

2015-01-01

# El Momento En Que...

Donna Lynn Munoz

*University of Texas at El Paso*, [dldennis@miners.utep.edu](mailto:dldennis@miners.utep.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.utep.edu/open\\_etd](https://digitalcommons.utep.edu/open_etd)



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Munoz, Donna Lynn, "El Momento En Que..." (2015). *Open Access Theses & Dissertations*. 910.  
[https://digitalcommons.utep.edu/open\\_etd/910](https://digitalcommons.utep.edu/open_etd/910)

This is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UTEP. It has been accepted for inclusion in Open Access Theses & Dissertations by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UTEP. For more information, please contact [lweber@utep.edu](mailto:lweber@utep.edu).

EL MOMENTO EN QUE...

DONNA LYNN MUÑOZ

Creative Writing Department

APPROVED:

---

Daniel Chacon, Chair

---

Jeffrey Sirkin, Ph.D.

---

Maggy Smith, Ph.D.

---

Charles Ambler, Ph.D.  
Dean of the Graduate School

Copyright ©

By

Donna Lynn Muñoz

2015

## **Dedication**

To my husband, Eddie, and my children, Benny, Alexa, Eddie, Andrew, and Daniel who make this life beautiful. To my mother, Corinne, I am so grateful for you and for your health. To my Lord and Savior, who carried me when I simply couldn't carry on.

EL MOMENTO EN QUE..

By

Donna Lynn Muñoz, B.A. Print-Media

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of  
The University of Texas at El Paso  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements  
for the Degree of  
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Creative Writing Department

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

December 2015

## Acknowledgements

Patience and persistence are two words that mean so much more to me than they ever did before beginning this program. I recall after my first fiction workshop (which was a disaster), feeling defeated, as if I had made a huge mistake in enrolling in the program. Through tears, I listened to my three small children banging on the door to the bedroom where I was holed up for my online class. I penned a very desperate letter to Daniel Chacon, basically thanking him and expressing my decision to resign from the program. I felt in that moment that there was no way I was going to be able to complete my MFA. He was so kind to send a prompt reply about having had those same feelings and writing a similar letter to his advisor and assured me that I was going to be okay. Instead of resigning to quit, I resigned to idea that no matter how long it took me, I was going to complete my degree, and I did, two classes at a time for three years.

On my journey, I was blessed to meet faculty members who I will never forget, people I am so honored to know and call friends, Lex Williford and Liz Scheid, who have impacted my life and held my hand along this journey. I see everything they are doing in the writing world, their talents, their compassion for others, and even how they have found a lovely balance that works for their writing, their careers, and their families. I learned that it is all possible with patience, persistence, and that passion that they both have for life, which I often found to be contagious. I am so grateful to have such incredible role models in my life.

I'd like to thank Dr. Jeffrey Sirkin and Dr. Maggy Smith who have been so kind to sit on my thesis committee and for having faith in me to make such a commitment. I will treasure your feedback on this project.

Lastly, I'd like to thank my writing community among my colleagues at El Paso Community College who never stopped asking how everything was going, who scolded me when it was necessary, and who hugged me or gave me that pat on the back or kind word when I was trying to grasp onto any kind of hope for accomplishing this life goal.

Dedication.....	iii
Acknowledgements.....	v
Finding The Beauty Of A Tapestry's Tension.....	viii
Prelude.....	1
I Went To See My Grandmother.....	2
We Said Goodbye.....	3
I Prayed.....	5
I Spoke To A Butterfly.....	7
A Wedding Dress Changed Everything.....	10
I Lost Margarita.....	17
Margarita Wore a bikini.....	18
We Were Robbed.....	23
Margarita Became a Hero.....	25
The Wizard Lost His Power.....	27
I Almost Kissed A Boy.....	29
Margarita Became American.....	36
My Family Ate Dinner At A Restaurant.....	41
Margarita Got Asked To An American Dance.....	48
I Accept That I Will Never Be Accepted.....	51
I Tried To Be A Real Girl.....	53

<i>Señor Guzman—That Is All</i> .....	58
<i>Papí Got A Raise; I Got A Concussion</i> .....	64
I Found Esperanza.....	71
I Almost Punched An American Girl .....	72
Margarita Got Sick.....	79
I Dreamed.....	82
Two Sisters Fought For The First Time.....	86
<i>La Leucema—That Is All</i> .....	94
I Learned To Cook.....	96
<i>Feliz Cumpleaños</i> .....	101
I Asked To See My Sister.....	104
I Visited Margarita In The Hospital.....	108
<i>Mamí Lets Margarita Go To An American Dance</i> .....	112
Works Cited.....	115
Curriculum Vita.....	116



## **Finding The Beauty Of A Tapestry's Tension**

### **Introduction**

We've all experienced moments that move us in some way, moments that we've memorized for the rest of our lives. Some we can't ever forget, and some we wish we could. Nonetheless, these moments are ingrained in the forever of our minds. My collection, *El Momento En Que...* is a compilation of snapshots of the life of a fictional character named Graciela, who is fourteen and has experienced the tremendous loss of family, sense of place, and sense of self. It is a collage of moments where she questions her life, her parents' decisions, her relationships with those around her, and essentially, her sense of place.

The snapshots begin three years after Graciela's *abuelita* died, and her parents decided to pack up and move to Texas where Graciela Flores feels trapped like a butterfly in a jar, unable to breathe. Everyone and thing she loves has changed, and the traditions that made her feel safe are slowly slipping away.

The story that I am going to tell in snapshots is how in America, everything feels wrong to Graciela as she watches her family slowly plant their roots in Texas soil. Her father works his fingers to the bone, her mother works for hours on end for Mrs. Constance, and her big sister, Margarita has merged into American culture seamlessly. Margarita is so in love with American culture that she does not want to be Mexican anymore. And the longer the family stays in America,

the more Graciela realizes how much her dark skin, plain hair, and everything that makes her Mexican is tearing her and Margarita apart.

The themes that I am exploring in my work are voice, culture, family values, culture shock, illness, and a family's response to crisis. I investigate how a young girl experiences such a culture change, and how it impacts the family unit as well. I explore character development and how one bends and forms to their new circumstance without letting their true self go.

I believe the best way to describe my collection of short, interconnected stories is through a tapestry. A tapestry is defined as a fabric consisting of a warp upon which colored threads are woven by hand to produce a design, often pictorial, used for wall hangings, furniture coverings, etc.



*Indian Earth Star Tapestry*

With its beautiful, interwoven colors, each pattern is its own distinct and unique story, yet each pattern is an integral part of the bigger story. How could the tapestry exist without each part of the story?

A book of short interconnected stories works in this way. Each story is an individual pattern. Even so, each one comes together in an interconnected story, one full and glorious family tapestry. And each of these short stories as in my collection, are like moments in time.

Margarita, the protagonist's sister, often practices English words in the mirror, trying to hide her accent, she flirts with American boys and is desperately trying to live the life of an all-American girl amid her mother's strict and watchful eyes and who forces the girls to abide by her rule of never speaking English openly in the house. In fact, she is trying to find a way to sneak out to her first school dance. A family crisis is the only way Graciela's loved ones will all be brought back together and truly find "home" with each other. Isn't that always the way?

This book engages the reader with Graciela's personal calamity as she navigates through these days of doubt, and finishing off with a short story that offers closure to the storm. *El Moment En Que...* is literary fiction using the art of the short story, focusing character tension and its impact on the narrative. As with short stories, there isn't a lot of time to say things, and the art of the short story is using each word wisely. I think the advantage to this piece, though, is that it is one single person's story, but broken up into fragments of her memories, that will come together in a big picture.

## Literary Inspirations

I have found literary inspiration in authors such as Ben Saenz, Pam Muñoz Ryan, and Sandra Cisneros. Saenz develops his characters organically and authentically, and together with his use of the Spanish language and culture in literature, he does such a phenomenal job of creating artistically in this way. Ryan, who wrote *Esperanza Writing* is also an inspiration for my writing. Her character, Esperanza, was also violently plucked from her happy existence and a life of privilege in Mexico and relocated to California to make a new life as a migrant farmworker after her father died. The tragedy of Esperanza losing her father and relocating created the tension that drove this book to the very end. The journey was hard, and it was felt beyond the pages. She says, “I am a reader, writer, author, and pilgrim. Every book is a journey.” One of my favorite books by Cisneros is *House on Mango Street* where Cisneros uses 46 vignettes to form a story about the life of a Mexican-American girl, Esperanza, in Chicago in the sixties. “*I like to tell stories. I tell them inside my head. I am going to tell you a story about a girl who didn’t want to belong.*” (109) Cisneros’s early life provided the inspirations that she drew from as a writer—from her personal place—Constantly migrating between Mexico and the United States with her family. A house her family purchased in Chicago when she was 11-years-old, in a predominately Puerto Rican neighborhood, became her inspiration for *House on Mango Street*.

And while I am using the technique of the short story in fiction, I have to admit that my idea for *El Momento en Que*, came from a personal place—nonfiction. While the window of nonfiction I present is brief, an entire universe of fiction came from that small thread of an experience. Cisneros once said, that she writes down “snippets of dialogue or monologue—

records of conversations she hears wherever she goes.” These snippets are then mixed and matched to create her stories.

Where did my stories grow from? I suffered a great loss, my own precious *Abuelita*, Soledad. I often lay in bed with her and listened to her stories of growing up in Durango, Mexico. And while her death did not propel me into a move from one country to another, it moved me emotionally with a leap that felt just as large. Another story I often heard about was that of my two older sisters, Jenny and Bernadette, who were eleven months apart and little girls of four and five when my mother left their biological father. Bernadette was often seen even in pictures, hiding behind Jenny. Jenny was often the bolder mouthpiece of the two. They held hands a lot, especially when faced with new experiences. My mother, who was in high school when she had my sisters, left the home they had shared with their father, and moved in with my grandmother. They hardly got to see my mother because she worked hard to support them. Often, she’d leave my grandmother’s house at dawn, her two small, sleeping daughters inside, so that she could catch two buses to get to work. The girls were alone until my grandmother came home from working a graveyard shift.



Grandma Cholita and I on her birthday



Bernadette, Jenny, and I

The small glimpses that I saw into this time of my family's lives, even though I wasn't even a thought in the universe, became a part of me, and in my quest for answers, I lived these stories in my mind and presented them in the form of fiction, specifically as my influence in *El*

*Momento en Que...* In *The Truth of the Matter*, by Dinty W. Moore, he writes, “A subject becomes noteworthy, in other words, because the author takes close notice, and then finds a way to transmit his or her own fascination with the subject to the curious reader (11).”

## **Tense And Verisimilitude**

When I first submitted my manuscript to my thesis director, Liz Scheid, it was in past tense. She wrote back and complimented the language, the details, and the poetics and asked me if I would consider writing it in present tense. I immediately went into the story and attempted to figure out how it would work. There was an awkward feel to it, and I couldn’t quite explain why. Brian Shawver states in *The Language of Fiction: a writer’s stylebook* that “Fiction written in the present tense isn’t just removed from reality by content, but also by style. This dual separation from reality means that readers are more likely to notice the artificiality of the tense. If they think about it too much, it’s harder for them to suspend disbelief (10).”

But writing in the present progressive tense was well worth it, and the exploration of it led to my own tension in my personal writing which I think made its way well into my writing. For the first two stories, I used past tense to establish what has happened to get my characters where they needed to be. But in the third story, I begin using present progressive:

*I miss the open skies of Mexico very much. Instead, when I look out our windows I get to admire black tightrope wires that connect to tall wooden posts, tangoing with tree branches and covered with blackbirds. It is something I will never get used to – the feeling of a prison.*

Shawver writes that the present tense is less risky and more popular in short fiction than novels and short novels as opposed to doorstops. “Every time a reader picks up a present-tense narrative, she has to accept the bargain the writer presents her with: *You must try to suspend*

*disbelief in spite of the artificiality of the verb tense, and I will try to make use of this tense pay off (7).*” He says that using present tense can actually augment a work’s verisimilitude. We are in the moment, the conflict has not been resolved, our ignorance is the same as our reader’s. I don’t regret this decision at all. I feel that using present progressive enhanced my story rather than hurt it.

## **The Gift Of Tension:**

### **A look At Jazz And The Collected Stories Of Amy Hempel**

Tension in writing is not only necessary for a story to thrive, but can manifest itself in different ways within the piece including its presence between characters and the narration, but specifically, it is born from the plot. Aristotle said it well, “The Plot, then, is the first principle, and, as it were, the soul of a tragedy: Character holds the second place. A similar fact is seen in painting. The most beautiful colours, laid on confusedly, will not give as much pleasure as the chalk outline of a portrait. (Aristotle)

Character is only second to plot, but the characters are what give a face to the plot. And if tension is needed to make a story flourish, character to character tension is a driving force in any piece of work. Depending on what situation the characters find themselves, what era, what political environment, what personal place they may be in, tension can erupt and thrive off of these situations in such a way that it fuels the story with memorable circumstance, narrative, emotion, appeal, and character development, such as is the case with young Graciela, my protagonist. In *El Momento en Que...* Graciela was thrust into her transformation, searching deep within herself and her circumstance to hold her family and herself together. This journey and the tension it brings, is driven by the plot. Graciela was bitter and careless. She had her own priorities—renewing her



relationship with her big sister, Margarita, pulling her sister out of her submersion into American culture (character to character tension), and getting back to Mexico. Though these experiences, she was forced to grow and change on the inside, letting go of the things she had no control over, surviving uncertainty, finding purpose, and holding onto her “here and now.”

What surprised me was that while working with tension as craft—developing tension in plot and establishing character tension, the tension in narration developed organically. There are two pieces of fiction that I enjoyed the most during my time in UTEP’s MFA program and where, as the reader, I experienced this organic tension in the narrative. These pieces were *Jazz* by Toni Morrison and *The Collected Stories of Amy Hempel* by Amy Hempel. There is a tension that comes from the plot, there is tension between the characters, and very organic and tense narration of in both pieces of literature that works very well in emphasizing the meaning of each piece as a whole. Using *Jazz* and *The Collected Stories of Amy Hempel*, I employed the theories revolving around these complex and artful pieces of writing and the authors’ writing techniques in exploring tension, its value in literature, and its impact on my personal writing.

While one could find plenty to discuss within the dramatic, thematic and metaphorical tension, the tension between characters in these two works is an excellent place to focus on due to the power of the tension in the relationships and its influence on even the narrative of these stories.

First, in *Jazz*, there is tension in the relationship involving Violet and her husband. They find themselves in the post-slavery era in Harlem, New York in the 1920s, where Jazz music is infiltrating the city, but personally, they are in a very emotional place. The second and not necessarily the inferior character tension is between Violet, her husband Joe, and his lover Dorcas. What is working for the character tension more than the political environment afore mentioned is the way Morrison has centered her characters’ tensions on pure and simple desire. “Toni

Morrison's exploration of desire seeps into every aspect of her novel *Jazz*, from the richness of her style to the content matter of her love triangle." (Cannon) In my thesis, my character tension is centered on American culture, the shock that it brings to the table, and the unfolding of events in my characters' lives.

Morrison writes, "She moves from clarinets on Harlem street corners which awaken desire in passers-by to an eighteen-year-old girl with a pock-marked face awakening desire in a fifty-year-old married man. (Cannon)

Joe and Dorcas's tension does not come simply from their 20-year age gap, or the fact that he is a married man. What drives their character tension is the desire, the sexual drive between a man looking for love, and a young girl with a tormented past who is experimenting with her sexuality and seeking someone to justify who she is and why she exists. While sexual tension can hardly be compared to the tension of struggling siblings in my collection, *Jazz* has stayed a part of me because it taught me exactly how tension can reproduce some of the strongest writing one never thought possible.

Aristotle describes tragedy as the genre which is the most effective form of narrative and deemed successful if the reader has a cathartic experience. Tragedy creates tension, and this is the tense energy that I channeled for my collection of stories. When writing my thesis, there were places where for me, personally, I cried. I cried for what was lost, what was gained, and what caused pain, both emotionally and physically. The sisters in my stories lived a full life in Mexico. They were confident, happy, loved, and most of all, they were close in their relationship. Their first true tragedy, one they suffered as children, was the death of their *abuelita*. This tension was the catalyst for everything that occurred after—moving to America and all the trouble that this move brought to their existences. Now, where they once spent sunny days on a cool porch playing

dolls, they now were thrust into a busy city with parents who spent countless hours away from home chasing after the American dollar. Public school kids were not kind to Graciela, the protagonist, because of her skin color and accent; meanwhile, her sister Margarita, the one who was blessed with long dark hair and skin the color of coffee and cream, immersed herself seamlessly into this culture. With busy parents and an “American” sister with other important things to worry about, Graciela is essentially all alone in her grief regarding the loss of her loved one, and the loss of her identity. Her bitterness comes from these losses, and her inability to maintain her once close relationship with her now distant sister.

In *Jazz*, The tension between Joe and his wife is that he simply had a desire for his mother and was trying to find a replacement for his mother when he married Violet, and now he believes he’s found true love, and Violet has a desire to have a family, and now has a desire to learn about her husband’s lover, becoming obsessed with the young girl and trying to seek out why he would have been so in love with this girl.

What I learned is that this tension built on desire worked flawlessly in *Jazz*. It all comes to a climatic murder, one the reader never gets to see, but everything that Morrison builds around it through the narration and the story, shows us everything we want to see without so much as ever seeing Joe pick up a gun. In *El Momento en Que...* the tension is not only in the circumstance of these abrupt changes, but also in the relationship or lack thereof between the sisters. Again, Margarita is so immersed in American culture, though she was only a stranger in it, and Graciela pines for Margarita’s attention. She blames America for tainting her sister, and Graciela is determined to hold onto her heritage and everything that made her feel safe. It all comes to a climax in the big bedroom fight where the sisters, once tighter than an entwined braid, once lost together in this America, exchange words they never thought even existed within

them, words so painful and so hateful that their relationship seemed beyond repair.

*My head is spinning. "You didn't feel that way when we were little. When we came here afraid and all we had was each other," my voice breaks on each other. I need to remind her.*

*"You didn't feel that way about helping me learn English."*

*"The only reason why I made sure you learned English is because I didn't want a Spanish-speaking idiot tagging along embarrassing me!" Margarita's eyes are lit like small flames.*

*I tighten my jaw, and fire flows through my body all the way up to the top of my head.*

*"I hate you, Margarita," I cry out, my legs shaking under me. I fist my hands, my nails digging into my palms. I've never ever told my sister something so evil.*

*"Good, estúpida. I hate you, too." She has never ever told me anything so evil either.*

These sisters have personal demons. Graciela is lost and insecure. She is jealous of her perfect older sister. She misses her parents. She despises her school and the kids there because they torment her. She misses her grandmother. She simply wants to go home to Mexico. Margarita's personal demons stem from wanting more. She is clearly not as affected by the loss of her grandmother or the move to America, but now that she is in America, she is tormented by the need for more footage into this culture. She hates that her little sister won't let go of the past, and because Graciela refuses to let go of the past, she and Margarita can no longer get along. Also, Margarita pushes against the walls her parents have put up around them in feeble attempts to preserve their heritage, including their mother not allowing them to speak English in their home. Margarita finds all of this hypocritical as her parents moved to Texas to seek better opportunity and work hours on end to provide for their family. This hypocrisy fuels Margarita's anger.

These personal demons dancing around the tragedy in the lives of the characters is also a driving force for character tension. These characters are deeply flawed from the get go, something I learned from *Jazz*. In *El Moment En Que...*, these young girls, Graciela and Margarita, come from a place of security, love, compassion, unconditional bonds of sisterhood. They are thrust into change with the death of their family's matriarch, *Abuelita*, and a life-changing move from Mexico to Texas when they were still trying to heal from the gravity of their loss. From my introduction to *El Momento en Que...*

*~ Grandmother is sleeping. I walk over to her bed and whisper, "No te mueres, Abuelita. Por favor." Don't die, Grandmother. Please. I slip my hand into hers. It's soft and cold. She opens her eyes, smiles, and tries to squeeze my hand, but she can't. She's too weak now. I can't hide my tears from her. She raises her hand slowly, trying to touch my face, but it falls back down to her side. I lean in closer, and she reaches up and brushes the tears from my cheek. "El cambio puede ser bello," she says, her voice just a soft whisper. Change can be beautiful... My abuelita told me a lie. ~*

In *Jazz*, the tension had to begin somewhere. Joe longs for his absent mother, naming himself Trace as in "no trace" of her, Violet has been unhinged by her own mother's suicide and her failing marriage and her inability to have children. Dorcas is an orphan losing her father to a race riot tragedy. These very personal torments create the character to character tension that becomes a driving force. Violet wants to escape from her mental prison, Joe is obsessed with holding onto this feeling of honest and real love to the point of killing Dorcas because he didn't know how to handle his emotions, and Dorcas, while she as alive, was trying to reconcile her identity and receive validation of who she was, experimenting with her sexuality during this pursuit of her identity. In

my collection, the tension began with *abuelita's* death and everything this created between the girls.

*The only life I'd ever known was stolen from me. There would be no more fresh-evening walks on my grandmother's land, across the hilly grounds, through long, fresh blades of cool night grass. No more sanctuary from the burning hot sun under the umbrellas of tall trees. No more summers in the small pond only a short race between cousins from her front door. No more limonada Sundays on her wide porch. No more waking up to family and big breakfasts and elaborate dinners. No more home. How could this be what my parents wanted? But there would be no changing their minds. A few days later, we packed only what would fit in Papi's old faded Ford truck and drove away from that beautiful house. It was the only home I'd ever known, and we left it behind. We left the people I loved behind. We left my Abuelita's grave behind.*

I will never forget this impact on my writing—the tragedy that weaves into *Jazz* along with its love triangle is a stirring pot for some remarkable drama and narration that is perfectly created by the existing plot tension, all to the backdrop of jazz. “In her subsequent novel, *Jazz*, Morrison creates a narrative strategy that combines the movement of music and structure of tragedy. (Jones)

But Morrison does not leave us in the tragedy that is swallowing these characters. We receive freedom when Felice, Dorcas's best friend, liberates Joe from his guilt by filling in the spaces of the murder and letting him know that Dorcas died only from not going to the hospital to take care of a flesh wound and letting him know that Dorcas truly loved him and protected him. Felice also gives Violet a purpose, as she now has a daughter in a sense to care for. Felice offers them friendship. They become a little family where they sought so badly for a place to belong. These characters achieved change—personal growth. This is how happiness or peace was able to be achieved. In *El Momento En Que...* emulating *Jazz*, though a fight forces a barbed-wire fence

between the sisters, Margarita getting childhood Leukemia, this family tragedy, brings them back together again. And once these characters transition into stronger, more aware beings over a process, then I was able to give them that freedom. For Margarita, it was remission, but not before remembering how precious her family and culture truly are, and of course, my Graciela, becoming who she was meant to be—a strong, caring, and giving individual who now has her sister back, and has learned to be content wherever she is in life in whatever country she lives in.

