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My Mother's Daughter

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MY MOTHER'S DAUGHTER

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Monica Vanessa Martinez

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Dedication

To my mother, Irma Martinez Montelongo. I will forever be my mother's daughter, and that is a good thing. To Alejandro Montelongo, my ever present, and more importantly, ever supportive dad. To my darling sister, Marissa Montelongo. And finally, to la familia: your love and support are the best gifts I have ever been given because they gave me the courage to put my words out into the world.

MY MOTHER'S DAUGHTER

by

MONICA VANESSA MARTINEZ, BA

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

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The Importance of Using First-Person Point of View to End the Silence of Chicana Voices in *My Mother's Daughter*

What amazed me was: I wrote about a girl who plays chess and her mother is both her worst adversary and her best ally. I didn't play chess, so I figured that counted for fiction, but I made her Chinese-American, which made me a little uncomfortable. By the end of this story I was practically crying. Because I realized that -- although it was fiction and none of that had ever happened to me in that story -- it was the closest thing to describing my life.

Amy Tan

An Interview with the Academy of Achievement

Amy Tan wrote fiction with the intention of mirroring her culture. While writing her story made her feel “a little uncomfortable,” Tan wrote a collection of linked stories that mirrors her background by using multiple narrators to highlight the conflicts between mothers and daughters. Her collection also mirrors my collection in that I sought a way to focus on the lives of minority women—in my case Chicana women—and the conflicts between mothers and daughters. Using first-person narrative to show the diverse voices of Chicanas seemed most appropriate to illustrate the conflicts they face trying to live within family-centric culture.

Moreover, I wanted to show the Chicano culture from the inside and how the Catholic religion and the family dictate how Chicanas must live. First-person narrative seemed like a fitting way to show the Chicano culture while also challenging it by giving a voice to the Chicanas who are typically silenced in this male-dominated world. In doing this, perhaps, I would also find my own voice in the male dominated world of literature.

While first-person narrative is not the only way to produce the inner thoughts of a character, it was the way best suited to show the conflicts between the characters in their own unique voices. This is important because third-person narration, even when intimate, can cause a distance between the character and the reader. There is a need to see the internal conflicts between what a character thinks and how they act and these conflicts need to be heard from the character's own voice in order to grasp the full depth of the disconnect between thoughts and actions.

As Amy Tan says in an interview:

Of the feelings that I had, of these things that my mother had taught me that were inexplicable or had no name. This invisible force that she taught me, this rebellion that I had. And then feeling that I had lost some power, lost her approval and then lost what had made me special. It was a magic turning point for me. I realized that was the reason for writing fiction. ("Amy Tan Interview," 5)

The conflict between what Tan's mother expected of her and what she wanted to do herself, shares with her readers the lessons that her mother tried to instill in her and possibly even how she failed at those lessons. But this external dispute between mother and daughter is really just a surface conflict; the deeper conflict is how the external conflicts between mothers and daughters force them to endure their own internal conflicts.

For example, in this thesis the character Carolina in "A Family First" wants to divorce her husband, but her mother visits her in an attempt to stop her. Her mother, Lucia, brings the couple together, inviting the husband into the Carolina's home after Carolina has kicked him out

him out. However, the mother-daughter issue is just a precursor to the real conflict of the story. Will Carolina go against her religion, tradition and mother by divorcing her husband?

Using the first-person narrative for this particular story allows the reader to hear Carolina in her own voice: “[Mamá] stepped out of the home and I was really alone. I stared down at the painting my mother had lovingly, if not misguidedly, hung. I picked it up, took it back in the living room and placed it on the wall again.” Hearing Carolina’s own words, the reader can understand that she is sad about her divorce and about being alone. By rehangng the painting her mother hung without permission, Carolina shows the reader that she understands her mother’s personal choice of abiding by religious standards. Even if she doesn’t agree to stay married, Carolina shows respect for her mother’s position. If the reader witnessed Carolina’s actions from a third-person perspective, without hearing Carolina’s own words, hanging the picture could be interpreted as blind obedience rather than a loving show of respect despite the mother and daughter’s different views.

As with the Chinese mothers depicted in Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club*, Chicana mothers play an important part in the lives of their daughters. For this reason, Tan’s stories became a reference for some of the techniques used in my thesis to dramatize the struggles between Chicana mothers and daughters.

In “Identity-In-Difference: Re-Generating Debate about Intergenerational Relationships in Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club*,” Bella Adams discusses the effects of the daughter’s rebelling against her mother in *The Joy Luck Club*: “[T]he narrators suggest, albeit negatively, the benefits of intergeneration identification as a way of averting the ‘irritat[ion]... upset [and] silence’ engendered particularly when the daughters defy maternal expectations with their ‘new thoughts willful thoughts or rather thoughts filled with lots of won’ts’” (82). If the narrator were to defy

cultural traditions, she'd have to narrate this experience directly to readers. Readers understand Carolina's choices because we have specifically heard, in Carolina's own words, why she is determined to divorce her husband. The readers can not only understand the protagonists' external struggles but witness the internal struggles in their own words.

Reading about Amy Tan's journey from writing something fictional about mothers and daughters, I wondered how a Chicana from El Paso, Texas could fit in with the model of literature a public education had given me. After all, in most of the literature I studied, the people were British or American white men. Even if they were women, they were not like me, a Chicana.

The first story that helped me see the possibilities of showing Chicana women in my own writing was "The Story of an Hour" by Kate Chopin. Chopin tells the story of a woman in her mind. We, as readers, learn that her inner thoughts are vastly different from what she portrays on the outside. While she is outwardly the ideal wife, inwardly she revels in the freedom of becoming, what she thinks at the time, a widow. This divergence between what's felt and what's done intrigued me.

Entering this woman's inner world and witnessing the conflict between the woman she presents herself as and the woman she really is helped me to learn what I wanted to do as a writer. Readers would need to be brought into the daily lives of Chicana women so they could see how Chicanas face this internal battle on a daily basis. It was the culture of the time that kept Chopin's protagonist, Mrs. Mallard, from outwardly expressing her relief at being free from her husband. The machismo culture of Chicanos often keeps women silent as well.

In my short story "Mikimotos," the main character, Vallia, realizes that her husband is having an affair and that the other woman has Vallia's missing pearl necklace. At first, Vallia

stays in the marriage, accepting her husband's bribe of a new set of pearls. Chicano culture is rooted in the Catholic faith, which frowns upon divorce. By using the first-person perspective, the writer can help the reader witness the conflict Vallia feels. "Staring at the reflection of the strand of pearls around my neck doesn't make me smile. At sixteen inches of length, the jeweler called the necklace a pearl choker. I slide a finger under the necklace and pull it gently away from my neck. It isn't all that tight but I assume nooses don't feel tight at first." With the necklace being called a noose, the reader understands that Vallia doesn't want to be in her relationship.

The conflict between what Vallia feels and does is much like the internal conflict Mrs. Mallard feels in "The Story of an Hour." Inwardly, both protagonists are their own person. Mrs. Mallard is willing to grasp onto the feeling of happiness that would be denied to her if she strictly followed the template set in front of her by their culture. Chopin captured the inner workings of her protagonist's mind wonderfully by using an omniscient narrator:

When she abandoned herself a little whispered word escaped her slightly parted lips. She said it over and over under her breath: "free, free, free!" The vacant stare and the look of terror that had followed it went from her eyes. They stayed keen and bright. Her pulses beat fast, and the coursing blood warmed and relaxed every inch of her body. (125)

Readers of this section hear what no one else can, witnessing the quickening of the protagonist's pulse.

By choosing the first-person narrator in "Mikimotos," not only is the reader able to hear the inner thoughts of the characters, something Chopin does with a third-person omniscient narrator, but the reader has a chance to hear in Vallia's own words how she feels about her

situation. Vallia's choice of the word *noose* to describe a gift from her husband reflects how she feels trapped.

The first-person narrator continues to give the reader insight into Vallia's internal conflicts. She prepares to leave her husband until she hears about the death of her father. Again, we hear in her words her reason for staying. Her Chicana culture eventually colors her choice. Vallia shows the reverence for the mother in the Chicana culture when she says, "Mamá is so happy to have him as a son-in-law. How can I end that happiness?" In the clash of honoring a mother and trying to live her own life, Vallia exemplifies the main conflict and theme of the collection of stories: Chicana women face internal struggles in trying to live within cultural standards and trying to become their own women and to find their own voices.

Again, an intimate third-person narrator could give a similar view of Vallia's situation and internal struggles. Yet, with the first-person narration, Vallia's voice is heard, and this is important because in "Mikimotos," Vallia never speaks to her family about what is going on. Traditionally, Chicano culture would dictate that the inner workings of a marriage are private. This would typically impose a silence upon Vallia. She doesn't admit to her family that her husband has an affair or that he hits her. Her silence and the cultural standard are both challenged by having a first-person narration. Readers can hear a voice that has been silenced, and that is an effect third-person narration can't give readers.

Looking at narration and voice from the perspective of literary theory, one can understand why this is a standard literary technique. Every story has a narrator. According to Mieke Bal, in the book *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, "As soon as there is language, there is a speaker who utters it; as soon as those linguistic utterances constitute a narrative text, there is a narrator, a narrating subject" (22). So how do writers take something

prevalent in every story and change it, make it their own? Again, it is Bal who provides an explanation: “The identity of the narrator, the degree to which and the manner in which that identity is indicated in the text, and the choices that are implied lend the text its specific character” (19). As a writer who finds it important to show the Chicana culture in literature, I decided to make the narrator a Chicana. If Bal’s theory holds true, choosing a first-person narrator who is a Chicana colors the character of this story and the entire collection.

This decision to use first-person narration presented a bit of a problem. I wanted the narrators to be first-person and Chicana, but I had already written some of the stories from the third-person perspective. If I left the stories that way, could I still provide a strong enough character voice within the text to highlight the internal struggle each woman faced and color the text giving it a specific Chicana character? To make this decision I turned to contemporary literature.

Louise Erdrich, a contemporary writer who has also dealt with female protagonists and their relationship to their culture and who uses both third and first-person narration, uses a third-person narrator in her collection of stories *Love Medicine* with the telling of the story “Lulu’s Boys.” Erdrich uses a third-person narrator to describe the actions of the character Lulu Lamartine, saying, “Lulu left him sitting on the couch and went back into the sacred domain of her femininity. That was the bedroom with the locking door that she left open just a crack” (120). The readers know that Lulu’s door has the ability to lock because the narrator tells them this fact. She willingly leaves her bedroom door open and unlocked with a man in another room of the house. She could have locked the door but chose not to and by extension may be inviting the man on the couch to enter the “sacred domain of her femininity.”

This narrator does provide the reader with information and even, one could argue, insight into Lulu's intentions. If she left the door open, perhaps she wanted or even welcomed someone to come into her bedroom. However, the third-person narrator keeps the readers at a distance in some respects. The reader will never know why she leaves the door open or how she feels when she does that. Because this section is not in her own words there is a distance between Lulu's thoughts and the readers.

At other times in *Love Medicine*, Erdrich does use a first-person narrator. She even manages to use Lulu again, not as a character in the third-person narration but as a first-person narrator in the story "The Good Tears." Lulu says:

And so when they tell you that I was heartless, a shameless man-chaser, don't ever forget this: I loved what I saw. And yes, it is true that I've done all the things they say. That's not what gets them. What aggravates them is I've never shed one solitary tear. I'm not sorry. That's unnatural. As we all know, a woman is supposed to cry. (277)

By using Lulu's own words, Erdrich provides her readers with an insight into the protagonist's inner conflict. Lulu faces a battle between what her Native American culture thinks she should be and what she actually is. She decides, as is evident by the quote, to be who she wants to be and she makes no apologies for this.

