky full of stars and
because it smelled like Abuela.

Abuela sips from her cup of café con leche as she watches me.

I feel a little strange about being in my underwear in front of her and go
in my closet with my choices, which are:

My mother’s red skirt that she wore when she had a part in a musical play
on the Island. I have worn dress-up with it since I was five years old, but it
finally fits me perfectly. It is the kind of skirt that opens like an umbrella when
you turn in circles.

A top I sewed together from an old sari Uma’s mother was going to throw
away. It is turquoise blue with silver edges.

And finally, over my sari, I will wear my father’s sharkskin suit jacket—it’s
big on me but I can roll up the sleeves. It is what he likes to wear when he
sings at rent parties. Under the light, it changes colors and seems to come alive
as the design shifts and moves. Papi says it is great for dancing; you don’t even
need a partner.

And finally, tall platform shoes we found buried deep in Whoopee’s closet,
circa 1974, she told me. Whoopee collects antique shoes to go with her science
fiction outfits. It is a fashion statement; she will tell anyone who asks. No one
knows what the statement means, and that is just fine with Whoopee.

When I part the clothes in my closet and come out like an actor in a play,
Abuela’s eyes open wide. Before she can say anything, I point to each piece of
my outfit and say a name: Mami, Papi, Uma, and Whoopee.

Abuela’s face changes as she begins to understand the meaning of my
fashion statement.

“Ahora sé quién eres, María, y quién puedes ser, si quieres. Ven acá, mi amor.”
Abuela says that she knows who I am and who I may be if I choose.

I have heard those words before but I don’t remember when or where. Abuela
embraces me and kisses my face several times. This is a Puerto Rican thing.
It goes on for a while. I close my eyes to wait it out and I suddenly inhale a
familiar scent. When I open my eyes, I see a starry sky. Abuela has put her
shawl over my head.

“Algo mío para tu día de ser quien eres, mi hija,” she tells me. Something of
mine for your day of being who you are. She is letting me borrow her mother’s
beautiful shawl!

All day at school, I feel elegant. Whenever anyone tries to make fun of my
costume, I think of the words my grandmother quoted to me: I know who you
are and who you may be if you choose. And when I go into Mr. Golden’s class
and his eyes ask me, Who are you today, María? I will say by the way I walk in,
head held high, that today I am a poem.

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3. café con leche (ká-fá kohn lehch’á) Spanish: coffee with milk.
4. sari (sá’rē): a traditional Indian women’s garment.
5. sharkskin: a synthetic fabric with a smooth, shiny surface.