And for as much as I learned through *Jazz*, I also incorporated lessons from *The Collected Stories of Amy Hempel* into my thesis. The character tension in this book almost flies under the radar, but I really appreciate the delicacy of it. The story where you specifically have to be looking for the tension is “Nashville Gone to Ashes.” There is a personal character struggle here with a woman trying to reconcile that she loves her husband. This was a truly impacting story of a woman who seems so angry at her late veterinarian husband because of his love affair with his animals, one she claims to have tolerated, yet over the twenty years, there were so many signs of her loyalty to him and even to the animals, though the character shows animosity against them as well, readying herself to give them away to new homes. This is where I learned to give Graciela some grace in her pursuits to ruin her sister’s new life in order to make her aware of what is truly important in life. There are places in *El Moment en Que* where Graciela is looking out for Margarita, even though she professes to despise her. For example, when Graciela sees Margarita in a bikini, she can’t even reconcile the feelings she’s having—jealousy over how beautiful her sister looks, how the boys at the pool stare, or anger and betrayal over her sister’s lack of modesty despite how sheltered they have been raised. From the piece:

*My poor Mamí. She would faint if she saw Margarita now. And then she’d light ten candles at the church altar. Everything in me wants to run over and cover her up.*

Yet when there is a moment where her mother almost discovers that Margarita has a bikini, when Margarita drops it in the hallway on her way to the washing machine, it is Graciela who saves her by intercepting it before *Mamá* does.

In Hempel, while we see these outward signs of frustration and a gentle tension, there are other outward signs of love and loyalty. For example, she wears her dead husband's watch. She sleeps in his bed because she can't bear to look at his bed empty from her bed. She looks out a window and reminisces of him outside. She recalls his gentleness in holding an animal as it woke from anesthesia. This made me cry so much. I worked so hard to achieve this same emotion that Hempel invoked in me. One place I found to center this emotion centered around *Abuelita's* little silver brush that Margarita now owns, and is often found brushing her hair with.

*I spread out over my math, folding my arms and resting my head, and watch my sister as she slowly brushes from top to bottom, through that thick hair that she claims is dark and rich like Papi's coffee.*

This brush has more value as an emotional tool later on when Margarita is too sick to complete her daily ritual of brushing her hair, so Graciela puts her sister's head in her lap and brushes it for her, and also in the piece, Margarita loses all her hair, and Graciela not knowing this, not even truly understanding cancer, takes Margarita's precious brush to the hospital.

## **Show Don't Tell**

When I first began the MFA program, one of the biggest problems I had was telling my reader how to feel, and Daniel Chacón called me out on it each and every time. Though we were on Skype and not one of my classmates could see me with much clarity, my face was red, I would sweat, and my heart would race. I knew he was right, and oddly, for the first *several* times, I could



never see it, but the second he pointed it out, I would curse under my breath and think, “Why, Donna? Why couldn’t you see that?” Anton Chekhov wrote it best, “Don’t tell me the moon is shining; show me the glint of light on broken glass” ([antonchekhov.org/quotes](http://antonchekhov.org/quotes)).

As I tell my own students who write chronic sentence fragments or chronic run-on sentences, if it’s your weakness, then you need to pay even more diligent attention to it. I was literally writing things like, “I was devastated.” But as I grew in the program, as I was exposed to texts that never told me how to feel, yet I could not avoid the emotions they evoked, I realized that technique is all in the writing, in the actions, and in the tension. Hempel achieved this so effortlessly. These little details that she included in “Nashville Gone to Ashes,” were so subtle, yet so powerful.

We are reading about a woman who despised her workaholic veterinarian husband and the animals that consumed his time, yet she pined for him in her actions, as mentioned above, these tender glimpses Hempel gave us of the wife wearing her husband’s watch and sleeping in his bed, not just to smell him, but more so because she could not bear to look at the painful reality of his empty bed. This writing is so tragically beautiful. And as for the animals that this wife despises so much, she cares tenderly for them, feeding them, getting allergy shots for two decades just to be around the cats, and at the very end when she is ready to give them all to new homes, she simply finds an excuse not to. In fact, instead of feeding a beggar, she chooses to feed his dog, and then we find her with an urgency running back home. The reader knows that it’s really because she realizes that she loves her animals—those animals she despised and perhaps envied for so long, the only connections left to her husband—and she just has this desire to get back home to them in that moment. Hempel never said outright, “The wife realized that she did in fact love the animals. The wife fed the beggars dog because she loved animals.” Had

she done so, that would have stolen every ounce, every bit of value from what she was trying to achieve. Some places where I worked to achieve this are when Graciela slowly learns to cook and then later, she does it effortlessly, and also where in the beginning she despised her old neighbor, but later, he is the only one home to celebrate her birthday with her, and her actions show how much she loves him, the *abuelito* she never had. There is also a subtle character change in Graciela when she finally gets to see her sister in the hospital for the first time. We can see how she's grown. She has forgotten the past relationship troubles, and it's a moment where she's reconciling two worlds—the new world she has despised this entire time, and the old world she's pined for. She doesn't even distinguish between the both, nor does she show disgust or sadness for either the way she had been. She thinks of two fond moments that happened in Mexico and America.

*I close my eyes and imagine her healthy. She's bright, her hair is long and flowing. I picture her running around the corn field and even hanging Papi's underwear on the line with me. "I love you, too," I whisper back. She is everything I need and more than I deserve.*

And all of this lovely and inspiring writing in Hempel, and all these revelations, just as in *Jazz*, revolve around tragedy that drives this character tension. In Hempel's book, this woman's husband is gone. Death has separated them and all that's left are the remnants of his life that she's taken responsibility for, from the animals down to his watch that she wears. We feel it in the narration.

"Flea sold his practice after the stroke, so these are the only ones I look after now. These are the ones that always shared the house." (Hempel).

"Will Rogers called vets the noblest of doctors because their patients can't tell them what's wrong. The doctor has to reach, and he reaches with his heart.

I think it was that love that I loved.” (Hempel)

“Here’s a trick I found for how to finally get some sleep. I sleep in my husband’s bed. That way the empty bed I look at is my own.” (Hempel)

“Cold nights I pull his socks on over my hands. I read in his bed.” (Hempel)

“In addition to Flea’s socks, I also wear his watch.

A lot of us wear our late-husband’s watch.

It’s the way we tell each other.” (Hempel)

These quotes are examples of this tug of war nestled inside this widow. The last quote is a great example of a few places where you can see the character tension that the widow holds for her husband.

“I would like to think bigger thoughts. But it looks like I don’t have a memory of our life that does not include one of the animals. Kirby still carries in his paper Sunday mornings. She used to watch while Flea did the crossword puzzle. He pretended to consult her: ‘I can see why you’d say dog, but don’t you see cat fits just as well?’” (Hempel)

The tension is in her disapproval, dislike, even jealousy of the animals, but they in turn are actually what tie her to her husband. In the same way, while the tension between sisters is America,

Graciela loves her sister so much that she actually takes great strides in trying to help her sister achieve everything she thinks she wants like getting a new dress and going to an American dance with an American boy. While Graciela often professes her bitterness toward Margarita, we can always see places where we learn how much she truly loves her.

*“Normal parents actually let their kids go to dances. They even take pictures of their kids before the dance. Some parents even chaperone the dance. We will never have a normal life, Graciela. Sometimes I just want to go back to Mexico. They dangle dreams in front of us like cheese in front of a mouse. Why bring us here just to keep us in a prison?”*

*... I lie there repeating Margarita’s words in my head. She’s so angry. It has been building up in her. I understand that now. As I slowly drift off to sleep, I try to dream up ways to get my poor, angry sister, a new dress.*

And:

*I lift her head onto my lap and brush gently through her beautiful long locks.*

*“Thank you,” she says quietly.*

*“I know how much it means to you.” Margarita brushes her long hair every night, and this would be no exception.*

Hempel displayed a truly unique way of capturing this emotion. A character thinks they know what they want or in this case what they don’t want, yet they don’t realize that the very thing they don’t want is what they need. The wife needed the animals. Graciela needed her sister.

## A Happy Ending For All

In Hempel, like *Jazz*, we're not left to doom and dismay, we're allowed to bask in the light of an awakening, of peace. The wife runs into town and through an incident with a beggar and his own dog, she realizes how much she truly needs her animals.

"How far do you take a thing like this? I think you take it all the way to heart. We give what we can— that's as far as the heart can go. This was the first thing that turned me back around to home. The second was just plain rain." (Hempel)

And from my collection:

*In the lobby, I spot the butterflies hanging down from the ceiling again, and I now understand. We are no longer butterflies caught in a mason jar. The jar is broken, and we are free, flying together in our new homeland, not to it. No matter what happens with Margarita, our family is strong and we'll face it together.*

In the end, my characters were flawed, they suffered tragedy, and they overcame. I was inspired by how effectively this worked in Hempel.

"Her characters are damaged goods – they walk through life with the lens of loss tinting their view. These losses – whether they be the death of a best friend, an unborn baby, a mother, a house – never defeat those in mourning. They become stronger, their scars a complexity, inevitably becoming beauty. (Sherman)

*Jazz* and *The Collected Stories of Amy Hempel* were excellent lessons on craft as much as they were memorable and enjoyable pieces of literature. They each inspired my thesis project, a project I have been working on in small pieces for the last year and a half. Morrison and Hempel are tools for learning the craft of writing well, or in a student's humble case, learning to write better. They

are invaluable examples of helping a story thrive through tension and all the aspects of life events that can push these limits.

## **Prelude**

*~ Grandmother is sleeping. I walk over to her bed and whisper, “No te mueres, Abuelita. Por favor.” Don’t die, Grandmother. Please. I slip my hand into hers. It’s soft and cold. She opens her eyes, smiles, and tries to squeeze my hand, but she can’t. She’s too weak now. I can’t hide my tears from her. She raises her hand slowly, trying to touch my face, but it falls back down to her side. I lean in closer, and she reaches up and brushes the tears from my cheek. “El cambio puede ser bello,” she says, her voice just a soft whisper. Change can be beautiful... My abuelita told me a lie. ~*

## I Went To See My Grandmother...

My *abuelita* is buried at the bottom of a hill called *la Colina de Milagros*. Three years ago, on the day we are set to leave Mexico, I spent a few quiet minutes at her grave. No words were needed. She knew everything in my heart. I was sure. Little white flowers had already grown all around her headstone, and I tucked one into my jean pocket. Sitting there was so peaceful, nothing like the pain and fear that were running races in my brain, nothing like the day we had buried her. I thought of her pinewood coffin carried on the shoulders of my *Papí*, my uncles, and my cousins—six on each side. *Papí* built her coffin. He sanded it down and polished it. He burnt a cross shape into the lacquer on the lid and put sheep's wool inside. It was perfect for our queen.

It was so hard to breathe that day, watching them lower my *abuelita*'s coffin into that deep black hole where she would be all alone. We were never going to hear her gentle voice again or brush her beautiful silver hair or smell her cheeks when we kissed her. My heart had broken that day, the pieces cutting into my chest. And then, just when I thought the ground was going to swallow me, too, my sister Margarita, slipped her hand into mine and squeezed. I listened to her take deep breaths, as if she was breathing them for me, and I found a calming rhythm with her. In and out, slow and steady.

*Tia* walked up softly behind me, pulling me out of my memory. She sat beside me on the grass and gave me a long hug. She was my best friend, the kind of *tía* that was more like a sister.

"*Ya es tiempo.*" She told me it was time, her voice thick with sadness. The motor of my *Papí*'s truck rumbled.



## **We Said Goodbye...**

When I was ten and Margarita was eleven, we received the news from our parents that would change our lives forever. It had only been a few weeks since my *abuelita* died when *Papí* decided to announce over dinner that we were leaving to America to seek out more opportunities. We would cross over the nearby border into El Paso, a place in Texas.

Across the dinner table, all our relatives—*tias, tios, primos*—teared up. Some stared back at *Papí* with wide eyes, but it was very, very quiet. *Mamí* stared at the floor, which meant she was supporting *Papí's* decision. If she had an opinion, she was keeping it to herself. It wasn't always that way. My mother was a fierce Mexican woman. But in those moments, she was as quiet as the tear drops running down her cheeks.

The only life I'd ever known was stolen from me. There would be no more fresh-evening walks on my grandmother's land, across the hilly grounds, through long, fresh blades of cool night grass. No more sanctuary from the burning hot sun under the umbrellas of tall trees. No more summers in the small pond only a short race between cousins from her front door. No more *limonada* Sundays on her wide porch. No more waking up to family and big breakfasts and elaborate dinners. No more *home*. How could this be what my parents wanted? But there would be no changing their minds. A few days later, we packed only what would fit in *Papí's* old faded Ford truck and drove away from that beautiful house. It was the only home I'd ever known, and we left it behind. We left the people I loved behind. We left my *Abuelita's* grave behind.

"*Fuertes*" *Mamí* called over her shoulder from the front seat. Her voice broke. She told us to be strong.

Margarita and I cried together in the back. It took about two hours to get through the line at the bridge, where cars and trucks and bikes sat so close to each other, I could have rolled down my

window and touched the person in the car beside us. Dark faces stared blankly out their windows at the crying *niñas* in the back seat. Papi's hands gripped the steering wheel so tightly that even his hands, darkened even more by his years out in the sun, wore a hint of white. We crossed over a border and came to this wild place, El Paso, Texas, where nothing made sense to me at the time. I would never accept that place. I couldn't. The bitterest part of it all was that our family, our home, was so nearby, yet so far away. With the new demands placed on both my parents to work all day and into the evenings, even visiting was put on the bottom of a long list that consisted of working and surviving.

## I Prayed...

I miss the open skies of Mexico very much. Instead, when I look out our windows I get to admire black tightrope wires that connect to tall wooden posts, tangoing with tree branches and covered with blackbirds. It is something I will never get used to – the feeling of a prison. Eventually, I just stopped looking out my window. But today, the motor of *Papí's* truck screeches, and then *click, click, clicks*. He tries to get it started so he can leave to work, but it won't budge. This is the second time this week. Maybe it doesn't like to wake up. Same as me. Because waking up always reminds me that I'm here. In America. And there is nothing I can do about it.

After five years here, my hope is giving out. Same as the truck. It never did this back in Mexico. The truck I mean. Even it knows better. Texas isn't home. It would never be. I press my forehead against the cool window. My tired eyes blink at the new sun. *Papí* rests his head on the steering wheel. The truck looks glum under the shade of the driveway's canopy. He tries to bring it to life again. Its rusty body shudders and stops.

I know exactly what he is doing in that truck. He is gently pumping the gas a few times, begging it to start. "*Ándale, mi niña.*" He'll say. "Come on, my little girl." He straightens and does the sign of the cross and lowers his head to pray. *Papí's* old truck needs a lot of sweet-talking and a lot of prayer. If that truck doesn't start, he won't get to work.

Sometimes I wish that it wouldn't start. Because if there is no truck, there is no work, there is no money, and my family will have to go back home to Mexico. That would be a dream come true. I want to pray for the truck *not* to start, but instead, I do my own sign of the cross and hope for a miracle. After two more tries, the Ford roars to life. *Papí* hollers out a happy *Wooo!* Then, he sputters away in his old Ford with its faded blue paint. It is more rust than paint. I

watch until it disappears down the street.

## I Spoke To A Butterfly...

Saturday is the one day a week where my mother, my sister, and I make our house as shiny as a new bell. This particular Saturday, I wake with an hour to spare before my mother will be calling for me from the kitchen in a tongue twist of Spanish. I look over at the empty bed of my big sister, Margarita. It's already made to perfection. She is in the kitchen having coffee and *pan dulce* with *Mamá*. They do this often, and never even give a second thought at waking me to join them. I don't like coffee much anyway. *Pan dulce*, I definitely like, especially the big round cookies with candy dots. I look at my bedroom door and wonder if I should intrude on *Mamá* and Margarita's special time, but instead I look back at something that moves on the window. A beautiful black and yellow butterfly clings to the screen outside. It's as if it's looking inside at me.

"Good morning, butterfly. Can you take me away with you?" I put my fingertip against the warm glass and pretend the small creature is resting on it. This reminds me of when I was seven, and I punched a boy named Efren because he caught a butterfly and trapped it inside a glass mason jar.

The day were so hot that all of us kids had gathered under the leafy umbrella of the largest tree on my *abuelita*'s land. We waited for *Papí* to return home to tell us one of his great stories. Sometimes, he'd tell us about how Margarita was sick as a baby and was going to die, but he climbed to the top of *la Colina de Milagros* – The Hill of Miracles— and said a prayer, and she was saved. But that one was boring. Our favorite story of his was one about a boy and his ghost dog.

Well, that day, Efren grasped at the butterfly and actually caught it. He released it into the jar and twisted the lid nice and tight, and then he lifted up his pant leg and pulled a blade out

from his sock. He held it out to the sun, and it gleamed like diamonds. He let a few kids touch the point with their fingers. Some kids gasped. One or two went wide-eyed and snapped their fingers back at the prick of it.

Efren took up the jar and used his blade to punch small holes in the lid so the butterfly could have air to breathe. He grinned as he placed the jar on the ledge of our porch for all of us kids to see. The glorious creature had solid black wings outlined with perfect red and white dots, so crisp against the darkness.

For a few seconds I stood with the others, staring into the jar, lost in the beauty. No one I'd known had *ever* been able to catch one. It fluttered against the glass, struggling, and then I understood. It needed to be free—to go home.

“*Dejalo ir,*” I begged him to “let it go.”

All our friends groaned at me.

“*No.*” His answer was simple and sharp.

“*Ya!*” I said much meaner. This means “now.”

He shook his head.

I looked around our circle of friends, hoping someone would be on my side. Several pairs of wide eyes just blinked back at me, but nobody said a word. Efren reached out for the jar and pulled it close into his chest, so I did what any sensible nature-loving girl would do. I punched Efren in the mouth, felt the sting of his front tooth as it slit open the skin on my knuckle. I snatched the jar and set the butterfly free and watched as it soared up and got lost in the leaves of our tree, while blood ran down to my fingertips.

I am not beautiful like that butterfly was, but I am stuck in a glass jar with tiny holes in the lid. Sometimes it feels like I struggle for every breath. Will anyone save me? I often wonder.

*How I hate America.*

## A Wedding Dress Changed Everything...

Margarita makes eye contact with herself in the long mirror of our bedroom like she's so in love with herself. Any minute now, she's probably going to close her eyes and press her face against the mirror and give herself smooches like we see in the movies. But she doesn't.

I spread out over my math, folding my arms and resting my head, and watch my sister as she slowly brushes from top to bottom, through that thick hair that she claims is dark and rich like *Papi's* coffee.

She used to brush my hair like that when we were little. We'd sit on our *abuelita's* porch and she'd take that silver brush and drag it from top to bottom, yanking on my tangles. I'd let her do anything she wanted, braids, buns, *colitas*. She was the only one I'd ever let brush my hair. Not my *mamá*, not my *abuela*, just Ita. I don't call her Ita anymore.

When my sister begins her speaking exercises, she interrupts my daydreams of the good old days in Mexico, on *Abuelita's* porch, with my very best friend.

"Beat," she says slowly, as if she still needs the practice. After three years here, we know English perfectly now. Her accent is almost gone. Mine, not so much, and I don't want it to go, either.

"Ssssring," she says, forcing each sound out.

When we first came here, our bilingual education teacher told my parents in Spanish, that my sister and I needed to speak English to each other at home. We didn't even know that much, only what we had started to pick up at school like, "Hi," and "Good morning," "Yes," "No," "I need to go to the restroom."

*Mamá* nodded appreciatively at our teacher, but her burning eyes told another tale, one of uncertainty and fear. Soon, we'd learn why. And it all started with a wedding dress...



Only days after crossing that border three years ago, my sister and I discovered the hard truth. Everything we'd ever known, every confidence we ever had, was gone.

Not only were we the new kids in school, but we spoke Spanish in a school where everyone else spoke English. That's like taking two little fish out from their pond and putting them in a sandy desert and telling them to make it. We were sure trying our best. That's for sure.

When my sister and I practiced our English at home, we'd laugh at each other. Margarita's words sounded funny, and I could barely say mine. We were two tiny girls sitting across from each other on our living room floor with our legs folded, holding up flash cards, and giggling together. That's what we did. Giggle.

We'd say things like "Teep of tha mountain." And "Did you went to school yesterday?"

We knew we were wrong half the time because when we'd see our teachers the next day and show them what we practiced, they'd correct us. We didn't care. Learning English kept us busy. It was a bully of a reminder of where we were and just how much we had to change, but it was something we were doing together, something we shared that belonged only to us.

Sometimes I'd catch *Mamá* standing in the doorway of our bedroom listening to us practice. Or she'd poke her head out from the kitchen and stare into our living room while we did our flash card lesson. I even walked into our bedroom one day and found her holding up our flash cards. She shoved them under her pillow, and we never said another word about it.

*Mamá's* face was always filled with wonder, and I promised myself that when I learned English better, I was going to help her learn it too. That day would never come. I remember it clearly, as clearly as I can remember every detail of the day we buried my *abuelita*.

We had only been in Texas for a few weeks. I was walking down our hall to the kitchen when the telephone rang, almost as if it was waiting for me to walk by.

“*Tia!*” I screamed into the phone. It was my *Tia* Martha, *Mamá’s* youngest sister. I love her in second place, after my *Tia* Patricia, of course. Her voice sped through me like a bullet, exciting my heart, making me dance on my tiptoes.

Margarita, with her usual two long braids on each side, came bounding down the hallway waving her hands. Her braids whipped in the air like reins guiding some invisible horse set on trampling me.

“*Tia! Tia! Dame la telefono!*” She demanded I give her the phone, but I wasn’t ready to let my aunt’s voice go. Margarita slipped her hands around the receiver and pulled on it while my neck bent and followed like I was glued to it.

*Mamá* walked over to the mouth of the hallway and put her hands on her hips. She smiled with a warmth that reached up to her eyes, but what I remember most—her worry line that was forever pressed into her forehead right between her eyebrows was for a moment, gone.

“*Ya, ya, ya,*” she hushed my sister and me. We sounded like clucking chickens from my *Abuelita’s* hen house as we pulled on and screamed our goodbyes into the telephone. She took the phone and leaned her tall, thin body against the wall, twirling a long dark strand of hair around her finger. She smiled as she chatted with my precious aunt about everything from *Papí’s* new job to our new school. She grabbed a pen and pad from the small shelf our phone sits on and pulled the top of the pen off with her teeth.

“*Veinte y ocho? Si? Mira mira.*” She teased my aunt about her small waist size. She scribbled down some more numbers, my aunt’s measurements. They were super important, numbers that would come together with fabric and thread and *Mamá’s* love. *Mamá* was making my *tia’s* wedding dress. We would actually get to go home for her wedding. *Home*. I had been

counting down the days until we would cross over to the South where the sun feels warmer, it shines brighter, and laughter never stops.

The next day, the three of us took the city bus up to the Palms Shopping Center to Ferguson's where *Mamá* often bought her sewing material. I remember how she looked around that store, touched every piece of material stacked on the walls. She said that the perfect material would call out to her. After maybe forever, watching *Mamá* run her hands over different textures of material, she finally found an ivory satin.

"*Toca lo*," she nudged, putting it out for Margarita and me to touch.