Erdrich uses both types of narration effectively, but I was attempting to tell stories more in the way Erdrich conveys her story in "The Good Tears." By letting the reader hear Lulu's voice, the narrator knows the type of person she is and we can sympathize with her better. Lulu's narration shows her conflict: the struggle between being the woman Native American culture thinks she should be and the woman she wants to be. In the first story, "Lulu's Boys,"

that conflict isn't as evident because the third-person narration doesn't show that Lulu is conflicted. That fact eventually inspired a change in my thesis.

I originally wrote the short story, "A Visit With My Mother," in third-person narrative style: "'Mama. Sorry, I was asleep.' Molly tells her mother as she stands in her kitchen in underwear, a sports bra and a pair of fuzzy slippers. The microwave beeps and she removes a bowl of instant oatmeal." In this version, the reader cannot tell that Molly is conflicted about lying to her mother. I wanted the readers of the story to witness the internal workings of the minds of the lead women. The readers would need to know what Molly feels. They would need to know how the external conflict between mother and daughter caused the internal conflict of having to lie to her mother.

In the finished thesis I use first person for this section, "'Mamá. Sorry, I was asleep,' I tell my mother as I stand in my kitchen in underwear, a sports bra and a pair of fuzzy slippers. It is a lie, but what could I say? That I was trying to sleep but her constant calls didn't let me so I willingly chose to avoid her?" It is a seemingly subtle difference because an intimate third-person narrator could tell the readers Molly avoids her mother, but the first-person narration gives Molly's own voice and colors the words with a sense of Molly's discomfort with hiding things from her mother.

The difference in the two is similar to the difference between the examples from Erdrich. Molly does the same thing but hearing in her own words why she chooses to do what she does heightens the reader's view and understanding of the internal conflict, an extension of the external conflict the protagonists face. While it is possible to showcase internal thoughts and conflict through third person, I found it essential to use first-person narration as a means of revealing the characters' voices as well as their internal thoughts. The voice is important

because most times in a male dominated culture, like the Chicano culture, woman's voices are silenced.

Even as a Chicana, I grew up reading little to no writing from Chicana women. It wasn't until college that I read a story by a Chicana: Sandra Cisneros' "The House on Mango Street." Was this woman really letting a young Chicana guide her readers? It was the first time I realized that a writer could use a Chicana voice and share Chicana stories.

How and why could I go through most of my education without hearing from a writer from in the Chicano culture? The only answer is the tradition of silencing Chicanos, specifically Chicanas. To draw further attention to the silenced voice of Chicanas, and perhaps begin a change to that silencing, I wanted to show readers why and how Chicanas are silenced *in their own voice*. Someone not familiar with Chicano culture may not know that women typically take a back seat to men. For example, Chicanas are often silenced in education.

One of the minor themes of the collection is should Chicana women go to college? Is it worth it to send a Chicana to college, and when faced with economic hardship should the men be educated first? My thesis attempts to address this concern with the character Iris.

In the time period when Iris's brother Victor would be going to college in 1964, only 7.8% of Hispanic males over the age of 25 had a college degree (United States Census Bureau, 151). For women it was 4.3%. Iris's education fell by the wayside because her chances of marriage were higher than her chances of attaining a college degree. "Mamá just told the familia that all her 'hijas,' her girls, had gone to college. I never went to college because Mamá didn't let me. Mamá didn't consider me one of her girls then," Iris thinks as she stands in the kitchen trying not to scream. She marries and never attends college because her family doesn't hear her voice or value her wishes. Yet, the reader hears her voice directly in first-person narration, and

the conflict of whether or not to send Chicanas to college hits a personal note when Iris tells us in her own voice an account of the pain it causes her years later.

However, ten years after Iris graduates from high school, her younger sister goes to college and in 1996 when Iris's daughter Molly is preparing to go to college her chances of becoming a Hispanic woman with a college degree has doubled since her mother's time. In 1995, 8.4% of Hispanic women over the age of 25 had college degrees (United States Census Bureau, 151). The external conflict of Chicana education becomes a personal conflict between Iris and her mother. First-person narration, like when Iris narrates, gives us a rare chance to hear a voice that the culture and her mother silence.

When Helena Maria Viramontes uses first-person narration in her short story "The Moths," it gives a specific perspective that enables the reader to understand the narrator's inner thoughts which, because of her age, gender and rank in the family, are thought to be of no importance. Hearing her thoughts in turn escalates the tension between what the character does externally and what she feels internally, much the way Iris's narration did.

Viramontes' narrator says her father yells at her for not going to catechism and her sisters promise to "kick the holy shit out of" her if she doesn't go. Eventually, the narrator dresses for church but heads to her grandmother's (Viramontes 1296). Setting up the conflict of the story, the first-person narrator describes the roles her family expects of her and what she really wants to do, which is avoid the cold and empty feeling of the Catholic Church and faith.

This narrative style provides an intimacy between the reader and protagonist. By hearing the central character's inner thoughts, the audience can understand and experience the struggles this Chicana narrator faces. Viramontes is not the first writer to use a first-person

narrator to show the conflict between what the protagonists are supposed to do and what they want to do.

Up to this point the focus is on how the first-person narrator has given the reader a unique access to the voice, to the characters and how it brings focus to the internal struggles Chicanas deal with. Amy Tan manages to use first person to show internal struggle in *The Joy Luck Club* . To some extent, Louise Erdrich does show internal struggle with first-person narration in *Love Medicine*. I wanted to take this technique and create another type of conflict, a disconnect between the narrators in which the reader can understand the internal struggle of the narrators but each narrator can't understand what their counterpart feels.

First-person narration is used in a unique manner when, on several occasions in the thesis, different narrators' tales overlap. By having two different narrators tell their side of the story, the goal of giving voices to the traditionally silenced is reached. This gives two narrators the chance to tell their story, in their words within one short story. In the story "A Visit with My Mother," readers can experience how two very different narrators witness a visit to a nursing home.

Iris details entering her mother's room at the nursing home, "Walking in to my mother's room at the nursing home always makes me want to cry. When she was younger, Amalia, Molly's namesake, always smelled of Channel. Now... the whole place smells. Not bad, not good, it is like a mix of medical gloves and TV dinners." By using Iris's voice, it shows that she misses who her mother used to be and views her relationship with her own mother through the lens of naming her daughter after her mother, indicating Iris's relationship with her mother has more to do with her relationship to her daughter.

Her daughter, Molly, walking into the same room says, "Walking into my grandmother's

room is hard. Nana and I used to take the bus downtown and we would walk everywhere. Nana would tell me we were going to ‘el town.’ Now, Nana can't even get out of bed, can't even speak. Seeing her in the bed and knowing that even if she wanted to she couldn't get up and give me a hug breaks my heart.” It is obvious that Molly misses her relationship with her grandmother and doesn't seem to note Iris's pain.

While both women ache from witnessing the deterioration of their family member, they both experience the same event in different ways. Iris remembers her mother as an individual. She remembers the way her mother used to smell. Molly remembers her grandmother as part of her. When faced with the same situation, seeing the same person, the linked narrators detail the relationship that these women have not only with the woman in the nursing home bed but with each other. Molly is more emotional, while Iris is more logical. Iris obviously has issues with her mother, given the fact that her memory does not include the two of them together in a shared experience the way Molly's memory does. So while Molly is unaware of the struggle her mother feels with her grandmother, the readers can understand how both Molly and Iris feel even if they cannot understand each other.

It is rare to find a single story with multiple first-person narrators. The closest match would be Amy Tan's novel *The Joy Luck Club*. While each story only has one narrator, Tan is able to show the same event through two different narrators by using two different stories showing the same event. The reader first hears Lena St. Clair's version of her mother's visit to her home: “She is visiting my husband and me in the house we just bought in Woodside. And I wonder what she will see” (Tan, 150). The narrator lets the reader know that she really does care about her mother and her mother's opinion. However, Lena's mother doesn't know how her daughter feels.

Whereas Lena has admitted to the audience that she wants to know what her mother thinks, Ying-Ying doesn't think her daughter absorbs what she has to say: "This room had ceilings that slope downward... I should remind my daughter not to put babies in this room. But I know she will not listen" (Tan, 242). Amy Tan manages to give her readers the same event from two different perspectives. By showing the two perspectives, Tan manages to give a voice to characters that would have been silenced. If the reader could only hear Lena's tale, the mother would have been voiceless, and Lena would have been silenced if the mother were the only narrator in *The Joy Luck Club*.

Both narrators express their feelings in their own words and show the conflict they deal with internally. Lena wants to know what her mother thinks but is afraid of what that will mean. She never asks for her mother's opinion because of that fear. Ying-Ying's internal conflict is also fear, the fear that her daughter will not listen to her. By using first-person narration in her novel, Tan gives the readers the unique experience of knowing what both people think and how they express that in their own voice.

Stephen Souris discusses the use of different voice within *The Joy Luck Club* in his article "'Only Two Kinds Of Daughters': Inter-Monologue Dialogicity In *The Joy Luck Club*":

Tan's "novel" offers a heteroglot collection of very different, fully valid voices each presented from its own perspective, with relativistic and centrifugal implications. Moreover, its unique theme—mothers from China and their American-born daughters struggling to understand each other—allows for a rich array of dialogized perspectives within single utterances: the Chinese, the American, and the Chinese-American, all three of which can be discerned, to varying degrees, in the monologues. (Souris 100)

The “rich array” Souris mentions is a goal I set for my stories. If I could show a variety of different women, each telling their own stories, in their own unique ways, as Tan does, I could present a realistic view of Chicano family and culture, and the struggles Chicanas face within those confines.

Witnessing two different views of the same event, readers face conflicts of their own. They know what each of the women feel and see a conflict between the mother and daughter even though both women care deeply about each other’s opinions. Souris continues: “The reader is poignantly aware of the potential for greater communication and understanding, but only in the reader’s mind is the dialogicity between positions uncovered and experienced. The mothers and daughters are speaking into a void, not to each other” (Souris 113). Lena and Ying-Ying mirror Molly and Iris. Two first-person narrators speaking in their own voices create an understanding of the internal struggle each feels about the relationship with the other.

As Souris mentions, the reader can even see the potential for a resolution, even if the characters don’t. If the narrative were written in third-person the reader would not attain this kind of perspective into the mother/daughter relationship. The two first-person narrators create dramatic irony within the story. The readers are aware of information that the characters are not. In Tan, the readers know that Lena wants to hear what her mother thinks of the new house, even though Ying-Ying is sure her daughter wouldn’t want to know what she sees. And in “A Visit With My Mother,” the readers know that Iris misses her mother, even if Iris’s daughter can’t tell what Iris feels toward her mother.

The importance of selecting a type of narrator is not lost on a writer. One’s narrator is the lens through which your reader sees the action. N.J. Lowe describes the writer’s repackaging of the story that is then filtered to the reader:

As usually defined, the narrative repackaging of story has two main effects. First it reorganizes story time ... Second, it imposes a more or less restricted point of view (by choosing and changing who observes the story, what they see, how much they know and what they choose to pass on to the narrator – who will then, of course, filter the account of events through a second level of editorial screening). (19)

What kinds of filter do these narrators use for their stories? They would use the conflicts among themselves, the everyday conflicts between mothers and daughters, to bring forward the internal struggles they face. Showing the conflict between mothers and daughters in my thesis carries over to the first-person perspective and uses each character's unique voice to detail her own internal conflicts. It is important for the reader to witness the internal conflict between what a character says and thinks. The conflict must be heard from the character's own voice to avoid the distance that is sometimes created by a third-person narrator.