I finally understood what she meant. When my fingers pressed into the satin, it zapped my fingertips and charged my smile. I looked at *Mamá* and Margarita and met each of their faces with my eyes. They wore the exact same smile. We stood there, the three of us giggling over a bundle of satin.

"Excuse me." There was a voice behind me. *Mamá's* eyes left our circle and then her worry line came back.

I turned around to find an older woman, maybe as old as *Abuelita* was, standing behind me.

"My name is Gail." She smiled with sweetness and put out a wrinkled hand.

I turned back and looked at *Mamá*. She stood there still. Gail's hand hung over my head in the space between them. She nodded, and *Mamá* slowly reached out, her eyes piercing, on high alert.

"Do you sew?" Gail asked.

My *mamá* blinked a few times and then looked at Margarita.

Margarita looked at Gail.

“Repeat, please.” Margarita said, her accent heavy.

“Does your mother sew?”

“Yes,” Margarita answered for *Mamá*.

“¿*Que dice?*” *Mamá* ordered Margarita to tell her what the woman was saying. Her voice was annoyed as if it bothered her that Margarita had left her out.

Margarita told *Mamá* the question the woman had asked.

*Mamá* looked at the woman and nodded.

“Does your mother do other work?” The woman looked to Margarita.

This time, Margarita looked at *Mamá* and asked her the woman’s question.

“¿*Come que?*” *Mamá*’s voice was aggravated.

“Like what?” Margarita asked the woman.

“Cook. Clean.” The woman smiled. “I want to hire someone to help me at my home.”

Margarita’s cheeks went blush red. “Repeat please.”

Gail laughed out loud. “Can your mother work for me? I’ll pay her.”

Margarita translated. My eyes went wide. What a crazy thing to ask *Mamá*. Whatever did we say or do here in this store to draw this crazy old woman over to us? I looked at *Mamá*, ready to see the fierce Mexican woman in her use sharp words and make this lady sorry she bothered us. But *Mamá* smiled, instead nodding her head up and down.

“Jess. Jess.” *Mamá* said.

My breath caught in my throat. Did my *mamá* just try to say *yes*?

Margarita must have understood it as soon as I did because we both giggled at the same time, slow at first and then loudly. Gail giggled, too. We were laughing so hard at how precious

our *mamí* sounded, and then I happened to look at her face. Her eyes lit like flames, her worry line a deep valley between them. I nudged Margarita's ribs with my elbow. The laughter stopped.

"*Margarita, dile que si y escribe nuestro informacion.*" She pulled a pen and a pad out of her purse.

"My mother says yes and here is information." Margarita's voice had a quiver. That's how I knew that I should be scared, too. Margarita wrote down *Mamí's* name, Rosa Flores, and our phone number.

*Mamí* counted out her dollars for the material, and we used the last of her change to ride our bus home. It took us two hours to get there, and in those two long hours, we said nothing. *Mamí's* face was sharp, quiet. So I became the same. I didn't like this. I even reached out and put my hand on the plastic bag sitting on *Mamí's* lap, hoping the satin would zap me again.

When we got home, she put Margarita and me up against the wall in our living room and in her loud, angry, Spanish voice, told us we could never speak English in our home again. She claimed that if we did, we would lose the ability to speak in our mother tongue, which she said she would protect at all costs in our home. But my sister and I knew the real reason. We made fun of our *Mamí*. Not on purpose. We'd never do such a thing, but that was how she saw it, and she was the queen. So we promised her to never, ever speak even one word of English at home, ever.

My sister cried in her bed that night. A few days later, when *Mamí* began her new job with Ms. Gail, Margarita created a plan she said would save us. Every morning before school, when our parents walked out of the house and down our three porch steps for work, Margarita put that plan into action. She'd order me to wait on our old brown sofa. I'd obey and play with the little burn spots from the last owner's cigarettes, and she'd go into the kitchen to prepare our

breakfast. Then she'd turn on Sesame Street, and we'd sit on the sofa together with plates of eggs and warm tortillas on our laps and repeat, repeat, and repeat the letter of the day, sounds, and words. If I didn't do it, she'd hit me on the head. If I said anything that didn't sound like what Grover said, she'd hit me again.

The characters of Sesame Street, little blue Grover, Maria, who looked exactly like my *Tia* Patricia, and Big Bird were our new American family. Spending my mornings with them was the best part of my day. They didn't laugh at me when I tried to speak English. They didn't see my brown skin and tell me how ugly I was. I loved my Sesame Street family very much.

My sister and I still don't speak English at home, at least not where our parents can hear, but we know it perfectly now. "Beat" now sounds like it should instead of "Bit." "You" doesn't sound like "Chooo." That's a big deal for Margarita.

And that's the wedding dress story. The reason why *Mamá* refuses to let us speak Spanish at home.

## **I Lost Margarita...**

Margarita changed. She has become unusual since our arrival. She's hardly interested in me and very interested in her new American friends and her school and herself. I had thought that we were both butterflies in the glass jar together, but somehow, she slipped out through one of the tiny holes in the lid and left me inside, alone.

That's the best I can guess of it. She slipped out, only she didn't go home, she just flew farther and farther away from me and from the home we did know, and from who she used to be—my best friend, my sister who solved all my problems like untied shoelaces, cuts on the knee, or unruly hair that she'd tame there on my *abuelita's* porch, honing it into obedient ponytails, buns, or braids.

It took one year's time for her to learn English and drift away. My old Margarita comes out now and then. Sometimes she'll smile a certain way, and I know that my best friend is hiding in there, waiting to come out, but she never does. She'd rather study all the time, brush her hair, read books and teen magazines that she hides from *Mamá*, or gossip with her new friends.

I am nothing but a bother, saying the wrong things, butting in when I shouldn't, and basically, driving her crazy. I know that I am on my own here, mapping out my own path in this new place.

## Margarita Wore A Bikini...

On Wednesday morning, Margarita comes over to the sink where I am washing dishes and whispers in Spanish “*Luz*.”

That’s a code word. We don’t need code words when our parents aren’t home, so I don’t know why she’s using one. *Luz* means light in English. The city pool is on Light Street.

“Wait a minute!” I whine. “I want to come.” School was right around the corner. This could be my last chance to swim.

“I don’t want you to come, Graciela.” I wish she was just playing around with me, but her eyes don’t sparkle. They’re angry and serious and she stares me down. She may be older, but I am taller than her and lanky at that, but even so, her presence over me is like a giant, and her glare is enough to smoosh me back against the sink. “I was just telling you where I’ll be,” she says. “In case of an emergency.”

I flick soapsuds off my hands and peer up at her with sad eyes. She already has her bag flung over her shoulder.

“I’m tired of you leaving me behind, and I really want to go to the pool. I won’t even talk to you. Please?” That’s all I’ve got to offer—a *please*. Last time she left me, I threatened to tell our parents. Margarita called my bluff. She promised she’d tell on me for the time when I snuck a cat in through our window and it shred our bedroom curtains. I just thought it would be nice to cuddle with it through the night. I was going to put it back outside in the morning. We woke up to hisses and angry meows and pieces of curtain fluttering in the air like surprise confetti and shredded curtains dangling from our rods like party streamers. I just pretended that the cat somehow appeared in our house, and that I was as shocked as my parents. Margarita kept my secret but whispered a “You owe me,” when *Mamá* wasn’t looking.



“Please, Margarita,” I try one more time. My voice isn’t as whiny. It’s just desperate. It must have made a difference because as quick as a light switches on and off, she relaxes. Her bag slides down her arm.

“Fine. But I’m leaving now.”

“Thank you! Thank you, Margarita!” I run to our room, throw some things in my bag, and fish out four quarters from the small savings account under my mattress.

We walk in silence under the hot sun for three blocks. Margarita looks nervous about something, and I just don’t feel like talking. We come around to the side of the outdoor pool that has a tall chain link fence. Teenagers we know are already waving and calling for my sister. She waves back shouting her hellos. I just keep walking.

Inside, Margarita pays a dollar to the lifeguard behind the glass window and flirts a little bit, giggling. It works. He slides her dollar bill back through the glass, she touches his hand when she takes it back, and then she dances off to the shower room with a big fat grin on her face. I pay my dollar and don’t say a word. The last time I spoke to this guy, he asked Margarita why I had an accent and she didn’t if we were sisters. My accent is not *that* noticeable. And I don’t even care that I have one. It’s important to me.

In the women’s shower room, I lock myself into a stall and rummage through my bag to find my swimsuit. It’s a tan two-piece. The bottoms are long like shorts and the shirt reaches all the way down to my waist. It doesn’t show much, and that’s how my parents like it.

“I’ll see you outside,” Margarita calls through my door and leaves me again. Her flip-flops squeak against the wet floor.

I stare at myself in the long mirror on the back of the door. Too tall with small potato spuds for breasts, long, dark, stringy hair, dark skin. Dark all over. I throw a white T-shirt over

my suit because swimsuits hate me, but there's a strict policy here about wearing them. My own flip-flops squeak all the way outside. I scan the pool for my sister. She's nowhere.

The pool is wide and gleaming, but there's no one to enjoy it with. This always happens. Two girls from my school splash each other nearby. I had them for math last year. I'd like to say hello, but when I walk by just to see what happens, they stop splashing and whisper. So much for that.

There's a shady spot over by the changing rooms. That's my next move. Everyone is paying attention to something. I look over, too. The water breaks, and my sister appears, standing up in the shallow area. Jaw drop. It's not a "something" they're all looking at; it's a "someone."

"Margarita!" I shout from the edge of the pool.

Margarita smooths her long hair down. Her wet, creamy skin glistens against the sun. I blink a few more times, trying to make sure I'm seeing right. Yep. I'm seeing right.

Margarita is wearing a purple two-piece, but it isn't like mine. *It's a bikini!* She isn't covered at all. In fact, she's really just wearing a bra and panties! Just because it's called a bathing suit, doesn't make it any different. My poor *Mamá*. She would faint if she saw Margarita now. And then she'd light ten candles at the church altar. Everything in me wants to run over and cover her up.

"Margarita!" I yell again, but she doesn't hear me. Or maybe she doesn't want to hear me.

She dives back in under the water where her long dark hair flows loose behind her like a super hero cape. I drop my bag against the wall and dive in after her. When I'm finally close enough, I reach out and yank on her hair. Her arms flail in the water and we both come up for air.

"What's your problem?" She pushes my shoulder and coughs out some water.

“What’s yours? What are you wearing?” I demand.

“This?” She looks down. “It’s Jenny’s. I borrowed it.”

“Well, you’d better ask her if she has a coffin you can borrow, too. I’m telling *Mamá*.”

“Are you serious?” She glares at me.

I am dead quiet. She already hates me enough and telling will only make it worse, but this is just way over the top. She’s lost her mind. By telling on her, I’m really just saving her from herself.

“Just lay off, okay?” She jabs a mean finger into my shoulder. “Anyway, I’m officially in high school now. I’m not a baby anymore.”

And with that, she dives under the water and several seconds later, splashes up in the deep end, grabbing onto the edge of the pool wall. Margarita climbs out and gets in line at the diving board. She smiles at her friends, full of confidence. All the boys are staring at her and I can’t take it anymore. My teeth grind against each other in my mouth. I’d like to punch all of them in the face. Just like I did with Efren.

How could Margarita do this to me? I climb out of the pool and sit against the far wall by the baby pool. Even the babies are having a good time.

*Deep breaths.*

Am I jealous or worried? Her body is perfect, nothing like my tall, dark, and boney frame. She stands straight and her beautiful hair, even soaking wet, hangs perfectly, behaving behind her.

Some younger boys steal my attention. There are three of them, and they’re pushing each other into the four feet end. The lifeguard doesn’t blow his whistle. Even he’s staring at my sister. When I look back at the boys, there are only two wrestling. My eyes scan the pool, and

under the surface is the third boy. I wait for him to come up, but he doesn't. Instead, he sinks lower until he's on the floor of the pool.

He doesn't move. Jumping to my feet, I scream the only word I can remember: "Margarita!" My heart races against my chest. She's nowhere, so I jump in, the water breaking around me, and swim down to him. He's just a small hump on the floor of the pool. My arms hook under his, and I pull him to the surface and onto the ledge, then spread him out on the hot pavement.

His body is still. His chest isn't moving. Wet feet slap against the cement and people surround us. Margarita pushes me to the side and puts her ear down to his face. The lifeguard is running over, but Margarita is already pushing on the boy's chest with her hands—one over the other. She puts her mouth over his, blows air into him, and then pushes on his chest again. When Margarita puts her mouth on his again, he vomits water in her face. She jumps back and wipes her mouth and the little boy starts to cry. A siren wails nearby. The crowd pushes in around us. I'm frozen, my feet somehow stuck to the burning pavement.

"Hey," someone says. "What's your name?" It's the lifeguard.

Someone tugs on my arm. It's Margarita.

"Let's go, Graciela. Hurry!" She pulls on me one more time before sprinting off to the wall and loading up her towel. I grab my backpack and even as people call after her, she drags me out of the pool and we're out on the street running home, Margarita in her tiny purple bikini and *chanclas*. Cars honk at us as my harlot of a sister runs, her glorious hair flowing behind her, her beautiful long legs whizzing through the air, and me, the boyish sister chasing after her.

## **We Were Robbed...**

When my eyes snap open, I don't even remember falling asleep. Something woke me, but I can't remember what. I blink as my eyes get used to the darkness. I listen for Margarita, for her snores, but it's quiet. Too quiet. Something is not right. There's a scratch at our window. Maybe that cat came back. But cats can't lift windows, and I hear mine sliding against the wood of the frame. My blood turns ice cold. I slap my hands over my mouth to keep from screaming.

*Someone's breaking in!* They close the window and *lock it!* I need to call for *Papí*, but I'm paralyzed. I let go of my mouth, but only a croak comes out. I slide under my covers, and I hold very still, trying not to even breathe. I listen as the robber creeps through our bedroom, the wooden panels of the floor creaking under each step. He's getting closer to me. My hands are balled into tight, sweaty fists, and my heart is pounding in my throat.

*Dios Protejenos!* God protect us!

There's a tap at our window. Another robber! The footsteps creep back to the window and it slides open again. We're doomed! *Mamá* was right! We should have been more careful. Who unlocked our window? There is a giggle.

"What are you doing?" Margarita says with a hiss.

"You forgot to give me my phone back," another girl's voice is just above a whisper.

"Oh! Sorry. Wait! Let me erase my texts."

"Aw, come on. I want to read your juicy texts. I'm your best friend! Plus, I let you use my phone the whole night so you could text him."

Now I recognize the voice. It's Jenny, Margarita's best friend.

"You have to get out of here before my parents hear us, or worse, before we wake up the troll up there." They both giggle. "I can't believe we partied with seniors!" Margarita squeals

quietly.

“I love high school,” Jenny whispers.

“Me too! Okay, bye for real.”

The window slides shut.

I lay completely still. Now I think it’s shock that holds me tight to my bed. And sadness, too. Margarita, my sweet sister, is a rebel. And worst of all, she thinks I’m a troll.

## Margarita Became A Hero...

Across from our bedroom, *Mamá* and *Papí* sit on their bed discussing the monthly budget. Margarita heads for the laundry room with her towel in her arms, and I follow to get a glass of milk. Something falls out behind her. My eyes sharpen in on it. The purple top to Jenny's bikini sits lonely on the hallway tiles.

I quickly run over to snatch it for her before our parents see, but then I stop and just stare at it. The anger from the pool takes over me. The memory of seeing her look so amazing wearing that bikini at the pool, and the shame at how careless and free she was really hits me.

That would have never have happened back in Mexico, but Margarita is changing in our new homeland. She's changing so fast, my head spins, and soon, I'm afraid I won't be able to reach her. I turn around and walk away leaving the purple top there for *Mamá* to find, promising myself that this is a good thing. Heck, if my parents discover this new Margarita, they'll pack up and take us back home in a heartbeat.

My parents' bed creaks. "*Voy a hacer café.*" *Mamá* tells my *papí* that she's going to make coffee. Her footsteps come closer. I bite my bottom lip, and my hands ball up into fists. *Mamá's* shadow approaches her bedroom door, and I can't take it anymore.

*Save the bikini. Save Margarita.*

I dive onto the floor, covering the top with my body. *Mamá's* bare feet are inches from my nose.

"*¿Que Paso?*" She asks what happened, her voice startled. "*¿Estas bien?*" She asks if I'm okay.

I grin up at her.

*Panic. How do I hide this bikini?*

Margarita comes over. “*Imposible.*” She rolls her eyes. She thinks I’m impossible.

“Margarita!” *Mamá* looks at her to scold her.

Here is my chance. I stuff that bikini top underneath my shirt; even though, Margarita says I’m “impossible.” When *Mamá* looks back at me, Margarita scowls at me from behind her.

Maybe I am “*imposible*,” but when we get back to our room, I fling the purple top across the room and it hits Margarita’s face. “You dropped something.”

Her eyes go wide as she understands.

“Get rid of this,” I warn her.

“Thank you,” she whispers.

I pause for a minute, staring right at her. There’s a glimmer of hope, a small spark of our bond dancing there between us.



## The Wizard Lost His Power...

On a Friday morning after making my breakfast, I go into our tiny living room and turn on our television, a simple one that still uses knobs and antennae. When the picture comes clear, I squeal and bound back to Margarita's and my bedroom while my burrito flops around in my hand, spilling egg all over the hall.

"Margarita, the *Wizard of Oz* is on! Will you watch it with me?" My voice hits the high-pitched happy octaves.

She looks up from her book, and our eyes meet.

"No." Her answer is simple, soft even, but it cuts through me like a blade.

I stand there watching as she lays on her bed, legs dangling over the side, and turns another page in her book. Maybe she's teasing me. She must see how exciting this is. And I had hidden her purple bikini top from *Mamá*. She owes me. Did she already forget that?

"Please," I beg.

"Go away," she says annoyed. "I don't feel like it." She closes her book and turns onto her side so I'm staring at her back.

I stand there for a few more seconds before walking away, still hoping that her laughter will chase me out into the hall, calling me back inside our bedroom where she'll say, "Just kidding!"

That doesn't happen. She may not remember, but this was the first movie we ever watched together here in America. It's one of my favorite memories. We didn't really have any furniture yet. Boxes piled up in our empty living room like a giant's play blocks. Margarita and I sat on a bedspread on the living room floor.

I was afraid of the scary new house. Margarita with her long braids and wide eyes had the

same feeling written on her face. *Papí* pushed a box to the center of the room. He left and came back in again with a small television set.

“*Un regalito de tu Tia,*” he said proudly. A gift. My aunt Patricia had given us her bedroom television. *Papí* fidgeted with the antennae.

The picture slowly came into focus. Margarita and I giggled. There was a girl with Margarita’s same braids clutching a tiny dog in her arm. Then we gasped together, as if we saw them at the same time—the girl’s red shoes, shiny like jewels.

We only got small and desperate peeks until *Papí* finally found the perfect place for the antenna, and the picture was clean. There was a new world looking back at us, a little girl just like us, lost, sad, and afraid. We did not understand a single word she said, but we didn’t have to. We knew.

*Mamí* came in with bowls of cubed cantaloupe and put them on our laps. We sat there hypnotized by this little girl, sticky fruit dripping down our arms to our elbows; no words were needed. The little girl, Dorothy, found her happy ending. It was all just a dream. I had hope that one day, I’d learn the same was true for me.

That was then. But today, I drag my feet back into the living room and stare at Dorothy on the screen, remembering the magic she once held for me, for Margarita. My finger pushes the button and the screen turns black. For the rest of the day, I don’t do much of anything except wait for my parents to come home from work. At four, Margarita and I pull out *Mamí*’s pre-made dinner from the fridge and warm it up. We are quiet except for Margarita’s sniffles.

Margarita goes back to her bed, and I climb a tree to the highest branch where broken rays of sun creep down through the branches and find me—find me remembering and rubbing out angry tears with my palms.

## **I Almost Kissed A Boy...**

On a warm Sunday morning, not long after the sun has come in and tickled my closed eyelids, our house is bustling with the morning. I slide into my chair at the breakfast table. The kitchen smells like coffee and a hot pan with leftovers of bacon and eggs.

“*¡Mira que belleza!*” My *mamá* turns from the stove, eyeing me in approval, saying I’m beautiful.

I’m not, but I’m glad she thinks so. I tried extra hard today, wearing a skirt suit with tight sleeves and an itchy collar. It’s the most important-looking outfit I have for what could be the most important day in my life.

“*¡Si! Que guapa!*” *Papí* agrees and gives a whistle through his teeth while he butters his toast.

Margarita gives me her “I’m onto you” eyes as she pours her juice, but I pretend not to notice and make myself eat my scrambled eggs with *chorizo* even though my stomach has joined the circus as a trapeze artist.

I’m meeting a boy today. A boy named Mark who slipped me a note during mass last Sunday in the third pew on the right side at 10:45 a.m., and I’ve read it every day, over and over again since. I place a hand over the side jacket pocket where my note sits snug, the edges frayed, the penciled writing now a silver smear across the page.

I eat only as much as my nerves let me, and then I stuff my egg into my napkin and wipe my mouth pretending to finish up. My conscience scolds me for wasting food. My conscience isn’t a cricket like Pinocchio’s. Mine sounds more like my big sister. I sneak a look at her. She’s busy eating like a bird, picking at her eggs and tearing off tiny pieces of tortilla.

“*¿Listas para la escuela?*” Our *papí* interrupts, asking if we’re ready for the new school

year, which is just a few weeks away.

Margarita bounces up and down in her chair. Of course she's ready. She parties with seniors. Boys like her. She has friends. She gets straight A's, and this year, her sophomore year, will be no different. I just shrug my shoulders, hoping that that's a good enough answer. I'm only just starting high school and am not at all ready to squeeze myself into Margarita's unforgiving shadow. Shrugging gets me a full lecture from *Papí* on the importance of loving school and appreciating my education because we are so blessed to be learning in the American school system.

"Donchu know the school it good, man?" *Papí* just butchered English with a chainsaw, and *Mamá* forbids English in the house. She turns around and swats him in the head with her spatula. "*¡Ay!*" he cries out shrinking in his chair. He gives us a silly smirk when she turns back to the stove.

Margarita's mouth is open in an *o*. We're both thinking the same thing. He's brave. No one messes with *Mamá*. But once that action is over, I can't help but yawn when his lecture, now back to Spanish, keeps going and going even when we pile into his dang beat up truck.

It starts on the first try. This is a very good sign. *Papí* gives a loud laugh and slaps the dashboard. Then he kisses the steering wheel. *Mamá* swats him again. This time with her Bible.

"*Andale. Vamos a llegar tarde!*" She tells him to hurry or we'll be late.

We drive to church with the windows rolled down all the way, but that doesn't help with my latest problem. Who wears a suit jacket in summer? It's only eight in the morning, and I know from the sweat in my armpits that it's already eighty degrees outside. Oh, and I forgot to borrow deodorant from Margarita. I can feel my worry line draw itself into my forehead.

When we get to church, I shove my sister out of the truck and fan myself with my hands.

My armpits are small ovens. I ignore the torture and vow to keep my arms down. Smoothing my skirt down, I search for Mark's family between and around the people crowding through the enormous church doors. I can't find them anywhere. *Oh, God. Please let him be here.* Actually, I'll kill him if he's not here. If only he knew what my armpits were doing all because of him.

Inside, my family sits near the middle and on the left, and I scan the pews trying not to be obvious. Finally, behind us, I see him. His sandy-brown hair falls perfectly over his eyes and his skin is sun-kissed from a summer spent teaching swimming lessons at a private pool. My insides turn, and I feel things in places I am not supposed to, especially when in church, but I am under his spell. When our gazes meet, his hazel eyes with a demonic-like lure, gleam at me from where he is. I start to wave, but stop myself not wanting the entire church to see it. He raises an eyebrow at me, and I bite my lip to stop a smile, but even then, my eyes get all dreamy. My heart even dances around doing *The Macarena*.

Mass is way too slow today. My hands tremble at the thought of him behind me, at the idea that I will be feeling his hands, gazing into his eyes, maybe feeling the warmth of his lips over mine, all in a few minutes. My eyes are glued on the clock above the priest's head, and I practice the ability of mind control. I'm going to move those hands to the place I urgently need them to be, 12:45—the time I will meet Mark. But the clock doesn't move.

Margarita pinches my thigh really, really hard when I don't stop squirming in my seat, so I bop her in the knee with mine before stealing one more glance over my shoulder at Mark. His seat is empty. The clock says 12:40. I get it. He snuck out a few minutes early. Because how obvious would it be if we both got up and walked out of mass at the same time?

Maybe he's as impatient as I am. Whatever he needs to say to me must be super important. My heart dances around in my chest like a ping-pong ball bouncing off bones. *Oh my*

*God.* Margarita nudges me in the ribs. *Oops.* Everyone is doing the sign of the cross but me. I keep my elbows down to hide my sweaty pits, and dab my forehead, chin, and cheeks with my fingertips. The last ten seconds tick by, and at 12:45 sharp, I shoot a whisper across Margarita to *Mamá.* “*Baño, por favor.*” I ask to go the restroom.

She shoots her whisper back across Margarita. It’s simple. “*No.*”

Of course she says no. We’re about to take communion. It’s the very thing she waits for each Sunday, and what she’ll talk about the rest of the day, that zing that she feels when the Holy Spirit falls over her when she partakes of the body and blood of Christ. I think it reminds her of home more than anything. I’ll need to top communion for sure.

“*Voy a vomitar!*” I whisper my lie in church, telling her that I’m going to vomit. Or is it a lie? I *am* nervous.

She raises an eyebrow but nods her head. She would have probably tried to go with me to make sure I’m okay, but again, the priest is about to offer communion, and she’d never miss that. My belly does flip-flops, jumping jacks, and Zumba all at once. On shaky legs, I break out of mass through the small hallway near the back of the church where we first entered, and I take a few deep breaths to relax myself. It doesn’t work, but still I hurry to find Mark.

Around the corner, I spot him. He’s outside under a tree in the courtyard. The blanket of grass, the flowers in the small garden behind him, it’s a dreamy place to meet for sure. Having my first kiss with Mark would be better than a dream. What if he hates kissing me? The butterflies in my stomach wake up and try to take off again. The stone statues of saints around the church garden, with their hollow eyes, warn me to be a good girl, so I don’t look at them. Margarita isn’t a good girl. Maybe it’s time I follow my big sister’s footsteps. For Mark, I would. Anyway, at least Jesus isn’t out here. He’s inside behind our priest, nailed to a cross hanging

from a wire attached to the ceiling.

My sweaty hand slips off the door handle on my way out to the courtyard. I swipe them on my skirt and hope Mark doesn't notice.

*Keep your arms down,* my stinging armpits remind me.

"Graciela!" He stands and I go to him, just like a magnet to the refrigerator. We are now only inches apart, and I can smell his peppermint gum. He pats my back. "How are you?"

My cheeks go hot, and I just know they're all red and rosy. He's concerned about me. This feels good. Like find a hundred bucks on the ground and not a single person in sight.

"I'm good," I lie in church... again. But I'm not good. I'm crazy nervous. And I'm sure he hears the gallop of my heart. I sure do. It's pounding all the way up to my ears.

Our eyes meet, and I decide to go for it, to kiss him, but then he sits down on the bench, and I'm left standing there with the leftovers of a dreamy look on my face. I rushed it. What have I done? My eyes burn and water along with the heat in my face. He pats a place next to him, so I sit. Okay, so he wants to do this sitting down. Maybe he's as weak in the knees as I am.

"Graciela. I really need your help with something."

*Oh, his voice! It's delicious.*

"Anything," I promise him, hoping whatever it is, we can get past it and get to what's important—kissing, working out our lunch schedule for when school starts—since all couples eat together, and even securing that he'll be my *chambelon* in my *Quinceañera*, which I've very stubbornly protested up until now.

"It's your sister." He hesitates.

*Oh. He's worried that Margarita won't approve of us.*

"She's not the overprotective type at all," I say confidently and even fling my hand

carelessly through the air for extra assurance. At least not anymore, I realize sadly.

“What?” He blinks a few times and then shuffles his feet. The small patch of dirt smooths out under his shoe.

*Boy, those eyelashes are fantastic.*

“N-no,” he stammers. “I meant... does she have a boyfriend? I want to talk to her, but I’m scared. She’s not as easy to talk to as you are, so that’s why I need your help. You know her better than anyone.”

Does he want to talk to her about me? How to win me over? But what does Margarita having a boyfriend have to do with us? “Margarita doesn’t have a boyfriend,” I say, my forehead wrinkling while my brain works overtime. “I don’t have one, either.” I give him my sweetest smile.

“She doesn’t?” His voice squeaks.

“No,” I say again, trying to keep the sweet in my voice and the impatience out.

He grins. “Really?”

“Nope.”

He smiles the most perfect smile I have ever seen, but I can’t focus straight. Boys are confusing.

“So you’ll help me?” he asks.

“Help you what?” The little trapeze artist in my tummy is on the most daring part of his act, and I’m about to throw up on my shoes.

“Help me get to your sister.”

Mexican women are known for their passion and emotions. We don’t keep them a secret. This boy, even as fine as he is, is about to see the Mexican woman in me with burning eyes and a



fiery tongue... never mind. We are at church after all, and I've already told *two* lies. My lower lip quivers as I try to speak. "We're not allowed to date," I say dryly. I shoot up and back away, turning to run for the courtyard door, but a stupid tree root trips me. I fall flat on my face, kissing the grass instead of Mark. I scramble up, coming face to face with a statue of Saint Joseph who gives me a sad look. And worst of all, *Jesus* is out here. He's a baby, and he's in Saint Joseph's arms.

"Are you okay?" Mark says, reaching out his hand to help me up.

I don't want it. "I'm fine!"

Suddenly the door connecting the courtyard to the building swings open.

"Graciela?" It's Margarita. You can almost hear the choir of angels singing at Miss Perfect's grand entrance. "Are you okay?" She strides over to me. "What happened?" She glares at Mark until that same worry line that we both got from our *Mamí* appears between her eyebrows.

"Nothing," he says, raising his hands in surrender. His mouth turns down into a frown as my sister stares him down.

She takes my arm and hoists me up. My butt throbs. I push her off and limp away. If I had a tail, it would be stuck between my legs. I close my eyes, squeezing back my tears, and then dare to take one last look behind me. Mark and Margarita are talking about something, their words a big mumble jumble in my ringing ears.

## Margarita Became American...

A few weeks into the school year, I have confirmed what I already knew—it would be terrible. Girls still talk about me exactly like they did in junior high, they still laugh at my brown skin, and they still whisper and stare at my hand-me-down shoes when I walk by. Margarita refuses to be seen with me even though *Mamá* keeps chirping away at how glad she is that we're together again and can take care of each other.

Today, just a few blocks from the school, I happen to run into Margarita and her friend, Jenny, walking home. I can't help but give Jenny the death stare. She corrupts Margarita, sneaking her out and taking her to parties and lending her bikinis.

Margarita glances at me as I fall into step with them, but she doesn't give me a dirty look, so I take it as her approval to stay. After all, she's going my way, and how even more pathetic would I look, trailing home behind my big sister?

"Hi," I say, but neither of them even looks or talks to me. They are too busy talking about a boy, probably Mark, the boy I love who wants Margarita more than me. A twinge of evil, fiery jealousy gets caught up in my throat. Maybe it's pain. I can't tell the difference anymore.

Margarita's arms sway freely at her sides, and they remind me of when we were little girls and Margarita would always hold my hand when we walked home from school or anywhere for that matter. I look down at her polished fingernails. The sun touches the tiny glitters in the pink, making her nails sparkle.

Jenny grins. "He told his friend, Tim, he thinks you're hot, and your hair is long and beautiful."

"No he didn't!" Margarita giggles and slaps a hand over her mouth.

Mark loves Margarita. I love her, too, but I also hate her with everything in me right now.

There is a boy shouting from behind us.

*Por Dios, no.*

“Margaret! Margaret!”

I give Margarita a puzzled look, squinting eyes and all. She’s bright red. And then I catch on. A boy with light brown hair and blue eyes stomps over to us, slowing his run and pushing in between my sister and me.

It’s not Mark. But while my heart screams for joy, I still huff in disgust. He’s tall and smells like too much cologne, and he calls my sister Margaret.

“Hey, Margaret. Can I walk with you guys?”

My sister smiles and nods, looking down at her sandals.

“Hi, Jenny.” He nods at her and then looks over his shoulder at me. “Hello.”

“I’m *Grace*,” I say, stressing my name in English, so that my dear sister, *Margaret*, knows I’m onto her.

“Nice to meet you, Grace. I’m John.”

“Oh, John, is it?” I say smugly. John is as white as they come, a *gabacho* as my father would say. “It’s so nice to meet you,” I say with exaggerated sweetness.

Margarita gives me Satan eyes, but I’m loving this moment very, very much. Now I have something over Margarita. What would *Mamá* think of her precious perfect daughter talking to boys and changing her name to American?

“Do you go to our school?” John suddenly asks me.

“Yes. I’m *Margaret*’s sister,” I say which apparently reminds him that there’s a purpose for his intrusion.

“Margaret, are you guys going to have another study group this week? I want to join.”

This is so pathetic.

"I think so," she says. "Ben was interested, too."

Jenny is blushing now. I see what this is. It's a scam. It's an excuse for a bunch of teenagers to get together and party, and of course, I'll never be invited.

"Do you guys really even study?" I interrupt with a nice touch of attitude in my voice.

"Of course, we do," Jenny says and gives Margarita a suspicious grin. "What else would we do at a *study* group?"

"I can think of lots of things," I say.

"Of course *you* could, *Grace*," Margarita says, giving me that knowing look of hers. I hold my breath with embarrassment, waiting for her to drag out all the trouble I tend to find in school from defending myself, but thankfully, she doesn't.

John waves at some boys across the street and one gives him a thumbs-up. John shakes his head back and forth with a smile.

Jenny snickers.

A light breeze zippers between us and it gets awkwardly quiet. I'm not even a part of this mess, and even my face is hot. Somebody should say something. Anything.

"Did you guys hear about the fall dance?" John blurts out. Finally, somebody ends the silence.

"Yeah, I heard about it. But I'm probably not going." Jenny sounds disappointed.

Margarita turns away, watching a dog jump up and down and yelp at us from behind a fence. "I probably won't go," she finally says.

"How come?" John seems worried about her answer. "Wouldn't you want to go?"

"Of course I would," she answers. "I just don't know who I would go with. She glances

at him and blinks a few times as if something is stuck in her eyes, but it occurs to me that she's batting her eyelashes.

Lies. My sister knows *Mamá* will *never* let her go to a dance, especially not an American dance and especially not with an American boy. And this boy is as American as they come with his light brown hair and blue eyes brighter than the turquoise jewelry my *abuelita* used to wear.

This is getting uncomfortable again. I try to fall behind them a little, but then I realize that I can't resist listening to how this plays out, so I step back up again.

"Yeah, I'm sure you've got a lot of guys to choose from," John's voice is sad.

"Actually, she doesn't think she'll get asked at all," Jenny assures him.

"Really?" John sounds hopeful now. "I can think of a few guys who would want to go with you, Margie."

"*Margie?*" I whisper. This is getting worst. It's official. My sister wants nothing to do with her culture.

"Well there's still plenty of time for *someone* to ask her. The dance isn't 'til November, you know." Jenny raises her eyebrows at John.

"*November?*" I snort. "We're in September, eager beavers." Everyone looks at me.

Margarita gives me a glare that tells me she hopes I die—her lips pinched, eyes sharp.

"What?" I mouth, shrugging my shoulders. I make a great point.

A bronze four-door Honda, pulls up to the curb.

"John," a woman with blonde wavy hair and red lipstick calls out. I can't see her eyes because she's wearing big, dark sunglasses. "Gonna drive Dad to the airport. Do you want to come?"

John gives Margarita a side-glance. "I gotta go. See you tomorrow?"

“See you tomorrow,” Margarita says sadly. She stands still and watches as his car pulls away, sadness in her eyes and sadness in my heart. *Margie* is out of control.

## **My Family Ate Dinner At A Restaurant...**

*Papí* promised that things would feel better in America, and he reminded us of this promise when he got his raise. But there are times when I cry, watching *Mamá* and *Papí* work on our budget, cutting the grocery spending, pushing back the purchase of new shoes for *Mamá*, and creating a plan to build up the family emergency fund. So I can't believe my ears when *Papí* comes home and makes a very bold announcement.

*"Vamos a salir a comer esta noche!" Papí exclaims.*

At *Papí's* announcement, that he wants to take us out to dinner, Margarita grabs my hands and jumps up and down. I go along with it, but *Mamá* is immediately stiff. She protests *Papí's* wishes, and we stop jumping because *Mamá* always wins. I can see why *Mamá* is nervous. My little stunt put a strain on the family funds. Plus, she always says it takes an act of God to save a dollar around here. So she guards every cent that comes into this house.

*Papí* takes *Mamá's* hands into his and tells her that he's earned the right to treat his family to dinner, and he will not let her say no. Then he turns to us.

*"¿Donde quieren ir, mis pequeña princesas?" Papí asks his little princesses where we want to eat.*

I know exactly what I want. Something I've only eaten in the lunch cafeteria. Something that would taste so much better when eaten at a real restaurant.

"Pizza!" Margarita and I yell at the same time. That word is the same in English AND Spanish. Our happy eyes widen with surprise that we agree on this, and we laugh together so hard that my eyes shut tight. For many, eating out is normal. Some kids bring fast-food bags to lunch. And even if there's only a bologna sandwich in there, they still have evidence of a place they've been, a place they've eaten outside of their kitchen. This is the first time in my life, my

entire life that I will dine in a real restaurant. A real one with tables and dining lights and seats and plastic menus.

*Papí* asks for a few minutes to shower and change, and our nervous and still unsure *Mamí* gets her purse off the hallway chair, clutching the handle in her hands. We run to our bedroom and put our shoes on. Margarita takes a tissue from the little box at the edge of our dresser and blows her nose.

“Are you okay?” I ask, studying her.

“I’m fine.” She’s too excited to worry about a runny nose. “Can you believe it? *Papí* was right. Things really are changing for us. I wonder how much money he’s getting now.” She sniffles again. “Hopefully, enough for more pizza dinners every week. And maybe new clothes,” she adds. “For both of us, of course.”

I give her a tight smile. Having new clothes would be so nice. I hate wearing Margarita’s hand-me-downs. But I worry she’s just too American now. Margarita wants pizza and fashionable clothes and a cell phone and a boyfriend to take her to dances. She’s out of control. She does a quick five brushes over her loose hair with *Abuelita’s* brush. Then, she stops and her eyes examine me through the mirror. “Come here, Graciela,” she orders.

What does she want from me? I resist when she tugs my hand. She takes me by the shoulders and turns me around to face the mirror. I frown at our reflections. We’re like the ugly duckling and the swan; we’re perfectly dark and perfectly light. Even for as watery as her eyes are, they blaze against my dull ones. Her long hair shines against the flatness of mine. Every perfect hair of hers is in place. She grabs my ponytail by the base and drags *Abuelita’s* brush over my tail, nice and hard, pulling out all the snags. My insides fight against the happiness this brings me. Ita is combing my hair again, just like when we were little girls, when she loved me



no matter how hopeless I was.

I give a shy glance into the mirror as she puts the brush into her mouth by the handle and smooths my hair down on top while she mumbles, “There.”

And now, I don’t know how to feel standing there staring at her reflection. Confused? Maybe. There’s also a little bit of sad and happy. It’s all there, all at the same time. She just grins back at me. Maybe she only combed my hair because she can’t go out for pizza with a sister who looks like me. She can’t do anything about my dark skin, but she can fix other things like my hair.

*“Vamanos,” Mamí calls for us.*

Margarita shoves the brush back into the drawer and blows her nose one more time, and we bump into each other as we both try to exit the bedroom at the same time, causing us to laugh again. This is too painful. It feels too good and too familiar to laugh with my sister. We stopped doing that a while back, and I don’t want to pile up my hopes again.

Outside, we climb into *Papí’s* old Ford and head down the main road to San Antonio Street near our school where the pizzeria is. My heart jump ropes. This is really happening. *For the first time...* For the first time, something no one would even believe, my family is going out for dinner. I can’t help but feel like a traitor to myself, getting all giddy over this, selling out to America... so I take a deep breath, hoping to calm the butterflies inside of my stomach and my ribcage and push aside my longing for Mexico for just one night.

When we come in from the Texas heat, which is still harsh in early September, the air conditioning of Pizza Place falls over us. It’s amazing, cool over my arms and sticky neck. We don’t have air-conditioning in the truck. People stare at us from head to toe. They know. They know we don’t belong here. They know we don’t go to restaurants or birthday parties. We don’t

go to the movies. My parents are not a part of the PTA. We share clothes. We save leftovers. When we first moved here, we lived off of beans and rice. They know. But right now, I don't care. Practically bouncing out of my shoes, I point to where I want us to sit. A big round booth in the corner. By the time we walk across the restaurant to get there, Margarita is shivering.

*Mamí* notices and says she has a sweater in the truck.

"Yo," I offer to go out to get it for Margarita, trying to repay her for her kindness earlier.

Once outside, I catch sight of a bronze Honda. Is it? I duck at the hood of the Ford and watch. Yes! It is! I scurry back into the restaurant, sweater clutched to my chest, before John, the *gabacho* Margarita loves, and his white mother even get out of their car. Sliding in beside my sister, I shove the sweater into her lap and frantically kick her under the table.

"¡Ay!" she cries out, so I kick her again, but lightly this time so she knows it wasn't an accident.

Her lips tighten and her eyebrows scrunch up. She doesn't get it, so I nod my head in the direction I really, really want her to look. Margarita's eyes widen when she spots John, and if the lights weren't so dim in the restaurant, I'd bet her face is bright red. She slips on the sweater and swallows so hard that I hear it. Just then, our server comes over.

"Welcome to Pizza Place. What can I get you to drink?"

Margarita and I stay silent, watching our parents for instruction. Usually, when we're out in public and English must be exchanged, it's up to Margarita and me. But out of respect, we allow our parents to give us permission first. But instead, *Papí* puts a gentle hand over *Mamí's* hand as if he's preparing her for something.

"We will please have four Cokes and two pizza wit pepperoni. And please, some cheesy breadstick." *Papí* smiles proudly, glancing at each of us.

My mouth drops open, and when I finally make myself look away from him, I find that my sister is frozen, and *Mamá* has betrayal burning in her eyes. I have the same betrayal. Only mine hides in my heart. How could our *Papí* do this? How could he learn English? My heart pumps into my throat and my vision is blurry from tears, but before my breakdown can be complete, *Mamá* speaks in a broken voice.

“What is this?” she snaps at him in angry Spanish when our server walks away.

I swallow my tears, and Margarita and I stay silent as he calls her his queen and tells her he wanted to surprise her, and that learning English is a promise he made when his boss, Mr. Jim, gave him his raise. He says he’s been reading a book on his lunch hour. Oh, the treachery of it. When *Mamá* refuses to reply, I quietly root for her. *Papí* pulls out some quarters from his pocket and orders us away to the gaming area. As I cross the restaurant, I sneak a glance over my shoulder, catching images of *Mamá’s angry face*.

The game area is in a medium-sized room with blinking lights and funny music coming from all the arcade games around us. “How do I look?” Margarita demands, completely clueless to what just happened at our table. I peer my head around the Pac-Man machine trying to spy on *Mamá* and *Papí*. “Graciela,” she demands, again. “Do I look okay?”

I turn to her. “You look great. As always.”

“Margaret!” John says her name with so much excitement you’d think he was meeting a movie star or something. He comes up beside her. “I can’t believe you’re here.”

We will probably never come here again. Not after this whole mess with *Papí*.

“Hi, John. How are you?” Margarita is looking down at the floor.

“I’m good. You want to go shoot some hoops with me?” He nods over to the basketball game.

“I’ll watch,” she offers.

“Awesome!”

They’re gone, leaving me to stand alone in the middle of the game room watching *Mami* and *Papí* having a very Mexican argument.

I tug on Margarita when the girl who took our order walks across the restaurant carrying two pizzas on trays. When we slip into our seats, there are plates and sodas in front of us. Margarita never drinks before her meal, but maybe because of her nerves, we all watch with surprise as she gulps down almost the entire glass. I slide mine over to her in case she needs more.

Our parents are very quiet, but *Mami*’s face is much softer than earlier, thank God. At last, I start some simple conversation, and we all chatter in Spanish about how our days went. After eating four hot, cheesy, saucy slices, I lean back against the red padding of our booth. Nothing could ruin this moment. Until I spot the *gabacho* heading our way, his hair perfectly brushed to the side and his walk like a young Don Juan. Oh, *Dios*. What is this guy doing? I sit up, nudging Margarita in the ribs. She coughs up a mouthful of pizza into a napkin and grabs mine to wipe her mouth.

John stops at the side of our table and gives my parents a nervous smile. “I just wanted to say bye to Margaret,” he says, looking right at her.

*Margaret*. There it is. Well, she can’t hide from that. Her breath catches at the mention of her made up name, and then I give a loud cough. *Mami*’s eyes sharpen on my sister and *Papí* scratches his head. Maybe *Mami* and *Papí* will see all the trouble America is causing, how Margarita has gone insane, and our only hope to save her will be to GO BACK HOME.

“Goodnight, Sir, Ma’am.” He nods at my parents. “Bye, Grace,” John waves to me.

I cough even louder this time, spitting my soda back into my glass. I slump, wanting desperately to disappear into the red vinyl seat. On the drive home, Margarita claims that John doesn't know Spanish, so he doesn't know how to pronounce our names. But *Mamí* and *Papí* want to know how he even knows Margarita. She tells them that at school everyone knows her. She is a tutor after all.

They completely believe her. My stern *Mamí* even laughs with pity for the American boy butchering our names, the poor boy who needs tutoring from her prized daughter.