The Chicana voice becomes the unique filter through which the reader witnesses the events of the stories. Amy Tan had never read stories that came close to describing her life, and neither had I. That is why *My Mother's Daughter* strives to reverse the silence typically imposed on Chicana women by their culture. The women in my thesis, though silenced at times by the confines of their religion, culture, or educational background, use their own unique voice to tell their own distinctive tales, a technique that Amy Tan says is, "the closest thing to describing my life."

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Part I

Iris and Molly

The Hierarchy of Tamale Making

New Year's Eve 1990

Amalia "Molly" Dominguez

Nana stands in her kitchen with the olive-green refrigerator. She peaks inside the olla, and inhales the steam that rushes out to greet her. As I stand at the sink washing hojas, I see the trembling of the hand holding the lid and wonder what is wrong.

"Listos," she says.

It is a order, not a comment. Nana's oldest daughter, my mom, Iris, gets up from the dining room table and walks into the kitchen. At Nana's house the small dining room is separated from the kitchen by a counter that if I stand on tip toes I can peek over but I don't move from my leaf-washing duty.

The mother and daughter team look funny. Mom, the tallest of the family and the strongest of the women, lifts the olla from the burner. Nana, a whole head shorter than her daughter, directs traffic. "Allí. Ponlo allí." If it is between Mom's height and Nana's cooking skills, I hope I get the skills.

Her job done, Mom returns to the table and sits in Abuelo's chair, her temporary throne while the men of the family are at the annual Sun Bowl game. She resumes the process of embarrando hojas with masa.

"Oye, Ma. When can I move up to masa?" my Tia Vallia jokes. She and her sister laugh. Nana does not. When it comes to tamales, Nana is all business. She says that it is nearly impossible to make tamales on your own. It is a family event.

"Women, for generations, have gathered together in the kitchen of the oldest woman to

feed the whole family. There is an order to tamale making. To upset the order is to ruin the batch." Years of making them and years of teaching her daughters the right way to do their jobs, has perfected Nana's tamales.

"Tienes la mano pesado, Vallia. Iris pone la masa bien. Tu no," Nana says as she seasons the next batch of carne. She looks over her shoulder at me and winks.

I smile at her. "Y yo, Nana?" I speak from my perch at the kitchen sink. From where I stand washing husks I can't see my mother or my Tia but I hear them laugh.

"Oye, esta chavala." Tia Vallia giggles.

My mom echoes her sister's laughter. "It took me until I was at least sixteen to be taken off wash duty."

Nana looks over the counter into the dining room. At first, her face is blank as stone, but then she raises one eyebrow at her daughters. The dining room goes quiet. Nana nods her head. The only thing I hear from the two women in the dining room is the busy work of their hands, spoons scrape bowls and masa spread on husks, no more laughter and no more small talk.

Nana walks over to the sink where I stand on a stepstool. I've never left my job. I reach into the sink to pull out my next corn husk and Nana's veiny hands plunge in after mine. Her hand is no longer shaking like it was when she lifted the lid off the olla. She finds my hand in the water and gives it a gentle squeeze.

"Tu, hija. Tu vas a quedarte aquí conmigo."

She removes a husk and sets it on a towel to dry. She picks up a group of dried husks and carries them into the dining room. Mom takes the husks I cleaned and spreads the masa Nana and I prepped at eight a.m., before anyone arrived. Nana had requested I spend the night so she could spend time with me but really, she was teaching me how to make her tamales.

After Mom spreads the masa, Tia Vallia then takes the husk from her sister and adds the carne-- Just this morning I learned the secret ingredient that Nana adds to make the chile sauce just right. She also told me that when her tamale making days were over, it was I who gets to keep her special ollas. The ones her mother brought with her from Mexico.

Finally, Tia Vallia folds up the tamales and places them in an olla. Nana has taken a tamale from the olla that has finished cooking. She unwraps it and waves me over. She takes a chunk off and blows on it. She pops it in my mouth and whispers, "little do they know that without your leaves we wouldn't have any tamales at all."

A Visit With My Mother

May 10, 2003

Amalia "Molly" Dominguez

I have a special ring tone for my mother. Carlos Santana's "Europa" fills the bedroom of my Albuquerque apartment. The song plays for the third time this morning. Lifting my head from the pillow, I eye the phone as if it had just bit me. My look softens when my eyes wander to the black and white picture on my night stand.

"Make it stop," says a voice from the other side of the bed.

"How?" I say as I use my pillow to cover my head.

Drew, my fiancé, pulls the pillow up, "I know what will make it stop."

Hopeful, I ask, "What?"

"Answer it." He lets the pillow fall down on my face.

Iris Dominguez

"Voicemail. For the third time this morning," I say as I set my cell phone and today's edition of the El Paso Times down on the breakfast table. Before returning to my work in the kitchen, I tighten the knot on my bathrobe's belt.

"You'll see her in a few hours," says Javier. "Why do you need to talk to her now?" Javier sits at the head of the table stirring his coffee, not noticing the look I am giving his comment.

"She was supposed to call me when they were leaving Albuquerque."

The swish swish of my slippers announce my return from the kitchen. Molly gave me the

slippers for Christmas two years ago, along with the matching robe. I wear the robe every day, despite the heat of the El Paso summers.

In one hand I carry a plate with eggs, bacon, hash browns and a tortilla with the edges blackened a little bit. The other hand carries a bowl of instant oatmeal.

"If she hasn't called, then they haven't left yet." Javier lifts his fork, digging into his eggs. I playfully slap his hand.

"What?" he asks.

I place my hands together, a reminder to say Grace.

Javier notices the oatmeal, "Is that all you're eating?"

Before I can answer, my phone plays "Smooth" by Carlos Santana.

"About time," I say as I get up from the table. Javier moves to get his fork again. I turn and look at my husband, "Don't you dare touch those eggs." He rests his hands in his lap.

Amalia "Molly" Dominguez

"Mamá. Sorry, I was asleep," I tell my mother as I stand in my kitchen in underwear, a sports bra and a pair of fuzzy slippers. It is a lie, but what could I say? That I was trying to sleep but her constant calls didn't let me so I willingly chose to avoid her? The microwave beeps and I remove a bowl of instant oatmeal.

"I thought you two were going to leave early. I was worried when I didn't get a call or text saying you'd already hit the road."

I look at the clock on the microwave. "It's seven a.m."

"So?" she asks.

"So, I worked a twelve hour shift at the hospital last night. I think I should be able to

sleep in on a Saturday."

Moving towards my refrigerator, I see a picture of myself with my mother and father at my graduation from nursing school. I am facing the camera with a big smile on my face as my dad hugs me close to him. Mom stands a little ways away and not looking at the camera. She is looking straight at me dabbing her eyes with a Kleenex, smiling with pride.

How can I tell the tear-dabbing woman that I don't want to see her?

Iris Dominguez

Burying my head in my fridge, I say to my daughter, "Just don't be late, Molly."

"Late? Ma, you do realize visiting hours last until seven p.m. I have twelve hours to get there. I could leave at two in the afternoon and still get there with plenty of time."

"Are you packed?" I ask as I shut the door to the fridge. I look at a coloring page, yellowed by time and the sun. It is a bear wearing a sweater with a heart on it. Molly colored it when she was eight. Written above the heart is an "I" and "Mommy" is written below it. I touch the old, delicate paper.

"We're staying in El Paso for one night."

I remove my hand from the drawing and place it on my hip. "Are you packed?"

"Ma, I have to let you go. Drew's out of the bathroom and we are leaving now."

"Que dios te bendiga," I say and hang up.

Amalia "Molly" Dominguez

Carrying my bowl of oatmeal, I sit down on my bed again. Drew rolls over on his side, stares at me and says, "I wasn't in the bathroom."

"Shut up."

"You know she started a timer. If we don't pull up in her driveway in exactly four hours she's calling a search and rescue."

I hit him with my pillow. "Shut up, I said."

Drew stands up and stretches, "Guess I'd better jump in the shower."

"No rush," I say as I begin to eat my breakfast.

He peers into my bowl, "Is that all you're eating?"

I stir up the contents of my bowl. "If I were you, I'd be more worried about what I was going to make myself for breakfast."

Iris Dominguez

"Your daughter just lied to me," I inform Javier as I return to the dining room.

He chuckles, "Can I eat my eggs now?"

"Javier!"

"What?" He shrugs and picks up his fork again. "I didn't lie to you."

Amalia "Molly" Dominguez

"It isn't easy being between two women. I love Mom. I love Nana. I do not love the three of us in a room together," I try to explain. Upon leaving Albuquerque, Drew asked why I was so against going to visit my family for Mother's Day. We are in the car, nearing the exit to my childhood home, and I still can't come up with a good explanation.

Drew's attempt at comfort? "It'll be ok," he says, not even looking up from his Sports Illustrated to say it. I feel that the least he could do is put down the magazine.

In an attempt to bring the magazine down and my worries to the forefront, I continue. "I just don't understand my mother's need to have me drive her to my grandma's. She knows how to drive. Besides, for all the other holidays we go at different times. Christmas, I go right after we open presents and before we sit down to breakfast. She usually goes after lunch and before we start making the rounds of the rest of the family. There is only one time a year my mother and I see my grandma together and there is a reason for that."

"It's Mother's Day?" Drew mumbles as he turns the page. His lack of attention is enough to cause my own inattention. I miss my exit.

"I mean there's a reason we don't go together other times in the year."

Drew puts down his magazine. He puts his hand on my knee and says, "You missed the exit."

Iris Dominguez

"She'll be late. She's always late. I knew she was lying. They didn't leave when she hung up with me. She just did that to get me off the phone," I tell my husband. His eyes don't move from the sports page. By now, we are sitting in the living room.

Javier sits in his recliner, reading glasses hanging on the tip of his nose. I can't sit. I pace. I walk from the living room window to the spot right in front of his recliner. I cross the room this way until I stop in front of him and say, "I raised her to tell the truth. To be on time. She will always be late. It's to spite me."

Without lowering the paper Javier says, "She gets it from me."

"What? Spite?"

The paper comes down, the prescription reading glasses come off and he says,

"Tardiness."

"Just because it's one of your qualities I'm supposed to forgive it?"

Javier always takes her side. She's his baby. She can do no wrong. I know this and I think this is Molly's way of saying she's nothing like me. She has my eyes, nose, and wide Latin hips. She even has my laugh but heaven forbid she have my punctuality.

"Iris, sit on the couch, get out your crossword puzzle and wait. It's not like you have to be at your mother's at a certain time," he orders. I listen. What else can I do? If Molly had been there she would have called me anti-feminist for taking orders from a man. I laugh at the thought of what Molly would do if Drew spoke to her that way. She'd probably call off the wedding.

Seeing his wife sitting and smiling, Javier picks up the sports again, but before he can start reading the highlights of last night's game, I start again. "No, we don't have to be there at a certain time but you know, as well as I do, that on holidays the home is busier than normal."

A voice emerges from behind the sports page, "Technically, it is not a holiday. Mother's Day is tomorrow."

"Today is Mexican Mother's Day."

Javier tries to make light of the situation, "your mother was born at Thomason. Graduated from Bowie. She's American, not Mexican."

I raise my eyebrow just a touch. He peers over his paper. Then, upon seeing the eyebrow, takes cover mumbling, "Speaking of Bowie, they beat Jeff in last night's baseball game." I get up and pace again.