## Margarita Got Asked To An American Dance...

American high school is toxic and untrustworthy, but sometimes this can be helpful. I learned the news along with most of the sophomore girls and even some junior girls who had their hearts broken when rumor spread through the school at the blazing speed of a freight train that John had asked *Margie* to the fall dance. I can't help but ruminate over Margarita's dilemma. She knows that getting to the dance will be impossible, but she surprises me later that night in our bedroom when she yanks her pajama bottoms on and smiles my way almost as if she's throwing it in my face.

"John asked me to the fall dance," her voice is like music.

"What did you say?" I ask eagerly, in disbelief that she is actually talking to me about something important to her.

"I said I wasn't sure." she sinks back on her bed.

I know why she's sad. "You're scared *Mamí* won't let you go."

"You know she won't. I'm so tired of the way they don't let us do anything. And trying to figure out a way to get to this dance is exhausting."

"They're just trying to protect us," I say quietly, all the while my mind is so happy that she's struggling—*finally*...

"From what? Growing up? Speaking English? Acting American? They act like we'll die or something. They can't protect us from everything, you know."

And she's right, I do know. Nobody has protected me from the loneliness of here, from the cruel kids of high school, from the cuts my sister makes on my heart over and over again. But I agree with our parents about the dance. I know that if Margarita goes to this dance, she's gone forever. This is one of those important moments in life—the ones that change... everything.

Going to a dance isn't just going to a dance. It's going to an American dance. It's embracing a culture that isn't ours. It's her throwing herself into this culture and forcing herself to belong. It's the last big step off the cliff, after all the other crazy things she's done, changing her name to Margie, debuting her beautiful womanly body in a purple bikini that could fit a toddler, sneaking out to party with seniors, and covering the purple suck marks on her neck with a scarf... My stomach hurts just thinking of it.

"What will you do?" I lay down next to her, feeling so confused in this moment. I love her so much. That part of me wants her to go. But I need her to stay with me, even just what's left of Mexican Margarita. Yet here I am laying beside her in her bed, something that I haven't done for a very long time. This dance and all its complications has actually opened a door for us. It's a chance to pretend like we are still sisters, for us to talk about something, anything. Of course, it's only something that Margarita is interested in, but that's okay, I'll take it just to be beside her, to be let inside her secret new world even if it's a quick visit.

"Don't know. I don't even have a dress. I guess it's a hopeless cause."

"Are you sad?"

*Mamá* yells for us to turn off our light.

"I'm mad more than sad. If we had normal parents, it wouldn't even be a big deal. Normal parents actually let their kids go to dances. They even take pictures of their kids before the dance. Some parents even chaperone the dance. We will *never* have a normal life, Graciela. Sometimes I just want to go back to Mexico. They dangle dreams in front of us like cheese in front of a mouse. Why bring us here just to keep us in a prison?"

Wow. We both want to go back to Mexico. Maybe for very different reasons, but still, she just said she wants to go back home. She sounds so defeated, so disappointed. I'm quiet for a

second, trying to get through my shock and then remember to speak. “It’ll be fine, Ita. You’ll see,” I promise her. I put my hand gently on her on her cheek, and she lets me. It’s the first time in so long that I’ve felt the touch of her skin. It’s distant and foreign, but beautifully smooth like always.

She gives me a forced smile. “Graciela, get out of my bed now.” She’s already turning over onto her side.

I turn out our light, and climb into my bed beside hers. It’s quiet as I lie on my back and stare up at our dark ceiling with my arms folded over my chest. Margarita sneezes two times, and then she snores lightly through her clogged nose. I lie there repeating Margarita’s words in my head. She is so angry. It has been building up in her. I understand that now. As I slowly drift off to sleep, I try to dream up ways to get my poor, angry sister, a new dress.



## **I Accepted That I Would Never Be Accepted...**

Every minute I spend at school reminds me just how much I hate America or maybe how much I don't fit in or belong in America. Moments like this: Pace Graham and Suzy Elleworth sit behind me in science. They are two beautiful girls with long obedient hair that frames their faces, pastel-painted nails, and designer shoes, skirts that are too short, but you can't help but stare at the beautiful definition in their milky-white thighs. I hate them for how beautiful they are, how unlike me they are. These girls are everything you'd hope an all-American girl would look like. They're also evil beings. Behavior that we should have left in middle school, rather, behavior that should be thrown out from the human race, is well-practiced by them. Pace throws the spit wad, and Suzy blows at the back of my hair to make sure each one gets in there nice and good.

It doesn't help to pull them out. They'll just keep coming. This will happen the entire period. Why don't I fit in? Why am I the go-to target? Perhaps it's my accent or the color of my skin... maybe my messy hair, which has a mind of its own. Maybe it's my... I just don't know. My jaw sets tight and my eyes burn with tears begging to come out even though a situation like this is common place for me. Another spit wad flies by. Telling the teacher won't help. After telling us to read chapter one and answer the questions at the end, he has been sitting at his desk looking down at his cell phone. He hasn't looked up once. Not even when other students have raised their hands.

"Stop." My word comes out like a hiss over my shoulder.

There are some chuckles all around me, and my face burns hot.

"Stop," Suzy catcalls back at me.

"You should say something," My lab partner Alicia tells me. She's somewhat dark like

me, but not *as* dark. Why don't they pick on her? I study her. She's dark, but she's perfectly American. She looks like them.

"It's okay," I mutter.

"It's *not* okay. It's driving me crazy." She crosses her arms and goes back to reading our science book. She shakes her head when the next spitball comes and scoots her chair away from me, all the way to the edge of the desk.

After the bell, I charge home, pulling out small wet wads from my hair and dropping them on the sidewalk as I go, like a trail of breadcrumbs in Hansel and Gretel, but my wish isn't to find my way back.

## I Tried To Be A Real Girl...

I'd love to go to school one day and have girls say hello to me. Have boys say hello to me. Have Margarita ask me to sit with her and her beautiful friends at lunch. Maybe I'm the one who's not trying hard enough. I evaluate myself as I sink into my warm bath and scrub the dirt off my fingers and toes with my soapy rag. What would my *abuelita* think? She'd tell me to be myself, but myself isn't doing so well. Myself never does well.

I grind my teeth in concentration as the dirt on the bottoms of my feet clings on, and I make a promise to stop walking around barefoot everywhere. "*Por favor!*" I beg, but it's fixed on there pretty good.

Young women should always wear shoes, right? I mean seriously, what kind of girl runs around barefoot all the time? Sadly, I nestle perfectly into this category. I never wear shoes unless it's to church, school, or the store. Or some rare event where we have to go someplace and even then I've forgotten to wear them. It's the way I've grown up.

We used to run around barefoot all the time in Mexico. Even Margarita. Heck, even *Mamá* did. Nobody needed shoes when running through my *abuelita's* corn field with soft, cool soil crawling up our toes and smudging our ankles.

We would dance under the corn husks that grew taller than us. Margarita would pull off the long leaves and weave them together to make beautiful braided hair pieces for us and our cousins. They looked like crowns. We'd go into that corn maze as little girls and come out little *princesas* every time.

I scrub at that stubborn dirt on my foot, the water swooshing back and forth around my busy hands. A long strand of my hair falls into my face. A young woman needs good-smelling hair, so with that thought my foot plops back down into the water, and I massage my hair with

big gobs of Margarita's strawberry conditioner.

I nod in approval as my fingers run right through my unusually smooth strands. It really works. And it smells great, too. I put the bottle back on the window sill, making sure it's in the same place and the label is facing in the same direction before I used it. Margarita hates when I touch her things. She uses tricks and traps to catch me in the act more times than I can say.

I slop Margarita's lotion all over me, even between my toes, which proves to be a bad idea. My feet slip and slide inside my *chanclas* when I make my way back to my room. Margarita is already snoring even though it's still so early. She's been pretty lazy lately. She's uncovered. Her latest book lays open on her chest. The sister in me wants to cover her and put her book away, but I leave her alone, worrying that if I accidentally wake her, she'll for sure smell all her good stuff on me. Plus, would she even do it for me? Would she care that I was uncovered? I don't think so.

Once in bed, I stare at the ceiling, unable to sleep, the soft smell of strawberry in my hair. The lotion will sink into my pores like a life-giving juice and change my life. I'll be a young woman now. I'll be pretty.

The strawberry in my hair helps me relax, and I close my eyes, sure that my days of tree-climbing and skipping the lotion and passing on nail-filing are behind me. Being a young woman is not that hard at all once you've accepted it.

In the early morning, the sun creeps in, teasing on my closed eyelids. The sky is still pink and Margarita is breathing heavy in the bed beside me. She is deep in her sleep. I let out an accidental sneeze, and Margarita rolls over, but her breathing goes heavy again. She's curled up like a ball like maybe she's cold even though it's summer. Slowly, I slip the covers over her and wait until I'm sure she's still asleep.

When she doesn't budge, I carefully pull open her top dresser drawer and take out the little silver brush that belonged to our *abuelita* and drag it through my smooth hair while watching Margarita in the reflection. She'll kill me if she sees what I'm doing. This brush is her everything. She loves it more than her books and more than homework, and probably more than me.

I don't mean any harm sneaking around and using her things, but I'm a young woman now. Hopefully soon, I'll have a boyfriend. I never thought I would be a young woman. Never wanted to be. Especially not when Margarita came home from middle school one day and broke our sisterhood bond. She declared to my audience of dolls and me that she was a young woman, and I was a runt.

I honestly didn't care. I watched what young women did. Well, at least what Margarita did. She brushed her hair and practiced her smile, and slathered lotion all over herself before bed. She stopped climbing trees with me. That's what I remember most. That's when I took a vow to never ever become one. Yet here I am, fussing with this wiry bird's nest on my head. Usually, I just run my fingers through my hair, and usually my hair is a matted mess. But today is special. I'm different. Everything will be different. Could it be as simple as trying harder on my hair?

I brush and brush, looking at the silver in my hands. My heart goes heavy, and I think of my *abuelita*. I miss her so much. A nearby car horn slams into my ears with a blaring cry. I freeze, Margarita's brush still in my tight hand. Two deep voices argue out on the sidewalk by my bedroom. Margarita doesn't move. I shove that brush back into her drawer as fast as I can and climb back into bed.

Margarita wakes up and while she gets ready, I pretend to be asleep. If she knew I was up so early getting all jazzy for school she'd just remind me that I'll fail anyway. When she leaves

the room, I get dressed trying hard to pick out what I have and make it look new. I hike my skirt a little higher, tie my blouse in the back so it sits tighter. My small breasts poke out like tiny pecks of something or another. I wipe my faded white sandals down with a wet napkin and dab some of *Mami's* perfume on my collar bone. The frizz of my thick hair is already started to come back, so I hoist it all up into a ponytail and tie it back with a rubber-band.

Across the street, I stare at my school. It looks impenetrable. Students swarm all around it. Can I break through? My legs are pulling me in a different direction—away. It's self-preservation. It's my inner-voice calling out in desperation. Maybe everyone will laugh harder at how I tried. I back away from the school and run to the corner-store where I hide in the restroom until the first bell rings, ignoring the knocks from people again and again, muffled voices asking if I'm okay while some voices are angry. I pull out the rubber-band that comes off with chunks of my hair. My frizzy long locks sit imperfectly past my shoulders. This is me. Finally, there's a sound in the doorknob. It's a key. When I finally come out, a police officer is waiting for me, tall, dark like me, but nothing like me.

*Papí* picks me up from the principal's office. The silence on the drive home is icy, ugly. It's the longest drive home ever. When we finally get there, he takes off his belt and lashes the backs of my legs. He's a gentle man by nature, which only makes this hurt worse. I've done this to him, turned him into this. I'm poison. Fire streams down to my ankles as I run into my bedroom, tearing off my clothes and kicking off my shoes, and then climbing into bed. I just want to sleep and forget, pressing my face into my pillow.

Margarita comes in, creeping up behind me. She's quiet for a moment as if she's trying to know what to say. "Your hair smells really nice," she says, stroking my long loose strands. "And it looks really pretty down."

“I don’t care. Leave me alone,” I say through the pillow, hoping she won’t put two and two together and realize it’s her conditioner that I used. But even if she does notice, she doesn’t say anything.

There’s a ghost in this room, the ghost of Sister Past, the sister who once cared so deeply for me she’d have given her own life if she had to. But I don’t want or need her kindness. It’s a kindness that will fade away anyway, so I keep quiet, keep my face down.

Margarita leaves the room. Hours pass and *Mamá* comes in and touches my forehead. That’s how I know it’s her. Her hands are gentle, but roughened from her days spent dipped in Clorox and other chemicals, sliding up and down a wooden broom, planting and picking vegetables for her boss. I pretend to be asleep, and she leaves. Their forks and plates clink together, and their laughter comes to find me in my bed, but I don’t care about anything. Not one single thing. I want to be asleep before *Mamá* comes in to check on me again, so I push all the sadness out of my head with my bulldozer.

I should have already learned this lesson, but now it’s as loud and clear in my mind as the brass church bell in our neighborhood back home in Mexico. If I’m going to survive in America, I need to be numb. I’ll never fit in here. Accept it. From now on, it’s me and only me.

I unzip my backpack and pull out my notebook. Inside I scribble my vow, pushing down so hard with my pencil point that the paper scars with my words so deep they’re now engraved: *Me and only me.*

## ***Señor Guzman—That Is All...***

Today, Saturday, there are plenty of chores to go around for such a tiny house. Our two-bedroom dynasty of red bricks that burn in the sun and small windows that are never open because *Mamá* fears we'll get robbed, is the cleanest on the block.

It won't be long before *Mamá* is hollering from the kitchen searching for Margarita and me so that we can split the chore list three ways. Margarita stands in front of our mirror slathering body butter on her arms. She gets it from the rich girls at her school in exchange for tutoring them, mostly in Spanish, but sometimes math and science.

I don't know why she's doing this since we're about to get dirty and grimy, but she does this several times a day no matter what we're about to do. I look down at my tan arms. They're dry and dark, nothing like my sister's smooth arms. *Mamá* says Margarita's skin is *café con leche*—coffee with milk. I run a hand down my scratchy arm like I could rub the brown away.

"Graciela!" I jump at *Mamá's* call. "*Donde estas?*" Why doesn't she call Margarita like that?

"Grout doesn't scrub itself." She throws up her hands like she's disgusted, does an about-face and walks away. "*Vamos!*" she hollers to *Mamá* that were coming.

We spend the day scrubbing all the grout as *Mamá's Cumbia* music blares from the little black radio on the kitchen counter and dances through the house. A few times, *Mamá* takes our hands and spins us around. This reminds me of Mexico, my beloved home, when she used to love dancing.

After we finish cleaning on the inside, we wash five loads of laundry and hang it outside on the clothesline. *Mamá* waves to our neighbor, *Señor Guzman* who sits on a rocking chair on his back porch. *Señor Guzman* is a dark little old man who wears khaki pants and white, cotton



T-shirts every day of the week. Like me, he doesn't like to wear shoes. Well, he wears something- *chanclas*. His teeth are either missing or capped, and his glasses are always sliding down his greasy nose. Our backyards are separated only by a chain-link fence, and he loves to sit outside and wait for any moment when we might be out there and *Mamá* will invite him to dinner, or ask if she can wash any of his clothes. And of course, she does invite him to dinner tonight.

The grumbling in my head accidentally escapes from my lips. Margarita snickers. Of all the people in this world, why did God choose to give us *Señor* Guzman as our neighbor? His dirty feet, his broken teeth, his smelly breath, it's all too much.

I hate to sound mean, really, I do, but *Señor* Guzman is just another reason to hate this new life that I'm stuck in. Every little thing, big or small, it all adds up. Busy streets, mean kids, this small house which is way smaller than my grandmother's, my sweet *abuelita's*, where we all lived together, my aunt, uncle, and the four of us with my *abuelita* before she died—before everything changed.

I realize that he is a lot like me, and that makes me burn inside. For me, school is just a pit full of snakes called students, the ones with flickering tongues who look at kids like me with their serpent eyes. Maybe it's my skin color. I think it is because I even hate how tan I am. But it's probably my Mexican accent that gets to them the most. After all, there are other dark kids wandering the halls at school, and they seem to be managing just fine. Skin color or accents, it doesn't matter what bothers the kids at school, the point is that I'm not wanted. Everything inside of them hates me because they see me as different. And it hurts.

Poor *Señor* Guzman. To me, he is different. He's dumb to what people think of him as he smiles, waving and hobbling back inside his house. Maybe I'm a serpent, too. Our arrival has

actually made this lonely man's life so much better.

I fasten *Papi's* jeans to the line, and use the back of my hand to wipe the sweat from my forehead. The summer sun burns against my arms and the back of my neck. It's going to make me darker. I glance at Margarita. She's so lucky. Fifteen and perfect in every way. She learned English better than me, she gets better grades, and she's just so pretty. *Por Dios!* Why did God give it all to the first daughter?

At dinner, it's Margarita's turn to set the table, and my turn to clean up and wash the dishes. Scraping messy food residue off of plates and stuck to forks that have been in people's mouths is disgusting, even if they are your family members. It's even more disgusting when that plate and fork belong to *Señor* Guzman. When I turn the corner leading from the hall to the entryway, I run smack dab into him. His breath smells like a coyote's kill and my stomach turns sour.

I sit at my usual spot at the table, and to my horror, he takes the seat directly across from me. He smiles at me, showing off his rotten teeth, and I suddenly am not hungry. I pull a face at my sister and her lips tighten as she tries to hide a smirk.

Margarita leans over to me. "Stop making that face. It's not that bad. He only comes once a week."

"That's too much," I whisper back.

"Show some heart," she returns. "His wife is dead."

I'd die, too, if I were married to him.

Margarita knows how much I hate cleaning the dishes he ate from. My stomach does a jumping jack, and I don't think I will be able to wash his dishes. And then there are the dirty fingernails that he's drumming on *Mami's* white cloth. He stands up to go use our restroom and

my eyes glance down at his dry feet and thick yellow toenails in the same worn-out *chanclas* he wears every day.

I slump in my chair. This is my punishment for lying in church in the summer. Now I really am going to vomit. *Señor* Guzman takes his seat again, and I can't help but wonder if he washed his hands after using the restroom. Then the unthinkable happens. He sneezes on the table, and I almost topple over in my chair. There could be all sorts of disgusting diseases crawling on our table and circling in the air. A loud cough escapes my throat.

“¿*Que te pasa?*” With hands on her hips, *Mamá* demands to know what's wrong as she looks down at me and studies my face.

Exhaling, I lie, “*Nada, Mamá.*”

She sits down beside *Papí*, everyone shovels *enchiladas* in their mouths, and my parents reminisce about Mexico with *Señor* Guzman. I pray to the Lord above that everyone would just stop talking and finish eating because I feel like every single word that *Señor* Guzman speaks, every breathing word, is polluting the air, and he's sitting right across from me. I smell *everything*.

Margarita watches me with a smug smile on her face. She's enjoying my agony. On my mountain of *enchiladas* are two eggs, sunny side up. This is called *Enchiladas Montadas*. I pop my eggs and the yellow yolk runs down the sides of the cheesy mess on my plate. When I take a bite, the mixture makes my mouth sing. *Usually*. Not today.

Our neighbor's plate is just about empty except for the leftover colors stuck to his plate, yellow from the egg yolk, red from the *enchilada* sauce, brown from his beans, and small grains of orange rice. It's all smeared across his plate. It's as if I'm in a slow-motion horror movie as he drags his fork against the dried egg yolk. He puts the fork in his mouth, then slowly pulls it out,

teeth scraping against the metal tongs. It comes out clean, perfectly spotless. I rub my eyes and wonder if *Mamá* would notice if I threw his dirty dishes in the trash.

“¿Porque no estas comiendo?” *Mamá* wants to know why I have a full plate. Margarita chuckles beside me, and *Mamá*’s glare finds her. “¿Y tu? ¿A donde vas?” she asks my dressed-up sister where she’s going tonight.

Margarita’s face crumples under *Mamá*’s inspection, but I don’t even feel like laughing at her. I wrap my arms around my stomach again. Margarita explains to *Mamá* in Spanish that she has a study group. They’re holding it one block over at her friend Jenny’s house, who she is careful to call “Juana,” probably so *Mamá* will like her better and say yes. I snort. I know what this girl is up to, and it’s not a study group. And I know for sure that *Mamá* is not dumb enough to buy it.

*Mamá*’s face softens. “*Esta bien, hija.*” She approves in a sweet voice.

“WHAT? You’re NOT going to a study group, Margarita, and you know it.” Just who does she think she is? She’s lying to our parents.

“SI.” She answers me back in Spanish, reminding me that I just broke the most important rule in our home, even more important than love one another—I spoke English in our house.

I press my lips into a hard line. *Señor* Guzman and *Papí* have blank stares at my outburst. *Mamá*’s nostrils flare as if smoke will come out of them. I push back against my seat waiting for her to charge. But something else comes out . . . out of me. I turn in my chair as vomit spills onto our tiled kitchen floor. It falls with a splash and speckles *Papí*’s shoes.

He gasps and pulls his feet in. Margarita snorts. I should have vomited on her side. *Mamá* ushers the men apologetically into our living room handing *Papí* a rag and promising them coffee and sweet rolls, but *Señor* Guzman decides to go home. It’s a little too late for that. He

already succeeded in grossing me out to the point of puke.

*Mamá* will show no sympathy to me. Not as she normally does when we're sick. She'll point her finger at the mess and order me to clean it up. I've really done it now—I spoke English. In front of a guest, no less. I'm on my hands and knees soaking up my gooey mess with paper towels when I'm suddenly staring at Margarita's sandaled feet. I look up at her. I'll get no sympathy from her, either.

"You're hopeless," she mumbles.

She's right. She glares at me, grabs her bag from her chair at the table, and heads for the back door. "*Ya me voy, Mamí, Papí.*" Margarita hollers over her shoulder at our parents.

"*Con cuidado,*" *Mamá* yells back from the living room, telling her to be careful.

## Papí Got A Raise; I Got A Concussion...

Margarita can't stop smiling as she sets the forks, knives, plates, and napkins at each of our places on the dinner table. It's as if her smile is stuck on her face like honey on a *sopaipilla*. Leaning against the entry to our hallway, I watch her dancing from chair to chair to whatever song is playing in her head, and I want to wipe that sticky grin from her face.

This must be what love looks like, smiling uncontrollably with singing eyes. Margarita is just like *Papí*. Hopeless romantics. It looks pretty ridiculous, if you ask me. And you will *never* find me acting that *loco*. Ever. Okay, well there was that one time at church with that boy named Mark, but never again.

*Papí* comes in and climbs out of his work boots at the back door and sets down his toolbox with its familiar clank, his clamps and pliers settling in. He is not his usual loud self. Usually when *Papí* comes home, he announces it loud and clear: “*¡Mi reina, tu rey ya llego!*” He would say, “My queen, your king is now here.” And he would spread out his arms to embrace *Mamí* as if he's giving her the gift she's been waiting for all day.

But not today. Today he's very quiet. Even Margarita stops her dancing to stare. We both watch as his head hangs, and he slides into his chair at the table.

“*¿Que te pasa, Papí?*” Margarita asks him what's wrong, her forehead crinkling, she lays a hand on his.

Now *Mamí* comes into the kitchen and stops beside me at the entrance.

It's as though we're all holding our breath, afraid to know what's happened. Was he fired? Robbed? Did somebody die? I can't take it.

“*Por favor, Luis!*” *Mamí* exclaims, begging an answer on behalf of all of us.

*Papí* looks up and makes eye contact with each one of us one by one. I take a nervous

step and edge closer against *Mamá* who is as still as the walls surrounding us. It's very quiet except for Margarita's sniffles. He lost his job. I know it. And if that's true... then we're going back to *Mexico*!

Suddenly, he takes a deep breath. I take a deep breath, too. This is the moment I've been praying to God for each night. I hold my breath waiting for him to say it, for *Mamá* to go to him and promise we'll be just fine back home where everything is stable and makes sense. And then he SMILES a big wide smile that causes us all to breathe again—*Mamá* and Margarita with relief, and me with disappointment. *Papí* jumps to his feet, pulling the closest person to him—Margarita—into his arms, then releasing her and wrapping *Mamá* and I together in his arms.

*"Me subieron el sueldo! Me subieron el sueldo!"* he shouts.

*Papí* got a raise?

*Papí* got a raise.

When will I ever catch a break? As long as he's succeeding here, we will *never* get back home. If I were sure my family wouldn't notice, I'd bang my head against the wall behind me.

*Why, oh why?*

*Mamá* gasps and Margarita squeals making her way over to our huddle. *Papí* smashes Margarita into us. I try to meet her eyes, but she's too busy beaming at *Papí* and celebrating the great news to notice.

I'm proud of him, too. Really, I am. *Papí* works his fingers to blood to make every penny. But because he struggles so much, I held out to some secret hope that one day going back to Mexico would be our only choice to survive. He has worked very hard for his boss, Mr. Jim. And now it seems his hard work is finally paying off. We don't belong here, and I'll never tell my parents this out of respect for them, but with every passing day, my parents dig their roots

deeper into this cursed soil. I'm lost in the circle of their hug. The three of them are on top of the world, and I am slowly sinking into the earth. Mexico is even farther away now.

Only something crazy, something out of this world, something unexpected could fix this new problem. My brain works for ideas. And here it is.

"¡Ay!" I cry out and fall from my family's huddle, carefully hitting the floor. I don't want to look too fake, but I also don't really want to hurt myself. Closing my eyes and pressing my hands against my head, I moan, "*Me duele. Me duele.*" It hurts. It hurts.

*Mamá* gasps, Margarita doesn't make a peep, and *Papí* scoops me up from the tile and holds me to his chest.

"*Mija,*" *Mamá* presses one hand against my forehead and the other against my cheek. I peek a little, and the worry on her face gives me a guilty feeling, but there is nothing that works better than an emergency to get people to understand what's really important, right? If I'm sick, then we need to get back home to a place and to people we trust. It's simple.

*Papí* sets me down on the living room sofa and I keep holding my head and crying out as best as I can. I'm so good that I think I'm actually starting to feel some pain. My heart races at the excitement of it all. *Mamá* tries to get me to open my eyes, so for extra effect I cry out, "*No!*" And cover my eyes with my hands, taking a peek through my fingers at Margarita again who looks worried. This is very good. Maybe this was the key to making her love me again—getting her to feel sorry for me. Now, I'll get both things I've been after—getting the old Margarita back and getting us to move back home. I. Am. A. Genius.

Unexplained head pain is a safe sickness to fake. You don't need to show anybody cuts or bruises or blood. You can have it without a fever. Nobody can see what's going on in your head. If I keep this up, they won't have a choice but to take us back home to our family doctor,



and I'm certain I can keep this up for a long time. Until I win.

*Papí* picks me up again, and I expect him to take me to my bed. I sneak another peek when we go back into the kitchen. *Mamí* has her purse and explains to Margarita that she should lock up and not open the door for anyone. Next thing I know, I'm in the backseat of *Papí's* truck. My head rests on *Mamí's* lap, she's praying over me, and *Papí* is cursing at the motor that screeches and refuses to turn, but finally roars to life. His turns are sharp and I can hear the road underneath us as *Papí* speeds over bumps and through dips. Are we going back to our doctor in Mexico right now? I moan again for good effect. *Mamí* rubs my back and hushes me with a soft and scared voice.

After a long ride, *Papí* tells us, "*Ya llegamos!*" He jumps out, slams his door and opens the back door, lifting me from the seat.

We're here? Where the heck are we? We haven't even reached the border yet. I open an eye and horror runs through my blood. Big, red letters greet me: Emergency. Oh, my God. We're at the hospital. An *American* hospital.

"*Mamí, estoy mejor!*" I yell out to my mother that I'm better. I try to sit up in *Papí's* arms, bouncing up and down as he jogs to the entrance.

"*Calmate,*" *Papí* tells me to calm down. He carries me through the glass double doors and *Mamí* goes to the counter. She speaks to the woman behind the window, and then that woman calls a man who must be speaking to *Mamí* in Spanish because she's going on and on telling him how I fainted and have head pain. Then she fills out paperwork while I plead with *Papí* to take me home.

But we don't wait for long. That same man comes out rolling a wheelchair and within seconds, I'm sitting in it. He wheels me through some double doors and soon I'm getting my arm

squeezed by some crazy machine he says is taking my blood pressure. And talk about pressure. I need to end this. Now.

He gives *Mamá* a hospital gown and steps out. I back away as she reaches for the zipper of my jeans, but she gives me that look that says I better let her do it or else. So I let her take my jeans and T-shirt off, then she carefully slips the gown on me while telling me that everything is going to be okay. I'm about to tell her I'm lying, but the nurse comes back in.

"*Donde te duele?*" The man asks me in Spanish but with a terrible American accent that hurts my ears.

"*Ya no me duele,*" I tell him it doesn't hurt anymore.

He tells another nurse who comes in that my heart is going very fast. If only he knew why, he'd leave me alone. That nurse says it's because of my pain. She steps out and then returns with a needle, a plastic tube, and a bag of clear liquid.

"*¿Que esta pasando?*" I ask what's happening. *Mamá* slips her hand into mine and squeezes.

I'm about to get poked by one of the biggest needles I've ever seen in my entire life. "*¡No!*" I scream and kick my legs, pulling my arms free from the nurse's grip.

*Papí* holds me down, and I scream until my throat burns. The needle breaks through my skin. My teeth slam together. When I'm calm, *Papí* lets me go. The nurse releases my arms and attaches a tube that connects to the bag of liquid. Droplets fall from the bag and run down the tube and into my arm.

"*Para dolor,*" the nurse says it's for pain.

Suddenly, my heart isn't going so fast anymore. I feel tired. My brain gets fuzzy, but tells me that if I can just get through this, it will all be over, and I'll never ever do anything like this

again. My plan failed, and I will never admit the lie to my parents. They'd never forgive me or believe anything I say ever again.

A woman comes in and says she's a doctor. She talks to my parents in English, but the nurse is there, too, telling my parents in Spanish what she's saying. I'm missing a few words because right now, it feels like maybe I'm walking on the ceiling. I reach out to touch it but can't reach it, so I bat at the air and giggle because I keep missing. I'm going for a procedure now, someone says. I say goodbye to my worried-looking parents. My bed has wheels and the nurse pushes it out the door and down the hall.

"Wheeee!" I wave my hands around.

"*Hablas Ingles?*" the nurse asks if I speak English.

"Yessss."

"Are you feeling better?"

"Yessss." I giggle again.

"Good. We're gonna look inside your head at your brain and make sure everything's okay."

"You're going to look at my brain?" I swallow hard. I'm not so fuzzy anymore. "I don't want you to look at my brain!"

"It doesn't hurt. Not at all." He lays a hand on my shoulder.

I don't let out a peep as he helps me out of the bed and onto a table. Another person comes over and makes me lay down. I don't hear much of what she's saying to me because my heart is beating in my ears. The table moves into a tunnel. There's a whirl around me and then I'm done. Soon, I'm back in my room staring at my parents. They look miserable.

Then, like the hundredth person comes into my room. This woman says she's with the

financial department. She asks my parent's in Spanish how they would like to pay for this visit and if they are interested in a payment plan. *Mamá's* worry line appears on her forehead. She and my father whisper and then she takes out money from the special bill envelope in her purse. I'm still a little fuzzy, but I think I see three one-hundred dollar bills in her hand. *Papí* signs papers for the payment plan for the rest of the bill. Can this get any worse?

The doctor comes in and shows my parents some pictures. They are of my brain. The nurse speaks for her in Spanish, telling *Mamá* and *Papí* that I am fine. *Mamá* lets out a long breath and *Papí* puts his arm around her and brings her to his side while he puts his other hand over mine. The doctor should check my heart instead because it just broke into a million pieces. That was our bill money that they used. Maybe my plan did work out. Maybe now we will have to go back to Mexico. Why are American hospitals so expensive? *Mamá* gives me a worried glance before turning back to listen to the doctor again.

After getting a clean bill of health, the nurse pulls out the small tube from my arm, and *Mamá* helps me dress. *Papí* wheels me out to the truck, and we drive home. I'm pretty tired and pretty banged up. There's a nice bruise on my arm where I fought against that needle. When we get home, even Margarita wears a worried face. I ignore her questions, and settle into my bed.

I'm the worst daughter in the world.

## I Found Esperanza...

After school one October afternoon, I go to the library and scan the shelves for a book. Then I see one sitting face-up on the return cart. It catches my eye. There is a young girl with dark hair and a flowing gold dress. She's floating gracefully in the air. She looks like Margarita. It's called *Esperanza Rising*, and I can't turn the cover fast enough to get to the first page. It opens with two beautiful Mexican Proverbs, but the first one calls out to me because it is one my *abuelita* taught us.

*"Aquel que hoy se cae, se levantará mañana."*

"He who falls today may rise tomorrow."

I read the first chapter as everything around me falls away. This book feels like home. It *is home*. Tears spring to my eyes as I read about a little girl and her *Papí* and their grape vineyard and how the land lives and breathes, how her father dies...

There isn't enough time. The bell rings, and I hide the book behind the neatly shelved books. The reason I hide it, is so no one else can take it out. At least not while I'm in the middle of reading it. The last time I took a library book home, Margarita made fun of me. She says I'm too dumb to enjoy reading. She also said I have stupid taste in books. So now, I don't even bother.

## **I Almost Punched An American Girl...**

In the morning when I wake up, Margarita's bed is perfectly made with her corners tucked in, military style. I just pull my blankets over and straighten it up so it looks made. It's still early, 6:45 a.m., when I walk into our kitchen. *Mamá* has her coffee mug in one hand and a rag in the other, using it to wipe down the counter where she's just finished making *Papí's* bean and cheese burritos for his lunch. Her little black radio sits on the counter, and she's moving her hips around dancing to a *cumbia*. She's so gorgeous with her straight black hair, perfect like Margarita's silky locks, her *café y leche* skin, and tall slender body.

"*Buenos dias, Mamá,*" I wish her a good morning.

She dances over carrying her mug of coffee, then brushes a kiss onto my forehead before trying to press down my wild hair. It doesn't work. Just like my fierce love for Mexico, it won't be tamed. The stray hairs stick right back up again. She tries again, and some of her coffee sloshes out of her mug and onto her shoe.

"*¡Ay!*" she cries. "*¡Mira lo que hice!*" Look what I did, she tells me. She puts her mug down and rushes to the bathroom to clean up.

I rub at my tired and burning eyes. Margarita's snoring tortured me all night long. Our Virgin Mary calendar on the wall by the stove reminds me it's Friday, and I'm so happy, I start dancing the *cumbia* too. I pause mid-step. Aside from *Mamá* and me, someone is missing. I glance down the hall and into our living room. Where *is* she?

"*¿Y Margarita?*" I yell to *Mamá* who is still in the hall bathroom.

*Mamá* comes back into the kitchen and points to a note on our refrigerator. The handwriting is beyond beautiful, and the note is so important-looking on a piece of light pink stationery with an "M" stamped on top. Our *tia* sent that stationery to Margarita with a set of

pens for her *Quinceañera* last year.

That makes me think of my own *Quinceañera* when I turn fifteen. It isn't too far away. My parents have been planning a small occasion because we can't afford very much. We are supposed to go back to Mexico with our family for it. Honestly, the last thing I want is to walk into a room in the puffy white dress Margarita wore for hers, announcing to the world that I am now a young woman, but if that's what gets me home then that's what I'll do. *Mamá* married *Papí* when she was fifteen. I shudder at the thought, imagining my parents at Margarita's age getting married and having us. That's just gross.

In the note written in Spanish, Margarita informs *Mamá* that she left early to stop by *Señora* Garcia's house before school to feed her cats and clean their litter. *Señora* Garcia is visiting family in California for two weeks. My cheeks burn. I really wanted that job. It would've been mine, too, but the day *Señora* Garcia asked *Mamá* if one of us could help her, I wasn't there.

I was so bored in mass, so I pretended to need the restroom, and then made sure to stay there until mass ended. It just so happened to *finally* end early for once. While I thought I was the smart one relaxing on the sofa in the restroom parlor and counting dots on the ceiling, Margarita was shaking hands on a five-dollar a week deal. What's even worse, Margarita offered to do it for free. *La estúpida*. That's why she never ever has money to buy herself anything.

"*Con cuidado. Te amo,*" *Mamá* wishes me safety and tells me she loves me as she clicks off her radio and rushes out the door to catch her first bus.

I miss the days she made crazy big breakfasts every morning for us. The smell of eggs with *chorizo* and fresh tortillas would find us in our beds. The morning table would be covered in freshly sliced fruits like strawberries and bananas piled high in her large glass plates that she got on her wedding day from *Abuelita*, and there would be several plates in the center stuffed with

potatoes, eggs, and roasted ham. My mouth waters as I remember. There is no time for that here, when you're chasing after the American Dream. *Mamá* and *Papí* have learned that lesson well.

I eat it a banana and drink some cold milk, brush my teeth, and run a few fingers through my hair, pulling it back with the rubber band I found in *Mamá's* important little things drawer in the kitchen just by the stove. The lock slips into place as I turn the key to our back door. Darting down our three steps, I pray for *Papí*, *Mamá*, and Margarita, especially for Margarita and her black heart.

The morning is cool on my arms. I take a deep breath and the fresh air rushes in and helps me sharpen my mind. After crossing the street at the crosswalk on Main, I walk past *Señora* Garcia's house and shoot a dirty look at the three white cats sitting in her window. When I get to school, I go straight to the library. Inside, there aren't too many kids borrowing books or studying at tables. The fiction section is completely empty, and I drop my backpack onto the floor. I slip my hand back behind the neatly shelved books and run my fingertips over the dust until they bump into the bind of my book. I gently pull it out so as not to topple all the books off the shelf and settle on the floor near my bag. I'm reading the ending to *Esperanza Rising*. It broke my heart and put it back together stronger than it was. *Esperanza* is a hero. She's my hero. Tears prick at my eyes, and I quickly look around to make sure no one is looking at me.

I run to the girls' restroom to check my face and then duck into a stall when footsteps clatter against the tile. Through the bottom of the stall I can see two pairs of high heels.

"Did you hear that Margaret got Sophomore princess?" I recognize that nasally voice.

"Who got princess?" This voice is softer.

"A girl named Margaret."

"Do we know her?"



“Yes. Pretty, smart. Long dark hair. Mexican.”

“Oh, yeah. She *is* really pretty.”

“I know. I can’t believe she’s related to Graciela.”

“Who?”

“We have her for science. Stringy hair, dresses terrible, dark skin.”

“Oh, my God. Eew. I can’t believe it, either. Like what happened there?”

“Different dads?”

The girls laugh, and my heart sinks to my stomach. They’re making fun of my parents. Tears sting my eyes all over again, and my bottom lip trembles.

“You know, Margaret isn’t really all that,” the softer voice says. “She probably paid people to vote for her.”

“She can’t afford it.”

They both snicker. *They just talked trash about Margarita!* My blood is hot and my head is about to pop. I unlatch the door to the stall and charge at the first girl I can get my hands on. My hand tangles into a fistful of long red hair. There are screams around me and the other girl runs out. The girl in my hands waves around trying to get at me. *What am I doing?* Shame swallows me up. This isn’t me. I let go of her hair. She turns at me and punches me on my left side in the jaw. It stings all the way up to my eye.

The other girl comes back in. It’s Pace. The spit wad girl. She has the math teacher, Mrs. Brock, with her. She questions me with her eyes, but I’ve got nothing. As Mrs. Brock escorts us to the principal’s office, Pace and Suzy hold hands and whisper a little too loudly about how they can’t believe what I did. I just stumble along behind them, my heart still broken over how ugly they talked about my family.

“Are you okay?” Mrs. Brock whispers.

I nod my head once.

In the principal’s office, the three of us are sat apart, but Suzy and Pace keep giving each other eye rolls and grins.

“Mrs. Stanley, please, make sure you get the whole story,” Mrs. Brock pleads. She gives me sad eyes, or maybe they’re disappointed eyes, before she leaves, closing the door behind her. It seals us in with a soft click. For the next fifteen minutes, Mrs. Stanley, our principal questions us from behind her large walnut desk like she’s Judge Judy. She wants to know what happened and who started it. I don’t answer anything. I am ashamed of myself, and I deserve whatever happens to me. I stare off, keeping my mind busy on all the pictures hanging on her walls. Little kids, old people, Sea World, Disneyland, a cabin in the snow where everyone in the picture is holding a sled. Places I’ll probably never see.

“Graciela,” she interrupts my imagination, saying my name with an American accent that sounds like Gray See Ella. “If you don’t cooperate, then no one can help you.”

I blink back at her a few times and bite my bottom lip. After a few more seconds of silence, Mrs. Stanley accepts my defeat.

“Girls, you can go.”

I stand up with the other two.

“Not you, GraySeeElla,” she points to my chair, and I slump back down.

Suzy and Pace glare at me on their way out. My jaw is still throbbing. Mrs. Stanley presses a button on her phone. “Yes, ma’am.” A man’s voice comes over the speaker.

“Nurse Patrick, please bring me a bag of ice.”

“Small or big?”

“Small.”

“On my way.”

“Thank you, sir.” She taps the button off and stares at me. “So... you’re the only one with a mark on your face. I want you to tell me what really happened.”

“I started it. Suzy was defending herself.”

“Why did you start it?”

Silence. I’m not tattletale.

“I know you, GraySeeElla. You’re quiet and keep to yourself, and you’re not a troublemaker. If someone is giving you problems, then you need to come and see me.”

There’s a tap at her door and our school nurse comes in and looks down at me. “Oh, boy. I’m assuming this is for you. Hear. Hold it over your jaw. Ma’am,” he holds a hand up to Mrs. Stanley and then slips out the door.

“Thank you,” I call out.

“Ah! She speaks,” Mrs. Stanley says.

The ice settles in and I feel better right away. I can feel the icy coolness spreading out like magic.

“Graciela, since everything is she said, she said, you’re the only one with a mark on you, and you refuse to tell me what really happened, I’m not going to punish you. But I am going to call your parents and inform them of what happened to your face.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Stanley.”

“You’re welcome. And be careful. I don’t want to see you in here again for something like this, okay?”

“Yes, ma’am.” I leave her office and toss my ice into a trash can.

When I get home from school, Margarita is reading in bed with her blanket pulled up to her chin. I kick off my shoes next to Margarita's organized pair and hang my backpack on the doorknob of my closet. When I turn around, she's already popped up out of her bed and in my face.

"Wow! So it *is* true!"

"What?" I pretend.

"You got beat up by Suzy Elleworth?"

"No."

"Well, what does she look like?" She moves in closer and whistles through her teeth.

"*Mamá* is going to kill you."

She's right. My heart sinks into my belly and flutters around like a butterfly with rabies.

"Well what the heck happened?"

I can't tell her. I won't break her heart.

## Margarita Got Sick...

Margarita sneezes twice and hugs herself.

“Margarita, you have chills!” Goosebumps cover her arms. She’s pale and little beads of sweat sit on her forehead like a crown. “Are you okay?”

“I’m just tired.”

“Why don’t you tell *Mamá* how bad you feel?”

“What for?” She turns away and crawls into bed. “It’s just a cold. Anyway, I’m feeling much better. I’m just trying to rest a little bit so I can help out with chores tomorrow.”

This feels wrong. “Well then, I’m telling *Mamá*. You need medicine. How is she going to help you if you don’t tell her?”

“I already took something. That’s probably why I’m sweating so much. It’s already working.” She wipes at her forehead and the beads disappear.

“Why don’t you want *Mamá* to know? It doesn’t make any sense.”

“She’ll keep me home from school,” she says.

I shake my head. Of course, it would be about school.

“I just need to rest up this weekend. I’ll be fine by Monday. So don’t you breathe a word because if you do, I’m sure there’s something I can dig up from all of your secrets. *Meow*.” She reminds me of the cat I snuck into our house.

“You don’t scare me, Margarita. And by the way, you have a few of your own, you know. *Luz*.” I remind her of the day at the pool when she debuted her tiny purple bikini. I don’t dare tell her I know she’s been sneaking out. “If I don’t see you feeling better by Sunday, I’m telling.”

But I don’t get the chance. *Mamá* finally notices Margarita isn’t doing too well when she

shivers through dinner. *Mamá* walks over to her and places a hand over her forehead.

“¿*Que te pasa, hija?*” *Mamá* asks what’s going on and touches her all over her neck and face, concern in her eyes. When she sticks her arm down Margarita’s shirt and feels her back, she gasps.

“¿*Todo bien?*” *Papí* asks if everything is okay, but *Mamá* is in mission mode.

She takes Margarita into the restroom and runs the bath water. We can hear Margarita whimpering and complaining in Spanish that the water is too cold. When our eyes meet, *Papí* puts his hand over mine. “Chee will be fine,” he says. My eyes widen, but I manage to give him a soft smile. He may be ready to break *Mamá*’s rule about speaking English out loud in our home, but I’m not.

I just look down at my tortilla.

Before bed, *Mamá* rubs Margarita’s back and feet with Olive Oil and salt. A Mexican remedy that I really hope works. She even puts some on my face where my eye is still swollen from a fight I had with a nasty girl. This is gross because she didn’t bother washing her hands. How wonderful. Getting to sleep with Margarita’s lovely feet bacteria hanging out on my jaw. I wipe it off with my pajama sleeve when *Mamá*’s not looking.

“Margarita, can I brush your hair for you?” I ask after *Mamá* closes our door.

“That would be really nice,” she says.

Wow. So being sick makes her nicer. How can I make this cold and fever hang around a little longer? I lift her head onto my lap and brush gently through her beautiful long locks.

“Thank you,” she says quietly.

“I know how much it means to you.” Margarita brushes her long hair every night, and this would be no exception.

*Mamá* had put a cool towel over Margarita's forehead, but it's already hot when I lay my hand on it. "I feel so much better knowing *Mamá* is helping you now," I say.

"Actually, me too. I'm sorry, you were right."

I was right! I've never heard my sister say those words, and I want to jump up and down, but as she shivers on my lap, it's not the time to brag. When she finally falls asleep, I wash up for bed and stare outside our window. The clouds strangle the moon, trying to snuff out its light. Shadows cover everything. There is a darkness coming. I feel something deep in my bones, but what? *Abuelita* always said I had a sharp sixth sense, and I don't like it poking at me the way it is. I kiss my bracelet for comfort and try my best to fall asleep.