Amalia "Molly" Dominguez

I pull the car in my parents' driveway and look up at my childhood home. "Oh my god."

"What?" Drew asks.

I point to the front window. "Don't you see the silhouette in the window? It's like a horror movie."

"You exaggerate."

I look at him. All I have to do is raise my eyebrow just a touch. Drew opens his car door and starts getting our overnight bags out of the backseat to avoid my gaze.

I get out of the car and follow Drew up the walk way. My dad opens the door and steps outside before we even make it all the way up the walk. He shakes hands with Drew and then looks at me, shaking his head.

"Amalia Inez Dominguez, why you gotta make your mamá mad?"

"How bad?"

The front door creaks open and there stands Mom, her purse in hand. She says nothing.

I look over to Drew and whisper, "Told you. Horror movie." I turn to my parents, "I missed my exit. You know these crazy El Paso drivers."

"Four years ago you were a crazy El Paso driver," my dad reminds me.

"Now, I'm a crazy New Mexico driver."

My mother clears her throat.

"Mamá!" I say as I move to hug her but Ma walks around everyone and toward the car. "Ma. Where are you going? Can't I go inside?"

"We're late." Mom says as she gets in the passenger side of my car. "I told you not to be late."

Everyone stares at Mom in astonishment. My dad pats me on the back, "Buena suerte."

In the car, I try to make small talk. "Work's going good. They hired another nurse and since I'm not the new kid anymore I might start getting better hours."

Iris nods. "I hope you find parking."

"At work?"

"At the home. It gets busy at lunch time. What time did you leave Albuquerque? If you'd have left when we hung up, like you said you were going to, you would have been here an hour ago."

"Traffic, construction. I didn't account for those things." I lie. I don't like to lie to her but what could I say. I couldn't tell my mother that I procrastinated. I couldn't tell her that we were late because I didn't want to make this trip in the first place.

Iris Dominguez

I watch Molly turn the wheel, reverse the car and straighten it as she perfectly parallel parks in a spot right in front of the entrance to Mountain Villa Nursing home. I hate driving. I would have never been able to get into that spot, especially not with the precision Molly used. I hadn't even tried to get my license until Molly was born. I figured I'd have to take my daughter to the park and to school somehow, so I had Javier teach me.

Molly, on the other hand, tried to drive the car when she was ten. Javier had left the car warming up one winter morning and Molly wandered outside in her pj's and mittens. Luckily, Javier had caught her before she could figure out how to release the parking brake. Even my fury could not dissuade Molly from wanting to drive. The day she turned sixteen, Molly arrived at the DMV before they even opened. She was the first in line.

Lost in thought, I don't realize Molly exits the car until Molly says, "Ma, you coming in?"

I nod to my daughter. Gathering my purse, I pull a small gift bag out of it. Molly notices and links her arms in mine.

"What'd you get Nana?"

"Socks."

"Socks?"

I see, despite Molly's effort to hide it, the disapproving eye roll.

Amalia "Molly" Dominguez

I take my time filling in the boxes on the sign-in sheet. As I do, I notice that every nurse says hi to my mother. One nurse, a woman about Mom's age, gives her a hug and wishes Mom a happy Mother's Day.

As Mom leads the way towards the room, I also notice that she says hi and good afternoon to the various residents in the hallway. Feeling rude for never having done this before, I start to smile and say hi.

Iris Dominguez

Walking into my mother's room at the nursing home always makes me want to cry. When she was younger, Amalia, Molly's namesake, always smelled of Channel. Now... the whole place smells. Not bad, not good, it is like a mix of medical gloves and TV dinners.

I make a visual scan of the room. It doesn't happen often but sometimes things go missing. Everything looks in place. Amalia's little TV is there with the Spanish telenovelas on. The picture frames of Molly's high school and college graduations stand on Amalia's night stand.

There is a new teddy bear on the nightstand, too. Sometimes the local girl scout troop delivers gifts to the residents at holidays.

Amalia "Molly" Dominguez

Walking into my grandmother's room is hard. Nana and I used to take the bus downtown and we would walk everywhere. Nana would tell me we were going to "el town." Now, Nana can't even get out of bed, can't even speak. Seeing her in the bed and knowing that even if she wanted to she couldn't get up and give me a hug breaks my heart.

Parkinson's disease breaks my heart. Nana's disease has broken her body. It has progressed so far, too far. She cannot speak. She cannot eat. The only signs of life are the darting of her eyes between her daughter and her granddaughter and the small tremor in her right hand.

Iris Dominguez

I can see the tears forming in my daughter's eyes. Molly loves her grandma and I know she's hurting. Molly shouldn't have to see her grandmother like this. "Maybe we shouldn't stay long," I suggest.

Molly squeezes her eyes shut tight trying to hide the evidence of her emotions. She turns to me. Her anger covers her face like a thin layer of frost. "Why?" she asks.

"Her hand is starting to shake. She's probably getting anxious."

Amalia "Molly" Dominguez

How could she know? How could Mom even pretend to know what her mother is

thinking? I guess the same way she pretended to do what was best for Nana when she wanted to stick her in here.

"She could just be happy to see us," I suggest and turn, resting my hands on my grandma's shoulder. The tremor in her hand slows.

When I was younger, I used to sit on Nana's feet to keep them from shaking. For the longest time I wondered if maybe that made my grandma sicker. As if the disease got angry and ravaged Nana's body sooner. Now, as a nurse, I know better but still feel guilty.

"Hi, Nana. I came to visit you."

Iris Dominguez

How does she do it? Every time she's here, it's like Mom is just a little bit better. I touch my mom's hand. "Feliz día de las Madres, Mamá."

The tremor starts again. It's almost violent. Mom bangs her hand on the bed rail. Molly grabs it in her two hands and she stops shaking. Why can't I do that? Why can't I be the calm for my own mother?

Mom didn't want to come to the home. When I explained the benefits of assisted living, all she would do was try to control the trembling of her right hand by placing the left over it and shrug. It wasn't until Molly's graduation from nursing school, it wasn't until Victor's stroke that my mother finally agreed to come here. Molly and I have never been the same since.

Amalia "Molly" Dominguez

"What about the gifts? I bet Nana would love to see what we got her." My voice breaks into my mom's thoughts.

Mom moves closer to the bed. She holds out the gift bag. "Mira, Mamá."

I watch as my mother carefully pulls out the tissue paper setting each one aside. Finally, she pulls out the socks and shows them to Nana. Of course there is no reaction but I can't help but think there is a little twitch of the mouth, maybe an attempted smile.

There is a knock at the door and the eyes of all three of us dart in that direction. A man in scrubs enters the room.

"Tómas. How are you?" Mom asks.

I have no idea who this man is.

"I'm good. Feliz día de las Madres. This must be the daughter we hear so much about."

I extend my hand, introducing myself properly, "I'm Molly. Amalia's granddaughter."

"Tómas. I'm a nurse here."

"He's being modest," my mother steps in. "He's more than a nurse. Tómas has implemented these monthly meetings where the residents' family get to come in, have dinner together with the staff and owners and just talk about what they like, don't like and want to make better."

"Your mother was the first one here at the first meeting," Tómas boasts. "There were only three ladies there that night. Now, because of your mother, almost every resident is represented at these meetings."

"Wow." It's all I can say. I never knew Mom was so involved.

Tómas moves closer to Nana's bed. "Listen, let me just take a quick look at Molly, oh" he looks at me and then at Nana. "I guess Molly Sr. and I'll let you three ladies continue your celebration."

Mom and I move closer to the door and let Tómas do his thing. I watch closely. This

man, this stranger was doing the job I was supposed to do. He was taking care of my grandmother.

Tómas lifts up the socks Mom has left near Nana's hand, "Great pick, Ms. Iris. Glad you took the doctor's advice. I know they aren't cheap, at least when compared to normal socks, but with the poor circulation, these really are the best socks for our sweet Molly."

Iris Dominguez

Molly watches Tómas's every move. She judges him, trying to see if he makes any mistakes. Tómas leaves the room and I can tell Molly is shocked by all she heard and all she saw.

"What do you think of Tómas?" I ask.

Molly shrugs. "How long have these meetings been going on?" she asks.

I answer, "About six months or so."

"Why didn't I know?"

"You don't live here. I know you can't make it. So why tell you?"

Molly moves closer to her grandmother's bedside, "because I told you to tell me everything that happens to Nana in this place."

I cross my arms. I had promised to keep Molly informed but there is something in Molly's tone that I just don't like. I say nothing at first.

Molly breaks the silence, "We had a deal."

I glance over at my mom. As Molly's agitation with me increases, my mother's tremble accelerates. Molly keeps going, "If I am ever going to be ok with Nana being in a home, then you need to keep me informed of everything. No matter how insignificant you deem it."

I am done letting my daughter make me feel this way, "If you are ever going to be ok with this place, then you need to realize that it was your Nana who made the choice."

Molly's mouth drops. She steps toward me and away from the bedside. In the small nursing home room, that one step brings us within inches of each other. "Don't you dare put this on a woman who can no longer defend herself."

"Maybe my mother can't defend herself, but I can defend myself. You were there, you heard Nana at the hospital that night--"

"You mean the night you gave your brother a stroke."

I raise my hand but before I can take aim at Molly, I notice that my mother has started shaking so bad the tubes from the oxygen machine have come out of her nose. Either ignoring my raised hand or distracted by her grandmother, Molly steps closer to the bed. She replaces the oxygen tubes when Tómas walks in.

"Everything ok?" he asks.

Without looking at him, Molly answers, "We're fine. I can take care of my grandmother."

Tómas looks at me for some sort of confirmation. I continue to watch as my daughter's proximity has already calmed Amalia significantly. I say to Tómas, "she's fine. Mija is a nurse and a damn good one." At that, Tómas exits.

There are several long moments of silence. Finally, annoyed by the whirl of the machine that pumps nourishment into my mother's g-tube, I speak, "Why don't you give your grandma her gift? What did you get her?"

Molly reaches in to her purse and pulls out a wrapped gift about the size of a picture frame. She leans over the bed and tries to mold Amalia's hands around the package. Molly then

proceeds to open the wrapping.

From where I stand, I can see only the gold frame. Molly holds it up to her grandmother's eyes.

"Que es?" I ask.

Molly has not looked away from her Nana. "Mira, Nana. It's for you. You're invited to my wedding."

"You set a date?" I ask.

Again, Molly keeps her focus on her grandma. "I know you can't be there. I just want you to know I want you there. And once Drew and I get pictures of the wedding, we'll visit and put a picture in this frame for you. Ok?"

A tear rolls out of the corner of my mother's eye. It runs back towards her ear. I watch as a matching tear rolls out of my daughter's eye. Before wiping her own face, Molly wipes the tear off her grandmother's face.

I clear my throat. Molly finally turns and faces her mother. I ask, "Amalia Inez Dominguez, were you ever going to tell me that you set a date?"

"I just... Grandma can't be there. But you can. I figured since she can't be there she should at least have some sort of recognition. Something to show her she's special to me. I mean Dad get's to walk me down the aisle. You'll get a pretty mother of the bride corsage. She'll be here."

Amalia "Molly" Dominguez

Mom nods. She has that look. Her eyes are misty and unfocused as she stares at the bougainvillea plant outside the nursing home window. She doesn't look at her mother. She

doesn't look at her daughter. It hurts her that I'm so close to my grandma. Mom once told Dad that Nana was a better mother to me than she had ever been to her own children.