## **I Dreamed...**

The rays of the afternoon sun fall hard against our backs, and they climb our necks. It burns my dark skin. Margarita splashes me in the face with the cool river water of the *Rio Grande* and I laugh so hard until my belly hurts.

She looks wonderful. Her cheeks glow and her eyes light up when she smiles. I wade further into the water after her, fighting against the light current and the mud at the bottom of the river that cradles my feet and slides between my toes. “I’m going to get you, Ita!” I scream to her in our mother tongue, but she just laughs and dances so easily around in the water.

“*Niñas!*” *Papí* calls to us from the bank of the river. He has our horse, *Valiente*, which means Brave, saddled up beside him.

Margarita squeals and bobs up and down. She wades her way to the bank, the water getting lower and lower from her waste to her calves. River mud runs down her legs like tears and covers her feet in brown.

When she gets to *Valiente*, she calls for me, and I make my way to the bank. Our horse is beautiful with its white body, black speckles, and silver hair. *Papí* lifts Margarita onto *Valiente*’s back. Then, *Valiente* grows wings and flies away with Margarita. Just like that, she disappears like a little dot into the sky.

I fall to the ground crying out, hugging myself. Margarita is gone.

I sit up in my bed and wipe sweat off my forehead. It’s so dark and my heart is racing as fast as an applauding crowd. What could this dream mean? She flew away into the sky. Was she going to Heaven? Fast breaths keep coming until I’m dizzy.

Margarita coughs a bunch of times. I lean over to check on her. Wound tight like a little ball in her covers, she’s asleep, so I lay back down, but her coughs worry me.



I worry that my nerves will keep me tossing and turning all night, but I'm pleasantly surprised when the morning sunlight glares into our room. The birds chirp in the tree outside our window and a lawn mower rips to life nearby. Oddly, Margarita is still sound asleep. My stomach cramps up when she coughs again.

*Mamá* is already waiting for me in the kitchen. "*Tu hermana esta dormiendo?*" she asks if Margarita is still sleeping.

My sleepy head nods. Today we're detail cleaning and washing our bedding. I take my list, Margarita's list, my rag, and my bucket and start my work as *Mamá's cumbia* music fills the house. I set *Mamá's* plants on the floor and wipe down the windowsill, water the plants, and put them back. Next, I clean all the baseboards in our living room. Behind me, *Mamá* is dancing while she empties the contents of our refrigerator so she can clean it out. Finally, our buckets are clean, our rags hang on the line, and my sore fingers are proof that the dang grout between our floor tiles are cleaner than clean.

Later in the afternoon, Margarita walks into our kitchen and uses a napkin to blow her nose. "This is the longest cold ever," she tells me. Then she frowns and gives a small gasp.

"What is it?"

"Nothing," she snaps and bunches up her napkin and throws it in the trash. She watches *Mamá* from the kitchen window. *Mamá* is outside hanging clothes on the line and our bed sheets dance around her in the light breeze.

Margarita boils some water and drops *Yerba Buena*, good herb, into her mug.

"You sound much better," I assure her.

"I'm sure by tomorrow morning I'll be perfect," she says, her voice a little softer.

I nod my head and finish cleaning the last of the lunch dishes.

Margarita nods in approval. “Whoever wrote ‘Dirty Mexican’ on your locker last year has obviously never been to our *mami*’s house.”

The memory she brings up hurts me, but I push it to the side, clean off my gloves, and head out to the yard to help *Mami* bring in baskets of laundry. After Margarita eats her toast, she sits beside me on the sofa and we quietly fold clothes and linens.

I watch her shiver, and I feel so sorry for her. And I’m so proud of her at the same time. She hasn’t told me about winning Freshman Princess for her dance, but now more than ever, especially after those two pigs said she didn’t deserve to win, I want her to go to that dance and claim her crown. Our *Papí* did always say that we are his princesses. Well, now Margarita really is one.

“Did you see John yesterday?” Maybe that will open things up a little bit.

Margarita smiles and it reaches all the way up to her eyes. “We ate lunch together,” she whispers.

“Cool.” It goes quiet again. “What did you guys talk about?” I ask innocently, pretending to be interested.

“Not much, really. His dad is a pharmaceutical representative, so he travels a whole lot. His mom stays home.”

“You really like him, don’t you?” I nudge her on her side with my elbow.

“Yeah,” she grins.

Moments like this test my doubts about our relationship, when we talk as if nothing is wrong with us, like we’re not broken sisters.

“Well, I guess I’m off to the store for *Mami*,” I say.

“You sound so excited about it,” she smiles.

“Have you seen her list?”

“Yeah.” She giggles. “I helped her make it.”

“Maxi pads.”

I join in on her giggles. We shouldn’t be giggling. We never ever do. I grab an orange off the counter and peel it over the trashcan. The first piece of peel lands right beside Margarita’s snot napkin—Margarita’s *bloody* snot napkin. That explains why she gasped. I want to say something, but she’ll just get bothered with me, and we just giggled together, and I don’t want to ruin it. It’s probably nothing. She has a cold, and she’s been blowing her nose a lot. That’s the best guess I have. But my dream comes to my mind and I can’t help but feel a shiver run down my arms.

## Two Sisters Fought For The First Time...

A new girl came to our school, and when she chose to sit next to me in math class, I pretended that I wasn't the girl that nobody liked. I was very thoughtful, offering my notes from the weeks she missed, and pointing out a few of her classrooms on the map stapled to her schedule. Julia from Los Angeles was untainted and best of all, unaware of the chaos that I was. When she found me at lunch, she didn't ask why I sat alone. Instead, she pulled up a chair and offered to split her tuna with me. It was a strange feeling. She looked like she should be friends with Margarita. We forged our best friend status with the exchange of accessories. She tied a pumpkin orange infinity scarf around my neck, and I offered the best I had—a red string *Mamí* put around my wrist. She calls it la sangre de Cristo, the blood of Christ. It works well enough. Julia admires the threading and offers compliments on how the scarf goes great with my skin tone. *Mamí* has warned us that we should never borrow anything from people, yet here I am parading this whatever kind of scarf it is to all the school. Our exchange was better than pricking our fingertips and smearing our blood together.

We agree on a return date, so I had put the scarf gingerly in my drawer where it would keep safe until that day. When the day came, I opened my drawer, and the scarf was gone. Today, I offer another excuse to Julia as to why I forgot it again. I need a miracle. I can't tell *Mamí* what's happened because she'll get me for borrowing.

When I get home from school, *Mamí* is already home. She's making chile rellenos. I run to her and bury my face in her chile-scented hair. Margarita comes in soon after me. Lo and behold, she's wearing the scarf. *Mamí* will never notice because Margarita always looks good. She runs to *Mamí* who hugs her close and doesn't even take a second look at the scarf. Meanwhile, my heart races. *Mamí* tells us to go wash up because *Papí* is on the way and for

once, we're eating dinner early. Margarita prances away to our room, and I walk slowly, planning my attack. My fingernails drag across the hallway wall. I'm pretty sure there is steam coming from my nose and ears. My bottom lip is caught between my teeth and it's going to pop. I walk into our room to the sound of strokes as Margarita's brush drags across her hair.

"Margarita," I say through my teeth and tight jaw, "give me back my scarf. *Please.*"

"This thing?" She stares in the mirror, angling her head in different directions, planning her next hairdo, a braid, a bun, who cares?

I walk over and put out my hand and tap my toe.

"Graciela, this is not your scarf. It can't be. Do you even know what kind of scarf it is?"

*Shoot. What was it? A future scarf? A... forever scarf...* "Duh. Now give it to me. It's not even mine."

"That's right. It's mine. Because I found it... in my drawer."

Oh! It fell through the back of my overstuffed drawer. She's making good on her threat to keep anything of mine that falls through the back of my drawer and into hers.

"Margarita, that's not fair. Be serious. It belongs to my friend Julie, and she's asking for it."

"Ooooh. *Mamá* will kill you if she knows you're borrowing things."

"You do it."

"Yeah, well, I know how to dress. Nobody's gonna notice if Margarita is wearing a trendy scarf or a flashy belt. But Graciela, well that's a different story." She grins and pets the scarf.

"You are pure evil, and I never want to speak to you again," I squeeze my eyes closed and force my tears back. I can't cry. I won't.

“I’m just teasing you, Graciela. Why can’t you ever take a joke?” She takes it off and tosses it at me.

Thank you, God. I examine it in my hands. “Wait. What’s this?”

“I accidentally got ketchup on it at lunch. I’m sorry.” She tightens her lips.

“What?” I scream.

She screams right back. “Don’t be ridiculous, Graciela. You’re so annoying. It’ll come right off.”

The scarf burns in my hands. How will I clean this? How can I return it to Julia like this?

“How am I supposed to get this out?”

“Well, I would’ve helped you, but you demanded it back, so deal with it.”

“Oh my God. I hope your hair falls out. You’re the nastiest person I know!”

Anger flashes across her eyes and we both give a hard look at our door, expecting *Mamí* to barge in and punish us for speaking in English more than for fighting.

I give up. I really do give up. Kind Margarita is gone. This girl is *loca*, and she will never love me again. I get that now. I turn to leave our room, but I just can’t go quietly. I turn back and stare at her reflection.

“What did I ever do to you? All I ever wanted was for you to love me again.” My voice finally breaks, and I don’t know which to be, angry or sad? “What’s wrong with you?”

“What’s wrong with me?” she yells. “*You*.”

It’s like a piece of glass dug itself deep into my heart.

“I can’t stand to even be around you, Graciela,” she shrills, banging her brush onto the dresser.

My head is spinning. “You didn’t feel that way when we were little. When we came here

afraid and all we had was each other,” my voice breaks on *each other*. I need to remind her.

“You didn’t feel that way about helping me learn English.”

“The only reason why I made sure you learned English is because I didn’t want a Spanish-speaking idiot tagging along embarrassing me!” Margarita’s eyes are lit like small flames.

I tighten my jaw, and fire flows through my body all the way up to the top of my head.

“I hate you, Margarita,” I cry out, my legs shaking under me. I fist my hands, my nails digging into my palms. I’ve *never ever* told my sister something so evil.

“Good, *estúpida*. I hate you, too.” She has *never ever* told *me* anything so evil either.

I’m as hot as *Mamá’s* teakettle when it gets to the boiling point. I look around me and grab the first thing I can see to throw at her. My math book goes flying at her like a torpedo, but she ducks, and I gasp as it crashes into our mirror with a thunderous noise. Pieces of glass clatter as they hit our floor.

Now there is banging on our door. It opens to reveal *Mamá* and *Papí*.

“¿*Que esta pasando?*” *Mamá* screams, demanding to know what is happening. Her eyes zone in on the broken mirror and then us. Our bedroom erupts like a screaming volcano of Spanish.

Next thing I know, I’m trying to claw at Margarita. She’s yelling at me, and *Mamá* has one hand on each of our chests, trying to keep us apart. I start grabbing things off our dresser and throwing them at Margarita.

Perfume, her watch, some pens. All fly through the air.

*Papí* never interrupts our arguments. Never, ever. So imagine my surprise when two strong arms are suddenly around my waist pulling me away.

I struggle to get out of his hold, kicking and flailing my arms, but he's too strong.

"*Loca!*" Margarita calls me crazy.

Someone is crying with anger. I realize it's me.

"*Ya. Ya. Ya.*" *Papí* whispers. "*Calmate. Respira.*" He tells me to calm down and breathe.

I realize that breathing feels very hard to do right now. *Papí* holds me in his arms and lets me cry. Finally, after a few minutes, I calm down.

When I catch my breath and Margarita sits down on her bed, *Mamá* asks us what's going on. Her voice is shaky, and her eyes are wide. This has never happened before. Ever.

When we both start jabbering away, *Papí* puts his hand up and calls on me. I tell him how Margarita took something that didn't belong to her, careful to not give him too much information about Harper's scarf. Margarita does that for me, telling them how I am borrowing clothes and things from my friends.

*It. Is. On!*

I look at *Mamá* and open my mouth. It shoots off like a bottle rocket, flames spraying out from behind it as it takes off to the sky. I tell *Mamá* in Spanish that Margarita is different, evil. I don't dare tell them how she snuck out the other night with her friend Jenny, but I do tell them she's trying to sneak out to an American dance with a *gabacho*.

Margarita's mouth drops wide open, and I know that I am a terrible sister as soon as it all comes out. I didn't want to tell on her. Why would she make me do that?

"*Es cierto?*" *Mamá* demands to know if this is true.

Margarita shoots a hateful glance at me before admitting it. "*Si,*" she whispers.

"*Mi respuesta es no.*" Without any hesitation, *Mamá* says she can't go.

Margarita's eyes instantly fill with tears. "*Madre, por favor!*" she begs. "*Papí?*" she



turns to him, begging him to change *Mamá's* mind.

But the true boss of our house has spoken, so he just shrugs his shoulders sympathetically. Margarita cries, claiming that *Mamá* keeps us from everything just because it's too American for her. *Mamá* tells her that our culture is the priority.

"If you hate *esthuped* America so much, then why did you drag us to this hell?"

Margarita shouts across the room in English. "*Hypocrita!*" She calls *Mamá* a hypocrite.

*Papí, Mamí,* and I freeze, neither of us believing what we just heard. That is until I speak. And I don't even bother to say it in Spanish.

"Margarita, your nose is bleeding."

\*\*\*

Margarita's nose bleeds for almost three hours. I know this because *Papí* is pacing the floor and keeps running into the kitchen to check the time, and every time he does this, he tells *Mamá* how much time has passed, and that they should go to the hospital. And every time he says this, *Mamá* tells him that she can get it under control, but each time *Mamá* thinks it has stopped, she releases Margarita's nose, only to have it drip out like a fountain again. The first time it splattered all over their shoes, the second time onto the floor, and the third, onto our kitchen table.

I've had enough nosebleeds in my day, but never anything like this. *Mamá* has been holding Margarita's head back so the blood could drip down her throat. Margarita spits out a blobby blood clot onto her napkin and that's when it hits me. Any tomboy nose-bleeder knows that when your nose is bleeding, you need to look down so you put pressure on all those blood vessels in there. So I've heard. And it works for me every time.

“*Mamí, así.*” Like this, I say, tilting Margarita’s head forward. She waves me away from her, but *Mamí* takes over and keeps her head down.

When *Mamí* has success after ten minutes, she gives me a loving smile and lets out a big sigh.

*Who’s estúpida now, Margarita?*

Margarita gets cleaned up, we eat a very quick dinner of beans and rice, and I give up on trying to clean the ketchup off the scarf.

I give up on Margarita.

When I go into my bedroom, the tension in the room is still there.

Everything reminds me of the words my sister and I exchanged—the *I hate you’s*, *stupid*s, and *hypocrites*. They all come circling back and push against my chest making it hard to breathe.

This was not our family. It never was our family. Has America really changed us this much?

I throw the pieces of glass into our pink wastebasket and wipe off the dresser. Now Margarita won’t be able to brush her hair in front of the mirror, admiring her perfect hair and skin, as she does.

When she comes into the room, it’s like the same feeling comes over her that came over me. She is very quiet and moves slowly, the corners of her mouth drawn down. I want to say sorry, but I can’t form the words. I move my tongue around and clear my throat.

Nothing.

I scurry into bed and fling myself on the mattress, clutching my chest and scrunching my eyes shut wishing I could be anywhere else in the world than here. Like on my *abuelita’s* porch,

eating *pan dulce* and watching our cousins play out in the trees and feeling Margarita's hands weave in and out of my hair while she practices braiding. But when I open my eyes, I'm still here, staring at this same ceiling, struggling to breathe.

\*\*\*

Someone is crying. I hear it far away at first, and then I hear it loud and clear, right below me. It's Margarita. I climb into her bed. It's wet all over my bare feet. I run to flick on our light. My feet are covered in blood. Margarita is covered in blood.

"*Mamá!*" I scream, and in seconds, she and *Papí* are in our doorway. *Mamá* runs to the bed and helps Margarita out of it. She looks frozen, her eyes wide, and blood is smeared all over her cheeks and chin and night shirt. She starts to choke and coughs up more blood all over the carpet. The Alarms in my brain are screaming at me. This is a real emergency. The kind where you call nine-one-one, so I run to the phone in the hall, and I do.

## ***La Leucemia—That Is All...***

*"Tu hermana tiene cancer."*

My sister has cancer.

Were there other signs? Did I notice anything? *Mamá* asks me, and I really don't know.

My tongue has forgotten how to move and my voice has forgotten how to speak. I listen to *Mamá* cry into the phone and struggle through words like *la leucemia* and *la quimioterapia*.

Leukemia. Chemotherapy.

I can't feel my legs, but when I look down, they're still there, shaking. Everything is shaking. I try not to cry. Not now. Not when *Mamá* needs someone to be strong. But I can't help it, and we cry together, for a long while. There is nothing I can do. I can't stop her tears, not when my own won't stop. I can't hug her. I can't hug Margarita. I can't take away the cancer. Can't. Can't. Can't. I cry even harder, and don't even notice when *Mamá* calms down, but she does and begs me to do the same. She tells me that I can stay home from school. I don't know what else to say, what else to ask, so I hang up and crawl back into bed.

Margarita has cancer, and the only thing I know about cancer is that people can die. Does everyone die? Doesn't cancer only happen to Americans? No one back home had cancer—not our friends, not our family—no one. And nobody has cancer at school either. How could this happen to Margarita?

This is *Papí's* fault for bringing us here. And it's Margarita's fault for trying to be more American. I knew something like this was going to happen. My jaw tightens, stopping my teeth from clattering, but my tears keep running down my cheeks and chin. I wish I could hug Margarita right now. I want to hold her hand and tell her that everything will be fine. But will it? Will she die and go to Heaven with *Abuelita*? No! No! She can't! I scream hard into my pillow

over and over again.

I don't even remember falling asleep, but when *Papí* shakes me awake, it's nighttime outside my window. My eyes feel like someone poured salt in them. I look at *Papí* with his own red and salty eyes. I don't know what to say to him. My throat burns like fire. He doesn't seem to know what to say either because all he does is pull me close into his chest, and all my tears come back when I hear his deep cries. I have never heard *Papí* cry before, and I now I know that I never want to hear him cry ever again. The sound of his pain drives a knife deep into my heart.

## I Learned To Cook...

Maybe my family will come home today. And if they do, they'll be hungry. I'll be ready for them. I believe with all my heart that they will all come home together, *today*. Margarita will be fine.

I get up and hurry into the kitchen, opening the refrigerator that *Mamá* polished both inside and out this past weekend. I stare at the open broom closet where our empty buckets sit. It was only a few weeks ago when our home became a whirlpool of *cumbia* music, buckets and brushes, and Margarita and I joked about *Papí's* underwear as we hung clothes on the line.

Margarita looked fine then. As wonderful as usual. How can she go from that to a hospital? My heart feels heavy like a big brick as I search the refrigerator shelves. *Mamá* has her food items neatly stored in clear bags and labeled butter tubs that she uses as Tupperware. Beans, of course. Beef. Onions. Garlic. Lettuce. Carrots. Cabbage. Squash. Raw corn on the cob. Lemon. Beef Broth.

*Mamá* had planned *Caldo de Rez* for us tonight, and I pull out everything I need. This won't be ready for a few hours, and I have no idea when my family will be home. It could be in five minutes, or it could be in five hours. Either way, I need a distraction.

My stomach quivers as I prepare to make my first pot of soup. I rummage through *Mamá's* knife drawer and find a fine blade. I chop up potatoes into ivory cubes, I shave and slice the carrots, clean and cut cabbage, and slice the squash into circles. I break the two corncobs in half making four small ones. On another cutting board, I chop up the beef. This is how I've watched *Mamá* do it hundreds of times before. She always begged me to cook with her, but I never did. I wanted to run out in the dirt and climb trees. Now more than anything, I wish she was here. I wish we could cook together.

I don't know the seasoning *Mamí* uses. Her food is so magical. It's like she uses secret potions from little pouches attached to her apron. But I don't have any of that, so I put the meat on the stove at a slow boil and wait.

In the quiet, the clock ticks behind me. One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Seven. Eight. . . And I can't take it anymore.

I go outside to sit on our porch, sitting in *Mamí's* rocking chair. The sky has an army of clouds out.

"Everything okay over there?"

I squint my eyes at the chain link fence on the side of our yard. It's hard to see after staring at the bright sky, but I recognize the voice very well.

"*Señor* Guzman?" My eyes finally adjust again.

"Yes," he answers. "I heard what happened. I talked quickly to your father before he left. Is everything okay with your sister, *mija*? Do you need anything?"

I hesitate, stunned that he speaks English, but most of all, I'm afraid that answering him will make this real. "I don't need anything, thank you. I haven't heard anything from the hospital yet. Um... I'll be right back."

I run back to the stove and dump my vegetables inside the pot, and add the beef broth and some salt. When I come back outside, my neighbor is still waiting. He's now at the fence looking at me through the chain link. I grip the doorknob a little harder.

"Maybe you should get inside now and lock up until your family gets home. I'll be watching your house. Do you have my telephone number?"

"Yes. My *mamí* has it on a list by the telephone."

"Okay, *mija*. I'm over here if you need me. I've already cancelled my doctor appointment

today just in case.”

I follow *Señor* Guzman’s orders, lock up the back door, and sit back down at the lonely table.

My stare lingers on each empty chair. I want to be in my bedroom arguing with Margarita or rolling my eyes as she brushes her hair. I put my head down onto the table for only a few minutes. The phone rings, and I jump out of my chair, knocking it over. There’s drool on the table. The kitchen clock says it’s almost one in the afternoon. How long was I asleep?

“*Bueno?*” I gasp into the phone.

“*Mija!*” It’s *Mamá*, and I can feel all my anxiety melt away. I can tell she’s been crying. Her nose sounds clogged and her voice is hoarse.

She whispers to me that Margarita is going to be okay, and she’s resting. She pauses before breaking her news. They would be staying at the hospital, and she didn’t know for how long.

“*Tu papá ya se fue. Descansa, hija. Hablamos mas tarde.*” She tells me my *Papí* is coming home, that I should rest, and we’ll talk later.

I don’t know how to respond to that, so I say what I know—“*Te amo, Mamá, y a Margarita.*” I send my love to her and Margarita, but my words feel unworthy. I want to squeeze them both close to me.

*Mamá* promises to give Margarita my message, and we hang up. For several minutes, I stare at the phone. Then tears flood my eyes like the Rio Grande during the raining season. Curling up on the couch, I pull my knees up and wrap my arms around them. My chest feels heavy, and I can’t breathe. I’m a butterfly stuck in a mason jar without holes cut into its top. Each breath heavy, wings slowly opening and closing. I die inside. Margarita is very sick, and I



regret the last words I said to her. *I hate you. I hope your hair falls out. I. Hate. You.* But I don't hate her. I love her. My Ita, my beautiful butterfly.