"You were right, Ma. She's anxious. Let's go," I suggest.

Mom moves towards the bed, "See you later, Mamá." Mom walks out of the room without another word to anyone.

Iris Dominguez

Molly drives me back to the house, her hands clenched at two and ten on the steering wheel. Trying to cut the tension, Molly turns on the radio to the local country music station. After a moment or two I change the radio station. Molly turns it back. I change it one more time.

"Ma! What are you doing?"

"I'm not a fan of country music."

"So you'd rather listen to the commercials on the Mexican station?"

I shrug. Turning off the radio, Molly gives up. She pulls over the car a few houses away from the house.

"Que estás haciendo?"

"So, we always have to do what you want to do?"

"I'm sorry. What?"

"If you don't want to listen to country. We don't. If you want us to see Nana together. We do it. If you don't want to drive, you don't. If you want to put your mother in a home instead of letting me take care of her..."

"Is that what this is about?"

"I got a nursing degree so I could take care of her, Ma."

"Well, I made the decision to put my mother in a home so that I could take care of you."

Molly stares out the window of her car. "I'm not a baby. I don't need you to take care of me. I don't know what hurt me more, Ma. That you drove this wedge between us or that you didn't think I was strong enough to make the right decision."

Molly reaches in to her purse and pulls out another gift the same size and same wrapping paper as the one she had given to my mom. She hands it to me. "You may have your father's tardiness but you get some things from your mamá," I say. Molly looks at me. I continue, "You may have made the right choice for Nana but it wouldn't have been the right choice for you. Eres una persona. You are a person, and though your devotion to your family is a beautiful thing, you mustn't forget you are your own person."

Molly nods and starts up the car. As she makes the rest of the drive to the house, I open my gift. It is a framed wedding invitation. Molly turns on the radio to the Mexican station. I clear my throat, flip it to the country station and say, "Next year, I'll drive."

Confession

March 2008

Iris Dominguez

I've been waiting for this call for eight years. Every time the phone rings, I expect it to be this call. I see the Caller ID and the area code 512. Austin. I pick up and hear, "Tia?"

I think of sweet Ada. Even in this moment of loss, even with tears, her voice sounds like a song. I want to smile because I love my niece, but I know what's coming. I know what she's going to say but I still ask, "Que mija?"

"D-d-dad..."

There are some noises, some shuffling and then the clear, deep, formal tone of Bianca comes over the line, "Iris."

My back straightens at my first name. I'd do anything to have her call me Nina, short for madrina, again. Now, I just say, "Si?"

"Dad didn't wake up this morning," Bianca says, then pauses.

So, Victor was dead. Pobrecito, mi hermano. I never knew it was possible to live so long after such a debilitating stroke, but if anyone could, it would be my stubborn brother. Again, I want to smile. Not because he is gone, of course not, but because he probably lived so long just to spite me.

I hear Ada whimper in the background. I want to hold her like when she was a girl and would sit on my lap as Raul, my other brother, paraded around the living room dressed as Santa. That fake beard always scared Ada but not Bianca. She wasn't afraid of anything. She still isn't.

Bianca, noticing my silence spoke, "I have to make arrangements and I've got to take care

of my sister. I thought you should know."

The line goes dead and I am left to remember how I caused this. It is my fault my brother is dead.

Eight years earlier, I stood in the kitchen of my mother's home. I clenched my fist to keep from screaming. Mamá just told the familia that all her "hijas," her girls, had gone to college. I never went to college because Mamá didn't let me. Mamá didn't consider me one of her girls then. I was about to scream when Victor entered.

"Que tienes, hermana?" he asked.

I shrugged. The anger in me wasn't enough to make me want to confide in him.

Victor was the type who couldn't let anything go. He pushed, "So much to say when you call me in Austin. Now that I'm in front of you, you're speechless."

I looked at him but he wasn't like the Victor I was used to. His face was red. He'd always been so dark that even if he blushed you couldn't tell. Not that Victor ever blushed. I was there the first time he asked out Esther. He walked up to her and said, "One day, you'll have my kids and be my wife. 'Til then, I'll take you to a movie." She blushed but he never gave hint of any strong emotion. What he said went, and we all just followed.

I was done following. "You know what I've been saying," I began. "I'm hoping that actually seeing your mother will help you understand how severe this situation is. She needs to go to a home."

"No," he said as he started to sweat. "The only home Mamá will ever be in is the home Papá built for her. Y ya, Iris. No quiero oír mas."

He started to walk out of the kitchen, but Esther walked in.

"Que tienes, amor?" she asked her husband.

He used his hand to shoe the idea away. It was then that he stumbled. When Esther grabbed him, he turned to me, "Es Iris. Esta muchacha. Me va matar."

"No digas eso!" Esther scolded and flashed me a dirty look.

I should have stopped. I didn't. "You're 600 miles away. I know better. Mamá will go to a home."

Untangling himself from his wife's helpful arms, Victor spun around and stomped up to me, pointing his finger in my face "Malcriada! She's my mom, too."

Knocking over a sartén of rice on the counter, he walked out of the kitchen shouting, "Tu di le, Iris. It's what you want. You tell her." Esther followed him but I stayed. Instantly, I felt bad. I had been angry at Mamá for her comment and took it out on my brother. Before I really had time to think about it, I heard my daughter Molly scream, "Tio!"

I ran out of the kitchen to find Victor on the floor, Esther was trying to lift him. Molly, utilizing her freshly earned nursing degree, talked to him and tried to help. I didn't hear what she said. All I could hear was his words in the kitchen. "Me va matar." My brother had said I would kill him and it looked like I had.

I sat and thought that day over until Vallia came to the house. She received a similar call from Bianca but on Vallia's call there was mutual mourning. Bianca had no problem calling her Tia. Now, Vallia sits across from me at my kitchen table. She stirs her coffee but doesn't drink it.

"What?" I ask.

"I don't know why I took the day off."

I shrug, "Because our brother just died."

She takes a sip of coffee. "I guess but what are we doing? Sitting, drinking cold coffee, and being sad."

I look up at my sister, who is crying. She speaks, "Just us girls left, huh? Mamá gave us ladies some good genes."

"What are we going to do about Mamá?" I ask.

Vallia looks up. Her eyebrows furrow together and I remember my dad. Victor Jimenez, Sr. was a severe man. The kind that children in stores would stare up at in terror. Yet, with his own kids he was a teddy bear. Vallia was his favorite. His baby. He was heartbroken when she married Ignacio. He sat in the front pew of the church with his eyebrows furrowed just like the way she has them furrowed now. In turn, she sat in the front pew, eyebrows furrowed, as the same priest that married her said Papá's funeral mass.

People mistook her for being angry when she did the eyebrow thing, but just like when Papá did that, I knew she was just in deep thought. "What about her?" she asks.

"We need to tell her about Victor."

Vallia sucks in a long breath through her nose and returns to staring at her coffee. I shake my head, "Di me!"

"The Parkinson's. The dementia. The doctors say she can't understand us."

I stand, "Ay, como siempre, I'll do the hard work. I'll tell her."

"Ay, como siempre, Iris es la que sufre," Vallia shoots back.

I stand and collect my coffee mug. "Mana," Vallia calls but I'm already in my kitchen washing out my coffee cup.

Before I visit my mother, I decide to go to confession. I enter the confessional and make the sign of the cross. The screen between the priest and me, along with the low lights make it hard for him to see me and me to see him. I know this is supposed to make me more comfortable but it scares me. Anyone could be on the other side listening to my deepest secrets.

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been three days since my last confession," I say.

"Iris." I relax hearing the familiar voice of Father Carlos. The father speaks, "What could my most helpful parishioner have done in the last three days that would disable her from taking communion at Sunday mass?"

"I killed my brother."

There is silence. The father clears his throat. He speaks, "When Victor's girl, Bianca, called, I figured you would be by."

"Well, murder is a mortal sin."

"You did not cause his stroke and you surely did not murder your brother," he says.

"Will you not hear my confession?"

"I'm listening. I'm just not hearing anything that the good Lord would find sinful."

"Ay, padre. Por favor. I'm trying to be worthy of taking communion at my brother's funeral. Please," I plead.

He sighs, "Three Hail Mary's."

"For causing my brother's stroke and death?" I ask.

"And three Our Father's," he says and closes the partition before I can ask for a more severe punishment.

As I drove to the church I got a text message from Ada. She and Bianca had landed in El Paso. I noticed that Bianca had not reached out to me since the phone call. It made me think of the last time Bianca said anything to me.

The day after Victor suffered his stroke, I sat with Esther in his hospital room. As a family we all agreed to take turns staying with her and it was just my luck that I was there when Bianca arrived from New York. It was her last semester of law school, and after maneuvering around finals and preparation for the bar, she arrived in El Paso.

I remember the way she walked into the hospital. I was sitting there praying and holding her mother's hand. The door to the hospital room flew open and the click of her pumps filled the room before we could see her. I stood up but my sister-in-law stayed sitting, holding her husband's hand. Bianca lifted a finger, silencing me before I could even say a word.

"I'll talk to you outside," she said. I looked at my brother, my sister-in-law and my beloved goddaughter. No one looked at me. So I walked out of the hospital room. When Bianca came out I knew then and there that she would hate me until the day my brother died, if not until I died.

"I will help my mother get Dad back to Austin. Poor Ada is a mess. Thank God Veronica is in Austin and can help her get through this until Mom and Dad are back home."

"Bianca, mija, I'm so sorry."

"About what? That I had to reschedule my finals? Or that my dad won't be able to see me graduate from law school? Oh I know, you are sorry for pushing and pushing about Abuela. We all know you fought with him before he had the stroke. I can't believe you, Iris--"

"Malcriada. I am your godmother. Show respect. I am not your equal."

"Wrong. You were my madrina until you caused my father to have a stroke. You are not

my equal. You are beneath me."

She walked into her father's hospital room and I stood in the hallway of the hospital, alone. I was torn. Part of me wanted to cry. Another part wanted to go in there and yell at her. I would never have been allowed to talk to an elder that way. Yet, she was hurting, and I wanted to reach out and hold her. She was in so much pain. I wanted to help her, not hurt her and she was hurting me in a way I never knew my heart could twist. I wouldn't cry.

In the end, Bianca didn't give me a chance to decide if I should reach out to her or not. I didn't know it then, but she would not speak to me until she had to call me to tell me that her father had died. Even at her mother's funeral, Bianca just nodded when I gave my condolences. What would she do at her father's funeral?

I arrive at the nursing home and find my mother is a far cry from the woman she used to be. I can't believe she's been in this nursing home for eight years. Despite the time that has passed, my mother's skin is flawless. I'm graced with her immaculate complexion. I smile at my own joke and then wonder if that is something I should tell the Father about.

I pull a chair up to the side of the hospital bed. I come so often the nurses decided to leave a chair in the room for me. I don't ever remember going over to my mother's house to just sit and talk to her, but ever since she's come to the nursing home I have visited regularly.

"I have news. I'm not sure how to tell you bad news. The last time I had to tell you something bad we didn't speak for a year." My mom's eyes dart from the window to the door and her head jerks back and forth in the opposite direction of her gaze. She's agitated and I'm not sure I should go on but I do. Victor's death has reminded me of all the other ways our family broke.

"The miscarriage was tough but telling you was worse. You made me feel like I failed. It was nothing you said. It was a gesture. You raised your hands up about shoulder height, palms up. Brought them up in front of you like you were praying and looked away."