The smell of my soup trails from the kitchen to me. My soup! I rush to the stove and pray it's not ruined. Stirring the mixture around with a wooden spoon, I find it's perfectly okay. The house smells wonderful with all the vegetables and meat soaking up the salty liquid. My mouth waters. I'm terrible for wanting to eat. *Papí's* truck pulls up and the locks click on the back door.

When he comes in, his eyes are so tired. The bags under them are dark. I wish I had Margarita's magical cucumbers for his tired eyes. Or maybe I should have made coffee for him. He stands in the doorway, takes a deep breath, and tells me in Spanish that it smells wonderful, just like my *mami's*. I doubt that.

Pointing to the table, I order him to sit down, then I serve him in one of *Mami's* big glass wedding bowls. The bowls were given in happiness. Maybe they'll bring some happiness to my soup. I slice up some lemon and warm three corn tortillas for him on the *comal*, and I fix up a bowl for myself. *Papí* finishes his bowl in minutes. I choose to eat mine slowly, appreciating my hard work and the slow simmer required to get it this way. Next time, I'll wait a little longer before adding the potatoes. I boiled them too long and they're a little bit soggy, but everything else is perfect.

He helps me clean up, even though I want him to get to bed for a nap. I know he was up all night. When *Papí* finally lays down, I put some soup in one of *Mami's* empty butter tubs and wrap some warm tortillas and lemon in some foil. I go out into our yard and open the rusty gate that separates our house from *Señor Guzman's*. If *Mami* takes care of him, I should, too.

It only takes a few seconds for him to answer the door after I knock. "I'm sorry. I was reading," he says. With his index finger, he pushes glasses up higher on his nose.

I look past him at the inside of his house. It's lonely and quiet. A cat sits on his sofa next to an open book. I got a taste of that loneliness today and can't imagine living in it every day like him.

"What's this?" he asks, looking down at the container and foil in my hands.

"I made *Caldo de Rez*. There was plenty left." Maybe I should have put one of the corncobs in his soup. There are two lonely ones floating in the pot, but they're for *Mamá* and Margarita for when they finally make it home.

"Thank you so very much, *mija*." He takes the warm butter tub and the foil and pats my shoulder. "Any word about Margarita?"

I suddenly feel much better about discussing this with him.

"She's very sick, but she's resting, and she and *Mamá* will stay in the hospital tonight."

"I see," he says. "If you need anything, please let me know and tell your father the same."

"I will."

He watches from his back porch until I get to my own porch and waves me forward into my house when I stop to turn back at him.

"*Señor* Guzman!" I call out.

"Yes?"

"Dinner is tonight at seven. I hope you'll join us?"

He laughs. I can't see his dirty teeth from here, but they don't seem to matter so much anymore anyway.

"It will be my pleasure," he calls back, and shuts his door.

## ***Feliz Cumpleaños...***

Birthdays are always a big deal in our home. *Mamá* would wake up extra early and make our favorite breakfast. She would play a cassette tape with a recording of “*Las Mañanitas*,” which is a Mexican birthday song played in the early morning hours to serenade the birthday person. Back in Mexico, we didn’t use tape recordings. When it was your birthday, you’d have real-life musicians, *Mariachis*, outside your window serenading you after midnight on your birthday.

After the morning celebration, we’d come home to a special dinner, even if she had to prepare it the night before in case she’d have to work late. She’d make homemade flan or a *tres leches* cake, which is the most delightful sponge cake, made with three kinds of milks and topped with cream, cinnamon, and a cherry. This year, I am supposed to have a *Quinceañera*. I didn’t want one from the beginning, but I was happy we were returning to Mexico for it. Now, there is nothing.

This evening, with *Mamá* stuck in a hospital with Margarita and *Papí* working two jobs to pay our bills, *Señor* Guzman and I eat dinner alone. I made chicken *quesadillas* with sour cream and salsa, a side of rice, and *ranchero* beans. *Papí* isn’t home yet, and I have to put his dinner in the fridge. I serve *Señor* Guzman his coffee and bring him a roll out to our porch where he rocks back and forth on *Mamá’s* rocking chair. I made a tiny cup of coffee for myself. Since I haven’t officially gotten my parents’ permission to drink coffee, I limit myself to one small cup. I feel grown, and coffee is slowly becoming my most favorite drink. I like mine with extra sugar. The first time I made *Señor* Guzman coffee, he spit it out and said, “*Mija!* This has a lot of sugar! It’s no good for my diabetes!” So we agreed that he would take his with a teaspoon of milk and no sugar, and I would take mine with lots of milk and lots of sugar. He makes fun of me and asks,

“Graciela, would you like some coffee with that sugar?”

We watch the stars in a silence between us that feels very comfortable. It’s like a quiet that only real friends can have between them, when you don’t need to say anything, and it’s okay. He balances his saucer with his coffee cup in one hand and with the other reaches for his satchel that he hung over *Mami’s* chair. He pulls out a small bag from a bookstore that I’ve seen when my family has gone downtown.

“Graciela, this is an early birthday gift. I thought you could use a distraction, so I got this for you today when I went into town for an appointment.”

He hands me the package he’s been guarding since he got here, and sips his coffee while I stare down at the bundle on my lap.

“What is it?” I give him a curious look.

“Well, there’s only one way to answer that. Go on,” he nods at me.

I unwrap the package and pull out a book. It’s my beautiful girl in her golden dress floating in the air with her long beautiful hair, like how my Margarita used to have before the clumps fell out. My heart hurts for one second, but only one.

“*Esperanza Rising!*” I hug it to my chest, it smells so good—the cover and pages fresh and crisp like it just came off the press. I hold it away to examine it, a smooth, brand-new cover, no creases, no folds on the pages inside—brand new! “*Señor* Guzman! How could you have possibly known how much I love this book?”

“You’ve mentioned it once or twice. *Esperanza* this and *Esperanza* that,” he chuckles. “It’s one of my most favorite books, too. Happy birthday, *mija*.”

I get up from the steps and hug him around his neck. He is like the *abuelito* that I never had. The phone rings inside the house, and I excuse myself to answer it, taking my book with

me. It's *Mamá* and Margarita calling to say goodnight, and *Mamá* tells me that *Papí* isn't home yet because he made a stop at the hospital because *Margarita* asked for him. She is having a hard time with her chemotherapy, and she just needed to feel his strong arms cradle her like a baby. *Papí* is very good at making us feel safe when we need it the most.

*Chemotherapy*. Shuddering, I hold my book, the picture of my dearest hero, Esperanza, close to my heart. Will we both lose someone we love? My stomach sours.

## **I Asked To See My Sister...**

“Our Father who art in Heaven,” I whisper the beginnings of my prayer, laying on my side in my bed, my arm tucked in like a chicken wing. I blink a few times, trying to keep my eyes open and finish my prayer. It’s been so hard to sleep in the emptiness of this house.

I usually toss and turn, then walk through the house like I’m a Day of the Dead zombie until I’m too tired and fall into Margarita’s bed. There isn’t anything quiet about the quiet. It’s like a graveyard, and it’s a horrible reminder of what my family is going through.

But tonight, I might finally fall asleep. I’m so tired that my tongue slurs over my prayer, and my eyes beg to close, but I’m afraid to sleep. Afraid of what the morning might bring.

I can’t help it anymore. Sleep suffocates me. Maybe it’s because this is the first Saturday that I cleaned the house by myself, no Margarita or *Mamá* to laugh with, no *cumbia* music to dance to. I thought about turning on that little black radio in the kitchen. I really did, but even the music would hurt my heart.

I had scrubbed grout, washed and hung out clothes, polished windows, watered plants, and packed a fresh set of clothes for *Mamá* and underwear and warm socks for Margarita. I wish more than anything I could deliver those clothes myself, but *Papí* keeps promising that I’ll see them soon, and says I need to put all my focus on school. “I miss my family, God.” My words come out with a cracked voice, my mouth dry like I drank a cup of sand. The words are so hard to say out loud, but I mean every single one.

The next day after school, I bust through our back door and raid the refrigerator. My beef is thawed. I pull out green bell pepper, onion, and garlic, chop it all up into a pile of green and translucent white with small yellow pieces and put it all in the frying pan with a little bit of water and all the meat. It simmers and I dash in pepper and salt. Next, I add potatoes. It turns into a

thick and rich stew and when I taste test it, I know I've hit the bull's-eye. The truck rumbles into the yard and my toe taps the kitchen floor as *Papí* opens the back door.

"Hello, *mija*." He tries his best to raise the corners of his mouth into a smile, but only half of his mouth makes it. "Why are you still awake?" His English is getting better, even with his words coming out so slow and tired.

I glance at the clock on the stove. It's only approaching nine. My bedtime isn't until ten.

*Papí's* eyes, so sad, look over the table that I have set and ready for him. The steam coming from his bowl of stew even seems to form a finger that curls and calls him to sit down. He comes over and pulls out his chair, and it creaks when his body that looks so tired and heavy sinks down into it.

This is the last thing he needs to hear, I'm sure, but I've done everything asked of me—taking care of the house, *Señor* Guzman, my homework—and pretty much, I'm tired of feeling like a tree branch that has broken off from its family, left unwanted and alone. I slide into the chair across from him. After he has five spoonsful of stew, I drop the bomb on him. Here goes... everything...

"I want to see *Mamá*. I want to see Margarita. Please, *Papí*." I don't even bother to speak in Spanish. I meet him right where he is. His dry, cracked hands fall open onto the table on each side of his bowl. His spoon rests in one hand and his tortilla, still wet from where he dipped it in stew, flops open onto the tablecloth from the other hand. It's like I just stabbed him in the heart.

My eyes can't meet his. So instead, they follow all the lines that crisscross over his palms and fingers. Dirt stains deep into them, and his fingernails are black. Small cuts and scrapes mark his skin. These are the beat-up hands of a hard-working man, and when I can finally look up, his deep, dark, and sunken eyes make me even sorrier for opening my big mouth. Poor *Papí*.

“*Perdoname, Papí.*” I ask for his forgiveness.

“It is not your fault,” he says in his heavy Mexican accent. “There is just not time. Not enough time.”

The pain in his voice tells me that he wishes he could help me, but he can’t. He’s right. There isn’t any time. Not with him taking that second job cleaning a private school on the weekends to replace *Mamí’s* paycheck and leaving before the sun comes up on workdays just to get clothes and other things to the hospital for *Mamí*. And especially not when he works until dark at the construction site, coming home long after the sun has gone down. There is no time for *Papí* to drive all the way to our house to pick me up and try to make it all the way back to the hospital before visiting hours are over. He’s already under enough pressure. How did I ever think there was a way? I sink low into my chair. I am the slime from the bottom of the earth that got stuck on someone’s shoe.

Worry weighs the corner of his mouth down. “You are upset?” he says.

“No, *Papí*,” I lie. I am upset. I’m upset because I can’t go see my *Mamí* and Margarita, and I’m upset because I can’t believe I just tortured *Papí* over it. “*Yo entiendo.*” I understand, I tell him. I give him a tight smile before my frowny face can attack. The telephone rings in the hall, rescuing us from this awkward moment.

Before I can stand to answer it, *Papí* pushes his chair out and rushes to the hall. He speaks in English. “Hello, Mr. Jim. Thank you for calling me. Yes. I’m so sorry to ask this of you. It is fine to take it from my paychecks, sir. Thank you. God bless you.”

*Papí* comes back to the table and buries his face in his hands.

“What’s wrong?” My heart beats wild.



“Nothing for you to worry with,” he says from behind his hands and then he moves them away and tries to smile again, but this smile is as bad as the other one.

Without saying a word, I wear him down with the questions in my eyes.

He sighs. “I am borrowing money from Mr. Jim.”

And it suddenly hits me why he needs to borrow money. “It’s because you have to pay my hospital bill, right? And now we don’t have enough money for Margarita’s hospital bill, right?” My lip trembles.

“Do not think like this, Graciela. You were sick. And I will always take care of you. And Margarita. You no worry. You let me do the worry. My job.” He pats my hand.

I don’t want him to see me cry, so I stand and avoid eye contact with him. “*Buenas noches, Papí.*” I give him a goodnight peck on the cheek, and he catches my arm.

“You are a good girl, Graciela. Strong like your mother. And this... all of this will pass soon. *Soon.*” He squeezes and tries his best to make this promise with his eyes, but eyes can’t lie.

I can’t fall asleep, muffling my cries in my pillow. A question keeps nagging my brain. How can I raise money to help my family? It’s my fault were behind. I could use one of *Mamí’s* hugs right about now. I consider surprising *Mamí* and Margarita by taking the city bus to them. But how can I face my sick sister knowing that we can’t pay her hospital bills because of me?

## **I Visited Margarita In The Hospital...**

*Papí* pulls into a parking lot that rests at the foot of a tall building dressed in windows, from the top to the bottom.

“Angel of Hope Children’s Hospital,” I whisper. I look instantly *Papí*. “Margarita?”

“Yes,” he smiles.

My heart dances with leaps and bounds. Margarita’s little silver brush is nestled in my back pocket. I’ve been carrying it everywhere. Now she will have it again.

I take *Papí’s* hand and tug him all the way to the front of the building. My legs can’t carry me fast enough. The double glass doors let us in, and we’re facing two sets of elevators, but all around us is beauty. There are butterflies hanging from the ceiling, rainbows on the walls, a coffee shop, and a gift store that looks as good as any toy store. There are colorful sofas everywhere matching the rainbow colors, and Disney cartoons painted into the tiles on the floor. And it’s so bright inside. Bright. The sun bursts right in through the large picture frame windows.

As we get into the elevators, I notice a play area designed to look like an enchanted forest, which is exactly its name. It’s all so amazing, but it can’t replace the true feelings here, I realize, as the doors open to the fifth floor. There is a play area to the left of the nurses’ station. There are kids there now, a few parents, too. Some have I.V. poles beside them like shadows, their arms connected to these silver poles by snaking tubes. A few of the kids are bald. Some kids watch television, others play board games with their parents, some play with toys from a small toy chest, and there’s even a gaming station where two kids are playing a racing game. One is bald and in a hospital gown, and the other is in regular clothes and has hair. They share the same face—twins, I think.

I can't believe my eyes. Jenny and her mother come toward us to get in the elevator. I can't believe she would get to see my sister before me. She was a bad influence on my sister, sneaking her out at night to go to parties and who knows what else? My heart races when I look her in the eyes. I can feel the fire in mine as I dig deep into her with my glare. *Papí* and her mother talk for a few seconds, *Papí* scraping by with the best English he has, but Jenny doesn't say a word to me. She blinks and looks around like she's uncomfortable, and she should be. I'm thankful when her mother pulls her inside the open elevator. But I have bigger things to give all my energy to.

I slip my hand into *Papí's* and squeeze. He squeezes back. A chill runs across my body, but I'm not cold. We make our way down a hall to a closed door with our last name, Flores, written on the small whiteboard beside it.

*Papí* opens the door slowly. "*Buenas,*" he calls out.

We step into the room. It's just as beautiful as the first floor, but before I can even gather my thoughts, *Mamí* is squeezing me to her, crying her salty tears into my hair. Every time she tries to speak, she can't. Her tongue stumbles over her cries.

My clouded eyes find Margarita who is watching me, smiling brightly. She is now completely bald, her shiny, imperfect head lumpy in places I never could see before now. I can't fall apart in front of her. I won't.

"Graciela," she calls out, and *Mamí* lets me go to her. It reaches her arms out to me. I climb into bed with her, careful with the wires attached to her body.

My head rests against the softness of her bare head.

"I love you," she whispers.

I close my eyes and imagine her healthy. She's bright, her hair is long and flowing. I

picture her running around the corn field and even hanging *Papí's* underwear on the line with me.

"I love you, too," I whisper back. She is everything I need and more than I deserve. We talk in English, and nobody cares.

She wipes my tears away and kisses my forehead.

When my parents run downstairs to the cafeteria for tea, Margarita and I lay together in that comfortable quiet between two people who love each other very much. Until she speaks...

"Graciela, I'm so sorry for how I've treated you all this time. You didn't deserve it. You are nothing but loving and kind, and I was just, well... I never felt well anymore, and I was always grouchy about the things we didn't have, and I guess I just took it out on you. Can you forgive me?"

"Margarita, there is nothing to forgive. But if you really want to make it up to me, get well and come home to me. Please." I kiss the back of her hand.

After my parents get back, we eat lunch together, and I push Margarita in a wheelchair all over the fifth floor. She already looks so much better. She's alert, not as sleepy as she usually sounds on our telephone calls. She's Brighter. She shows me something she calls a port. It looks like a purple heart. There's a tube attached to it that goes into Margarita's neck. This is how her medicine gets into her body.

"Does it hurt?" I study it with curious eyes, the same way I watch *Mamí* do her magic on sewing magic.

"It's okay," she says with a smile and pats the purple heart.

We read books from a small shelf in the playroom, watch television, and then we eat

dinner together. *Papí* and I share a tuna sandwich he got from the cafeteria downstairs, and the hospital gives *Mamí* a tray of chicken and vegetables. Margarita has melon and strawberry slices, and a pink shake-looking drink.

I glance at her window that's now welcoming the sunset.

"*Graciela, ya es tiempo para irnos,*" *Papí* lets me know it's time to go.

My heart plays leapfrog. I don't want to make things harder, to make Margarita and *Mamí* sad, so I obey without a fuss. Standing at the door, I give my sister one last look, when I remember something.

"Ita!" I reach into my pocket and pull out three mango and *chile* lollipops that I got from the man selling *paletas* in the park. They were her favorite growing up, and she'd get so mad when I liked all her *chile* off and put the wrappers back on. I shake the lint from my pocket off of them. "They're brand new. I didn't lick the *chile* off." I grin.

"Well then, they won't taste as good." She giggles. "Thank you," she says and tucks them under her pillow.

My Margarita is back even though she looks completely different. She's back, and it's real.

In the lobby, I spot the butterflies hanging down from the ceiling again, and I now understand. We are no longer butterflies caught in a mason jar. The jar is broken, and we are free, flying together *in* our new homeland, not *to* it. No matter what happens with Margarita, our family is strong and we'll face it together.

## ***Mamá Lets Margarita Go To An American Dance...***

*Mamá* wakes me up to half a dozen slices of French toast with strawberries, and a full pitcher of orange juice. We eat together and then, like a giddy schoolgirl, she puts a hand over mine and pulls me into her bedroom where Margarita's poufy white *Quinceañera* dress is spread out across her bed.

"For dance," she says.

My face crumples.

"Too puffy," I say with worry, making exaggerated gestures with my hands. I don't want people to laugh at Margarita. Why did these dresses have to be so big? Is it a rule?

*Mamá* grins and pulls out a large pair of silver scissors from behind her back.

"*A trabajar!*" she sings. To work!

I gasp and clap my hands.

Together, we take apart Margarita's dress and change it from a traditional poufy mess, to a form fitting modern dress. It's beautiful. I lay on *Mamá's* bed with my cheek against my knuckles, watching as she sews a lovely caramel-colored sash onto the new dress. She adds sequins on the trim in the same color as the sash. Later, I help her dye Margarita's shoes to match.

We stand over the entire masterpiece, *Mamá's* grin as wide as can be. She puts her arm around me and pulls me into her side.

"*Muy bien,*" she says.

She's right. It's very good.

I slash the last mark on the calendar.

November 10.

Margarita is coming home. She's really coming home. I squeak and dance around our bedroom while I put fresh linens on her bed. My special *caldo*, with extra vegetables to make her stronger, boils strong on the stove because she says she has to try it for herself. The smell of my spiced pumpkin *empanadas* fills the house. They are perfect for the season.

*Señor* Guzman left a gift for my sister. Spread out on the sofa in the living room are beautiful silk scarves for her head. They are beige, white, purple, and a pretty sea blue. She's going to love them.

Too anxious to wait any longer, I check out the window for *Papi's* truck for the millionth time. A Monarch butterfly sits in our tree out front. It's late in the year for it to be here. Most of them have migrated to Mexico by now. Did it escape a jar or get lost along its way? Or maybe it just likes Texas too much to leave. I am much like that butterfly. But I found my way home.

And Margarita is finding her way home, too.

There is no place better, we've both learned.

A week or so later, Margarita twirls in front of our new bedroom mirror. I straighten out her dress from the back, and gasp.

"This is how it's going to be on your wedding day," I say.

"My wedding day? Let me get through this dance first." She giggles and shows me her hands, sweaty from nerves.

We hear our doorbell, and she squeals.

"Stay calm!" I put my hands on her arms and meet her eyes with mine. "You look amazing. Like a real princess. And you're going to have a wonderful time."

She pulls me in for a hug. "All because of you."

"Go," I whisper.

She leaves our room, and I walk close behind her. She's so weak in the knees excited that I need to catch her if she falls. When we get to the living room, John is dressed in Khaki pants, a white dress shirt, and a black tie. Margarita's face lights up like the stars in the sky.

She goes to him and stops, looking back at our parents. *Mamá* gives a nod and a smile, and Margarita gives John a hug. *Papí* grumbles under his breath.

John tries to pin a corsage on Margarita's dress, but he pricks his finger, and *Papí* has to help him. Margarita laughs.

"Don't get blood on my dress," she warns.

Margarita and John pose for pictures in front of our fireplace. *Papí* has his older camera, and John's mother has a really updated digital one, but my parents actually look proud, and Margarita's smile could make the sun rise. I kiss my red bracelet, *las sangre de Cristo*, snug on my wrist.

In this moment, *este momento*, I look around the room tonight and feel truly blessed. *Mamá* and *Papí* are holding hands like the old days, and my sister, my Margarita, now in remission, is going to her dance to get her crown.



## Works Cited

Cisneros, Sandra. *The House on Mango Street*. New York: Vintage Books, 2009. Print.

Moore, Dinty W. "What Makes Nonfiction Creative." *The Truth of the Matter: Art and Craft in Creative Nonfiction*. New York: Pearson/Longman, 2007. 10. Print.

Shawver, Brian. *The Language of Fiction: a writer's stylebook*. New England: University Press of New England, 2013. Print.

Aristotle. *The Poetics of Aristotle*. Create Space Independent Publishing, 2012. Print.

Cannon, Elizabeth M. "Following the Traces of Female Desire in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*." *African American Review* (1997): 235.

Hempel, Amy. *The Collected Stories of Amy Hempel*. New York, London, Toronto, Sydney: Scribner, 2007. Print.

Jones, Carolyn M. "Traces and Cracks: Identity and Narrative in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*." *African American Review* (1997): 481.

Morrison, Toni. *Jazz*. New York: Random House, 1992. Print.

Sherman, Suzan. "Amy Hempel." *Bomb* (1997): 67.

## **Curriculum Vita**

Donna Lynn Muñoz is a native El Pasoan. She graduated from the University of Texas at El Paso with a degree in Print-Media where she was in the university's symphony orchestra and a member of the cheer team. She is married with five children and teaches Developmental English at El Paso Community College and the University of Texas at El Paso. She is a published romance author, but her true passion is in writing children's books. She runs the non-profit, Reading Brave which works to get children's books into hospitals. She has self-published Harley Farley's First Halloween: A Zombie Book with her three younger sons and spends much of her time giving elementary school presentations and hosting Harley Farley book parties at hospitals at Halloween time.