I stand. I can't. How can I tell her her failings when she can't defend herself? It's not fair but I can't get these things out of my head. "There were two more miscarriages that I never told you about. Why do you think I hold Molly so close to my heart? I went through hell to give you a grandchild. I would still give anything for you to look at me the way you look at her."

I sit in the chair again. I'm exhausted and I haven't even gotten to the worst. I throw it out into the room before I can even think, "Se murió Victor."

Tears come and I'm not sure why. Logically, I know that my brother was gone long before he stopped breathing. Then again, I'm sitting here and I sit here often, talking to a woman who doctors think isn't with us, mentally, anymore either.

"Bianca hates me. Do you know that she hasn't called me Nina since they took Victor back to Austin after the stroke."

I stand up and begin to pace again. "She hates me," I tell my mom. "When I went to Esther's funeral, she didn't even look me in the eye. When I tried to hug her, she turned around and acted like she was getting something from under the church pew. She's my goddaughter. How do I get her back?"

"No sé qué hacer," I confess. "The whole family is a mess. So we all have to gather for this funeral and I'm not sure I can keep everyone together. You did it so flawlessly. To you, Sunday dinners were just part of life. We haven't had a Sunday dinner in eight years."

I begin to pace the room. As my agitation rises, I notice my mother calms. I laugh to myself. Of course we haven't had a Sunday dinner. At the last one, I caused my brother to have

a stroke.

I sit back down. "I know you blame me. You never said it but I know you do. Tu hijo. The beloved son taken down by the least favorite daughter."

I begin to cry and I realize that this is the first time I've cried since the emergency room the night of Victor's stroke. There in that room with my family silently judging me, I vowed that I would take the burden. I would let them blame me for all the things wrong with this family. If they all blamed me then they would be together, even if it meant I was alone.

With tears still wet on my face I continue talking to my mother. "You know I don't mind doing the things no one wants to do. You needed to come to a home so I told it like it was. Molly needed to grow up and live and love and have a life so I made it so she could. But Mamá, I'm so tired. You took care of this family and made sure we all were good. How can I do that with you gone? How can I do that when no one loves or trusts me? How could they? I killed Victor."

I cry the kind of cry that shakes your body. The kind where you can't breathe. I lean forward in my chair resting my hands and then my head on the bedrail. When the crying still won't stop I end my confession, "Perdona me, Mamá."

I feel something brush my knuckles. I lift my head up a little and see my mother's hand. It is moving and while the movements look different from her Parkinson's spasms, I know they can't be deliberate. Yet, it looks like she's trying to hold my hand. I reach for her hand, hold it in mine and lower my head in prayer.

I begin, "Bless us, Father..."

I am jolted out of my prayer by a hand touching my shoulder and the deep pitch of Bianca's voice joining the prayer, "... for we have sinned." She has tears in her eyes. She leans

over and hugs me.

"How long have you been here?" I ask.

"I came straight from the airport. I thought someone should tell Abuela about Dad,"

Bianca says.

"What did you hear?"

"All of it," Bianca admits, and then, "Perdóname, Nina?"

She asks and I do.

Part II

Bianca and Ada

Chat

June 4, 2003

Bianca Jimenez-Grayer

I raise my glass, swirl the remaining ice and wordlessly call the bartender. He fetches the Jack Daniels and mixes me a second drink. Retrieving my laptop from my silver and black Coach tote, I log into my email, moving my hands along the keyboard and mouse pad without taking my eyes off the TV. Martha Stewart and her broker have just been indicted. What I wouldn't give to be her lawyer, because win or lose this would be a career-making case. I turn to my computer screen. The Yahoo messenger indicates Ada is online.

As I debate chatting with my little sister, a new email appears on my screen. I open up the note from my boss:

Bianca

Hope you have a safe flight. To answer your questions. The Austin branch of the law firm has a position open for associate but it is a lateral move. You heard right, Carl is retiring. We will have an opening for partner. Off the record...You've got a shot. See you in a few days.

Albert

Ada Jimenez

The coffee mug from this morning, the water from lunch, and the lunch itself sit untouched. I set down dinner and know that since San Antonio is playing in the NBA Finals, Daddy's eyes will never leave the TV. I have to try. He has to eat.

I retrieve my laptop from my room. Having no interest in the game, I tab between MySpace and Yahoo. Waiting for me is an email from Juilliard, the subject: New Student Orientation. My eyes dart between my father and the email. Though I move the mouse over the email, I don't click.

It had been sixteen minutes since I logged on and I know Bianca has seen me. I click the chat and type, Called the airline. Daddy's been wondering where you are.

Bianca Jimenez-Grayer

The chime of the chat window pulls my attention off CNN. I roll my eyes at Ada's comment. Dad hasn't talked since his stroke. It was such a Mom-like thing to say. With my drink in one hand, the fingers of the other hand search for the letters. M,e,c,h,a,n,i,c,a,l.

Ada Jimenez

The chime of the chat window lets me know I have received a response. Bianca has written, Mechanical Failure.

That's what you get for living in New York. If you lived closer you could have driven., I respond to my older sister's message. Then, I look at Daddy. The game is on commercial break. "Papá. Why don't you eat something?" He doesn't even look at me when I speak to him. I look back at the computer screen. Bianca doesn't respond.

Bianca Jimenez-Grayer

Taking a long slow sip of my drink, I wonder how to answer. Finally I write, You do know that Juilliard is here in NY not in Texas, right?

It takes a few minutes for the chat window to chime again but when it does I do not like what it read: Don't think there will be any Juilliard for me.

I set my drink down and type, Ada, don't do that to yourself.

Ada Jimenez

I stare at the words my sister sends. Yes, because this is my choice. Because I'm doing this to myself. There is only one way I can still go to Juilliard.

You're coming home then?, I type to my big sister. Bianca responds with the same response she's been giving for days, For the funeral and then back to work. I type what I've been asking for days, And Dad?

Bianca Jimenez-Grayer

And Adam? My husband is just supposed to give up his career and move to Austin?, I type and even in New York I see my teenage sister sitting in the living room in Austin, Texas, rolling her eyes at me.

When there is no answer, I pick up my glass and take another zip. So what would we do with our father now? Putting Dad in a nursing home was out of the question. It was when Tia Iris wanted to put Nana in the nursing home that he had his stroke. All the fighting among his siblings stressed him out. I personally blame Iris. Nana went to the home to stop her kids from fighting and I vowed that Papá would never suffer the same fate as his mother.

I don't know what to do about Dad, I type because I don't know.

WE need to know, Ada responds.

I've got a shot at partner, I type.

I've got a shot at singing Madama Butterfly at the Met some day, replies Ada.

After the capitalized "we" that Ada had written, the "I've" both of us started our sentences with look so selfish.

Ada Jimenez

I write to Bianca, Even with the nurse Mom had trouble with Dad. I can't do it alone. We need to do it together.

You could go to school at night, Bianca writes. A small consolation prize for the girl who had been accepted with a full scholarship to Juilliard.

I respond, And you could transfer. I can manage until then.

Bianca Jimenez-Grayer

Transferring to the Austin branch is an option I want to avoid. Adam and I have discussed it and he is open to a move but... I spin around to look at the airline board. My flight is still marked as delayed.

We're boarding. We'll talk more when I get there, I type.

I change my status to invisible so my little sister won't know I'm still online. I open Albert's email and hit reply. In an email to my boss I write:

Albert,

Thank you for your kind words but I have to take the transfer. My dad had a stroke and my sister can't care for him alone now that our mother has passed away. I will make the request official when I get back from the funeral.

Bianca

Ada Jimenez

Bianca Grayer has signed off, appears on my screen. I open a blank word document. In
it I write:

To Whom It May Concern,

I regret to inform you that I will not be able to accept the full scholarship to your
fine establishment this fall...

Working the Room

November 13, 2004

Bianca Jimenez-Grayer

Sitting at the bar sipping Maker's Mark, Adam watched as I worked the room. How many cocktail hours and company Christmas parties have I left him at the bar alone so I could make a name for myself among Austin's elite? We'd only been in Austin for a little over a year and I was trying to attain the level of success I held back in New York. It had worked, I had just been named partner.

On this night, it was a fundraiser for some children's cause the name of which I wasn't sure. "I don't know. Children's leukemia? Children's literacy? It's for work," I'd said. Not knowing the name of the foundation hadn't stopped me from shelling out \$1250 a plate for Adam and me to attend. Of course, I wasn't only there to help children. I mainly went because a lot of rich people would be there and rich people need good lawyers. I'm a good lawyer.

As I made contact after contact, Adam had cocktail after cocktail. By number four Adam teetered between buzzed and sloppy drunk. He would leave it all up to fate. This was how he decided to propose to me. He told me that if I came home on our six month anniversary with a gift for him that was store bought we would not get engaged. If I came home with something more personal he would pop the question at dinner. With help from my music loving little sister, Ada, I created a custom CD of love songs. By dessert I was tearing up over his heartfelt proposal.

On this night, if I walked over and kissed him, he would not drink anymore. If, however, I came over and reprimanded him for drinking too much, well, he'd have another. Fate, it would

seem, was no longer on our side.

He smiled at me and raised his glass. I was talking to a group of three men, each of them dressed in tuxes, each on their first drink, each a step above my husband. When I saw Adam, my smile faltered but I recovered before any of the potential clients noticed.

Adam knew my fake smile. To the men, I smiled showing my teeth but I never show my teeth when I'm really happy. I called it my business smile. Adam called it my hyena smile.

I shook hands and slipped my new business cards, the ones that labeled me a partner, to the men I talked with. I walked toward Adam at the bar. Sipping his drink, he peered over the rim of the glass and watched me walk to him.

"I wish you wouldn't drink so much," I said. In one gulp, Adam finished half a glass of the bourbon.

I shook my head and walked back to the crowd of wealthy philanthropists just waiting to hear how I would love to represent them. Adam's arms jutted out and wrapped around my midsection, pulling me into his lap. I gasped at the sudden public display of affection. Removing myself from his grasp, I looked around the room and heard him say, "Baby, let's just go home."

I spun around to face him. "I have to work."

"You just made partner. Give yourself a break." He suggested.

I mulled this over. Between work and helping Ada with Dad, I rarely spent time with my husband. I did miss him. Before I could organize my thoughts he said, "I'm tired of sitting here alone."

I smiled at this, a real, closed lip smile. I stepped closer to him, placing my hands on his shoulders. "You're welcome to join me. We could walk around. You could make a few contacts

yourself. It is always good to know people."

He released my hips and reached for his glass, frowning that it was empty. "Don't start the job thing again, Bianca. I'm really trying to find a job. The art scene in Austin isn't what it is in New York."

"I wasn't thinking job. I was just thinking social. It'd do us both some good to spend time with other adults."

"Other adults? I'd just like to spend time with this adult." He used his finger to point at the spot on my chest from where my heart beat sounded. He went on, "We've been here for hours already," he answered and my smile dropped. "Aren't you tired? Let's go home. You've been at this too long."

"At what too long? Work?"

"At working the room."

Giving him a dry laugh I shook my head and rejoined the party.

I smoothed the black fabric of my Chanel dress and adjusted my hair. My gaze darted around the room. No one seemed to notice that Adam grabbed me or that he was drunk. I'd make a round, say my goodbyes and get Adam out before anything else happened.

Before I could implement my escape plan a client stopped me. Nancy Whedon was on her fourth marriage. She was a long time client who split her time between New York and Austin, meaning I got to keep her as a client when I moved. I had handled all three divorces, written up all her pre-nups and felt obligated to chat.

"Ms. Whedon. How are you?"

"Wonderful now that I've found someone who got my name right. If one more shmuck

calls me by my husband's name I'm shoving a--"

I touched her arm and mockingly scolded her, "Nancy."

"Everyone knows I stopped taking last names after the second marriage. They do it just to piss me off. Speaking of pissing me off. Number four is half way out the door. How tight is the prenup? He won't get much, right?"

I scanned the room. "Is he here? Maybe you'd prefer to come by the office and talk about it in a more private setting."

Nancy gestured to the crowd of people. "He's around here somewhere, and even if we meet in private, all these people will be talking about the divorce soon enough anyway. Might as well give them an earful now."

I tried to make a backward glance casual but Nancy was no fool. "Why, Bianca Jimenez-Grayer, isn't the man supposed to keep an eye on the little missus?"

"The reason you picked me as your lawyer is because we have something in common. Neither of us is the little missus type."

Nancy kept a straight face for a moment but the right side of her lip curled into a smile. The left side stayed down as if it had forgotten the gesture.

"Looks as if the men are going to get better acquainted. Number four is walking up to your husband now."

She stared at him the way a high school cheerleader looks at the football field after her glory days have passed her by. Nancy would miss this husband.

"Nancy, are you sure?" I asked.

"Does it matter?"

"As your lawyer? No. You ask me to begin divorce proceedings and I do it. But I can't

help but wonder if maybe--"

"Maybe I'm so used to leaving I'm looking for the emergency exit before anyone has even pulled the fire alarm?"

I shrugged and looked back at Adam again. He pushed his drink glass back to the bartender. I couldn't hear what he said but the bartender set a glass of water in front of him.

Nancy's eyes followed mine. "We're a lot alike. We are both women with our eyes on the prize and no man, husband or not, will get in the way."

Adam Grayer looked on at his wife. Her back was turned to him but he liked watching her. Sure, working the room wasn't his favorite part of the night but she was good at her job. So good that his drinking buddy would be wifeless in a matter of weeks.

The women separated and Bianca smiled her hyena smile. She didn't give time for the crowd to part, she wiggled and swerved her way through.

"You okay?" Adam asked, frowning at the paleness of Bianca's face.

She shook her head and grabbed his unfinished drink. The bourbon warmed her throat and her cheeks flushed and returned to their normal color.

"Take me home, Adam."

"Don't you have to stay? Work the room one more time to say goodbye?"

"I've been at this too long. Take me home."

Without Help

November 22, 2012

Ada Jimenez-Salazar

Last year, my mother-in-law entered my kitchen, picked up my boxed stuffing and threw it in the trash. Grabbing my car keys and my GPS, she walked out the door returning twenty minutes later with grocery bags. This year, her take-no-bullshit attitude will be missed.

"Ada?" my husband, Gabriel, calls from the kitchen door way. "The timer."

I turn to face him and take the ringing timer from his hand. "I need to baste the turkey and start the stuffing. Will you--" I wave my hands the way a conductor would lead a symphony. He's learned to decipher my gestures.

"You want me to go?" he asks.

I nod. Gabe walks over and wraps his arms around my apron-clad waist. Once he makes his exit, I take out a yellowing piece of folded paper from my box of recipe cards. Gabe's great grandmother's writing, a flowing curvy script, lists ingredients and directions. The title on the paper simply states "Stuffing". The curvy script makes me smile, but the print of his mother's hand causes me to swallow hard. Six words give me the only directions I need to follow: You'll need this for next year.

On the day those words were written on the recipe card, I was so focused on chopping the vegetables into even sized pieces, I didn't notice that I had begun to sing. A perfectly pitched choral version of "Simple Gifts" emanated from my mouth.

"You sure sing pretty, Ada, but you couldn't hold a knife to save your life," Gabe's mom

commented on my technique.

I shrugged and dropped the knife, giving up. She shook her head at the ease of my surrender. "Pick up that knife," she ordered. I reach for the knife extending my index finger and thumb. "Girl," she admonished, "you aren't picking up a conductor's wand. You can't lead a symphony with that, it's a knife."

She placed the knife in my hands and molded my fingers like clay around the handle. I let her but as soon as she released my hand I dropped the knife. I said, "Maybe I'm just better off sitting this one out."

"You have to learn for next year. In case I'm not here."

I didn't want to talk about the possibility that my mother-in-law's cancer would kill her. I didn't want to think about losing another parent, with both my parents gone. "You'll be here. You'll get to make the stuffing again," I said.

"Screw that. My son has a wife now. I've earned the right to sit out making Thanksgiving dinner. Even if I am here, next year you do it without help."

That's me, I think. The good little wife. From a future as an opera singer to chopping celery while the menfolk watch football. I loved my husband, I wouldn't have married him if I didn't. Yet, I wanted more. I wanted the bright lights of the Met shining down on me, not the bland florescent lighting of a kitchen.

"You ok?" she asked.

I nodded. I always nodded when someone asked that question.

"Then get to chopping," she ordered.

I picked up the knife and tried to mimic the way she had instructed me to hold it. I began to slice the celery. I was just picking up a rhythm when the knife slipped and I sliced into the

flesh of my finger.

"Fuck!"

My mother-in-law quickly got over her shock at my word choice and wrapped the corner of her apron around my finger. She ushered me to the sink. Gabriel walked in from the living room. "What happened?" he asked.

"I cut my finger with that stupid knife," I said as my finger was placed under the cold water of the running faucet.

Gabe let out a little laugh and I spun around yanking my hand away from the faucet and my mother-in-law's grasp.

"You think it's funny that your wife is bleeding?"

Gabriel masked his laughter with a pretend cough. He shook his head.

"Cause it's not," I went on. "I shouldn't even be in this damn kitchen. What? Just because I'm a woman I get stuck making the meal. I bet if you tried you'd fuck up your finger, too."

"Calm down, Ada," Gabe ordered.

I rolled my eyes, "Mommy and Daddy are here so you are going to play the macho husband? Well, screw that. I'm done cooking and cleaning and being the wife you always dreamed you'd have. What about my dreams? You got your dream life and I got a mop and broom."

"I never told you to stop singing. That choice was made long before I came along. You want to yell at someone yell at your sister for not taking on a bigger role in caring for your dad. Yell at your mom for dying and leaving you two to take care of your dad. Better yet, yell at your dad for having a stroke."

"That's enough!" my mother-in-law yelled.

We both turned and looked at her. The image I saw did not match the authority her voice had carried. Her shoulders slumped. Her chest rose in quick bursts, as if yelling at us had exerted the same amount of energy as running a mile in under eight minutes. Her eyes water.

"Mom?" Gabriel spoke in a hushed tone, as if talking too loud would knock this sick woman over.

She filled her lungs with air, "Son, get out of your wife's kitchen."

His brows furrowed in confusion but he listened to his mother.

"My mother used to sing that song to me," she admitted as she picked her knife and returned to dicing vegetables.

"What?"

"Simple Gifts. That's what you were singing, right? Before your meltdown."

I nodded.

"If you love to sing, sing. Join a church choir, try out for American Idol, sing in the shower but don't ever take for granted the things you do have just because you miss the things you could have had." She cleared her throat and went on, "I've memorized my gran's recipe but I'll give you the written copy. You know, for next year."

Gabriel appeared at the doorway, and before his mother could admonish him, he flashed the first-aid kit he had retrieved from the bathroom. I nodded and he understood that it was ok to enter the kitchen. He stood by the kitchen sink. I walked over and offered him my hand.

A former Marine, my husband was well-versed in first aid. He cleaned my wound, applied antibiotic and dressed it. When he finished, he even kissed the band-aid. I smiled. My mother-in-law never stopped chopping but watched us from the corner of her eye.

When Gabe left the kitchen, I returned to my station. I picked up the knife and molded my hand around it in a perfect hold. "Next year, we'll make the stuffing together again," I said, my focus on the celery on my cutting board rather than my mother-in-law's bandana-covered bald head.

She paused. She put her hand on mine. We stood that way for a moment until she asked for a pen. I got one out of the junk drawer and on the bottom of her grandmother's recipe she wrote in a blocky print "You'll need this for next year." She handed me the paper, resumed her cooking and began to hum "Simple Gifts."

I joined in, only humming at first. Then I added the words. She paused and said, "And Ada, whether the cancer kills me or just old age, you use that crappy boxed stuffing I'll come back from the dead and kick your ass."

I pull the ingredients out of the cupboard and fridge and the door bell rings. I hear a man's voice and turn to the kitchen door to watch my father-in-law walk in. I set down the knife I was using to chop celery, smile and hug him. He holds a grocery bag up and I take it.

"Thought you could use a little assistance since this is your first Thanksgiving doing all the work."

I attempt to open the bag but my father-in-law places his hands on mine. "Wait. I'll keep my son out of your way."

With a quick kiss on my cheek, my in-law leaves and I'm alone in my kitchen once more. I place the bag on the kitchen counter, reach in and pull out a box of stuffing. I smile and look between the box and the ingredients spread on my counter. I pick up the box, toss it in my trash can and continue chopping celery.

Part III

Lucia, Veronica and Carolina

My Mother's Daughter

April, 26, 2009

Veronica Jimenez

"Women in my day had children," my mother said sitting at my kitchen table with her arms crossed.

"Women in your day couldn't vote," I said, pouring hot water into her coffee mug.

"Veronica Jimenez, do not make up such things," she scolded.

I looked at my mother, or rather, I studied my mother. Lucia Jimenez was the same petite Mexican-American woman who raised me. Her face had not aged, which she attributed to her daily use of Ponds facial cream. Yet, it seemed like the times had changed and she hadn't. She would not wear pants much less shorts. Pants were, after all, unladylike. So there she was on the hottest day of the year in a black dress that was two inches below the knee. Black, of course, because she was in mourning... for the past six and a half years.

I, on the other hand, looked like I stepped in from the beach. My long black hair was stringy from the chlorine in my sister's pool. I wore a white tank top over my black bikini top and tan shorts over the bottoms.

The morning had been spent at church; my mother had made me take her to a Catholic church near my home. Lunch was at my sister, Alicia's house followed by swimming with my niece, Eve and nephew, Raul, who was named after my father.

I was good with kids and that brought on "the" talk. The thirty-minute drive from my sister's ritzy house in Lakeway to my modest one in southwest Austin consisted of nothing but poking and prodding. Mamá wanted to know when I would settle down.

"That's just the way you make it sound. Besides, I make a living studying women's history, Ma. Of course I know when women got the right to vote," I explained, "I was just teasing. You are always too serious."

My mother stirred her instant coffee into the hot water, "I think it is very serious when a person tries to go against God."

"Ay, Mamá. Stop. Por favor. I'm just saying I don't want children. It's not like I'm saying I'm going to commit genocide or anything."

My mother quickly did the sign of the cross, folded her hands together in prayer, and mumbled something in Spanish about help for her wicked daughter.

"Ma, stop praying. I'm just trying to make a point. I don't want kids. There are far worse things in the world than not wanting to have kids," I argued.

"If your father were to hear you right now," my mother shook her head in disapproval.

I went for the low jab, "Dad understood me, unlike you. He'd be proud that I'm doing what I want and not succumbing to the wills of society."

"Well, your father was crazy."

I picked up the remaining dinner dishes and the coffee cups and loaded the dishwasher. This was only the first night of her weeklong stay.

Once I put clean sheets on the guest bed, or should I say sheets that came straight from the linen closet because Mom said "Quien sabe que o quien estaba aquí antes de mi," my mother excused herself politely to change into her night gown and robe. Finally, after ten minutes or so, she knocked on my bedroom door as I was combing out my hair after my shower.

"Come in" I said as I stood in front of my dresser mirror in nothing but a towel.

I could only see my mother's reaction by the reflection of the mirror. It was a look of horror. She slammed the door. I could hear the light swish of her slippers as she hurried down the hallway to her room where she slammed her door.

I called my sister, "Why can't she stay with you?"

Alicia laughed in response to my greeting, "because there's no room. Felipe, the kids and I hardly fit in this three bedroom house. You think Mrs. Manners would share a room with one of the kids? Ha, not on your life. You're just mad because now that Caro is married, Mamá is focusing on you."

Avoiding the subject of my younger sister's marriage, I tried to solve the problem at hand, "stick Eve in with Raul."

Alicia laughed again. My older sister was getting a kick out of my predicament, "Yes, I'll stick my teenage daughter in with her seven year old brother. That will go well."

I spilled about the car ride and the door slamming. My sister scolded me, "the whole reason she was inside while you all were swimming was your bikini. Do you do those things to piss her off?"

"Give me some credit, Alicia. I love my mother. I do. I don't want to make her uncomfortable. I'm just not going to make myself uncomfortable to accommodate her."

"She's still living in the fifties."

"You're telling me? She wants me to be June Cleaver."

"You are thirty-eight," my sister teased.

I didn't even have to answer. I scowled at the phone and it was as if Alicia knew she'd hit a touchy subject.

"Sorry, Vero. I'm teasing. The life you have is amazing. Traveling the world, helping

women in need. Fighting for women's rights and equality. Mom should be proud of you. I am."

I smiled, "At least someone is. I should go apologize. Tell that husband of yours to get a promotion already. That way, you can get a bigger house and the next time she visits from El Paso, she's staying with you."

I knocked at my mother's bedroom door. I was about to knock again, when my mother opened the door a crack. She glanced up and down., checking to make sure I was appropriately dressed, opened the door all the way.

I didn't know where to start, "um, is the room comfortable enough? You need anything, Ma?"

I sat at the edge of the bed. She remained standing. I had the room plainly decorated. I rarely had guests and when I did it was my mom. The walls were a blue-gray. A painting of a beach with the waves rolling in that I had purchased at a starving artist sale hung above the full-sized bed. Other than that and the bed set, which included a side table, the room was bare.

My mom gave me a genuine smile, "This is a lovely room."

First compliment I had received since I picked her up at the airport, "Thanks mom."

"It just needs a crucifix."

The moment was gone, "Can't you like anything about me or my home?"

I got up to leave the room but as I passed by her she touched my arm, "you do things very different from me. Different from how I was raised and how I raised you. It feels wrong."

"I'm not doing anything wrong, Mom."

"It's like you don't care about or respect where you came from, your family, your history."

"I can respect all of that and still be who I am. Just 'cause I wear a bikini doesn't mean I don't value what you and dad taught me."

"And kids?"

I sighed. I touched my mom's hand and led her back to the bed. We both sat down. I held her hands in mine.

"I am so wrapped up in what I am doing as far as research for the university and charity work for women's groups I wouldn't have time to have a baby. I'm still doing good for the world, Ma. I'm still leaving a mark. I'm just not leaving a mark that has half my DNA."

At this point my mother pulled her hands away from me, "I think I'd rather stay with Alicia."

I got up as if a physical shock had surged through my body with my mother's words. "If that's what you want."

"Veronica, I'm not disappointed with you. Your work is important. But the work I've done for your whole life, for your sisters... That's important too."

"If I have a kid who will I leave them with while I fly to Africa to deliver medical and school supplies to refugees? Why be a mother, if I can't be a good one?"

"What if you raise a child to do that? To follow in your footsteps? If you had a boy, he could do so much good."

"Boy?" I marched out of the room. I slammed the door of my room, stomped around a bit and went straight back to my mother's room.

"A girl, like me for example, can get just as much done as a boy. I've done so much but you don't see because to you it's not appropriate for a girl to do anything more than marry and pop out kids. That's fine for you, for Alicia, even for Caro but me? Ma, I want to do more. You

don't have to approve of my lifestyle but if you are going to stay in my home, you have to respect it."

"Malcriada!"

I went to the closet, got my mother's suitcase out and set it on the bed. "I can see why you might think that. I understand why you think women should have kids and get married and stay home, but do not think that because I don't do those things I am being disrespectful."

I left the room. Waiting for my mother to pack I called up Alicia. "Hey, Sis. Mom's packing. We'll be heading your way. Tell Eve I'll take her to get her ears pierced on her 16th birthday if she lets Grandma use her room."

Women in Black

May 3, 2009

Lucia Jimenez

Lord, I'm tired. I board the plane and feel all of my sixty two years of age, as if there is a rope tied around my lower back pulling me down. The years packed on tug on my shoulders making me stoop. I know I was taller. When Raul and I met in high school I was a cheerleader. The tallest on the squad.

I want to think about those days but a woman sits next to me and her teenage daughter sits in the aisle seat. Dios, help me. The girl has a nose ring! For all the things my girls put me through, thank you diosito, that they never got a facial piercing. There's a rumor Carolina pierced her belly button but I've never seen it and I don't ask.

Before the mother finishes stowing her purse under her seat, the daughter turns on her iPod, and the only reason I even know what that thing is, is because my granddaughter asked for one for Christmas. The girl has hers tuned loud enough that I can hear the thumping of the music. I notice the mother closing her eyes and taking a few deep breaths.

She touches her daughter's arm, "You'll have to turn that off when the Captain says so, ok?"

The girl pulls her arm away as if her mother's touch was poisonous viper fangs and not human fingers. The girl curves her back and shift in her seat, trying to face the aisle. She does her best to create space between her and her mother.

The woman looks at me, blushes and says, "Sorry."

"It's ok. I raised three girls."

She smiles at me, "I don't know if I should congratulate you or feel sorry for you."

I smile back. How things have changed. If that had been me and Alicia, well she never would have acted that way. Carolina had been my baby and had done exactly as asked. She, too, would have known better than to act like this girl. Veronica would have sat with her nose in some feminist text but she never would have pulled away from me. Not back then.

I lean my head back on my airline seat and think about my Veronica. After she took me to Alicia's I'd only seen her once more on my visit. She came over to Alicia's after teaching one of her classes at the university.

She was sipping coffee and talking about how her students watched a documentary. Raulito walked in, he's only seven, and he jumped in her lap. Well, she stopped talking mid-sentence to give him a kiss and ask him about his day. Dios, why can't she see it is in her nature to put family first.

It took everything I had not to tell her she'd make a good mother. Aye diosito, seeing her with that boy in her lap made my heart ache for her. Why does she fight what is natural? Women were born to be mothers.

"Do you ever wonder if you are being a better mother than your own?" The woman next to me asks.

At first, I am horrified that she'd ask such a private question of a stranger. Then, I think about the actual question. Am I a better mother than my own mother?

I had grown up in El Segundo Barrio en El Paso, Tejas. My mother and father had come over from Mexico as children but even as adults they had not managed to break out of the poverty that marked the new arrivals. Papí went to work and Mamí took care of us kids. There

were a lot of kids. At one point she had two in each primary, secondary and high school.

She made sure each of her kids spoke, read and wrote proper English. "No van estar diciendo "share" for "chair." Y si lo dices mal, me lo vas a pagar." This was usually said while she was stirring something in a large olla. Usually, it was caldo de res. Caldo was easy, cheap and it could feed a lot of people.

Being the oldest, I was the first to reach high school. This was when Papí got sick. We didn't know about asbestos back then. We just knew Papí coughed a lot and couldn't breathe. I wanted to leave school. I could work. I could help.

Mamá's reply, "Ni lo mande Dios. Todos mis hijos van a ir y cumplir escuela."

"Please make sure all electronic devices are off or on airplane mode. Your seats and tray tables must be in the upright and locked position." The staticky voice of the airline attendant brings my focus back to the woman sitting next to me and her daughter.

"I don't worry so much if I'm a better mother than my mother was. I think I worry more about my girls being better than me."

The woman glances at her daughter. The girl relaxes in her seat. It no longer looks like she is trying to escape. She doesn't look at her mother but she puts away the iPod as her mother instructed earlier.

"Are they?" the mother asks.

"What?"

"Better than you?"

"My oldest has two wonderful kids, a great marriage and a lovely home." I say, "My middle girl is a professor and has a PhD. My youngest is a pharmaceutical rep who just got

married. I was a simple girl from the barrio with a high school diploma. I'd say so."

She smiles, "I'd say so, too."

We receive more instructions from our attendants as the plane begins to taxi off. As always, I wait for just the right moment. There is this one second, this one moment, which no matter what anyone tells me, I know is your doing, Lord. Physics ni que Physics. It is the brief moment right before the tire lifts off. I time it so that I begin make the sign of the cross on the ground and finish when the plane is in the air. I know that God is the one who will carry me to where I need to go.

After several minutes in the air, we are told we can turn on electronics again. There comes a soft, melodious voice from the end of my row. For the first time, I hear my younger seatmate.

"Mamá, can I please use my iPod again?"

The mother nods. To my surprise the daughter smiles back. By now, not only has her back straightened but her head is leaning toward her mother. She pops in the ear buds and leans her head on her mother's shoulder.

"That sounded like an apology to me." I comment.

The woman next to me smiles and asks, "you speak teenager?"

"What mother doesn't?"

"How did you do it with three teenagers? All girls at that. One is enough for me."

"I had help," I think of my Raul. "Let me tell you, it was 1987. Alicia was 18 and about to go away to college, Veronica was 16 going on 30 and it was my youngest's 13th birthday party."

Raul was in the backyard manning the grill. I was inside trying to make sure everything was perfect on the cake. When he walked in to check on me, he reached his charcoal covered finger toward the icing. I swatted at him.

"You should have been a baker."

I looked at my work. It was nothing fancy. I had written "Happy 13th Birthday, Carolina" in cursive font. The edges of the pink frosted cake were decorated with what looked like a vine of white roses. It looked like something you could get at Big 8.

"It's nothing special," I said

"Carolina will love it!" Raul insisted.

My husband, who had been standing behind me staring at the cake, reached his hands around and wiped them on the stomach of my apron. This tickled and I tried to wiggle out of his reach but he just squeezed my midsection tighter. I couldn't get away and he kissed me on the cheek and neck until I was giggling.

It was then that Carolina came out of her room, "What going on?" She saw her father embracing me and made a gagging noise, "Gross."

Raul stopped and called Carolina over, "Mira. Look what your mamá made you."

She glanced over at the cake. "Thanks," she said without smile.

Raul noticed, too. He asked, "Que? You don't like it?"

"No. I do. But, well it's so pink."

I jumped in, "You like pink."

Carolina rolled her eyes at me, "Pink is so little girl."

With that, she left the room and Raul and I had nothing to do but stare at each other. He broke first and started laughing. "Y que piensa que es? Viejita ya?"

I had to smile a little. "Raul, Alicia and Veronica went through this, too. They are going to act like they are older than they are until..."

"Hasta que, they are our age and then they'll act like kids," he said as he dipped his finger into the cake and ran into the kitchen before I could get angry. As I was about to chase my husband, I heard the front door open.

"Quien es," I asked.

Veronica and Alicia walked in giggling and quickly stashed something behind their backs. As if their sudden hiding of something wasn't enough to draw my attention, they both said, "Hi Mom" at the same time.

"Show me."

Alicia looked at Veronica. Veronica looked right at me, "Show you what?"

"Que tries?"

Ever the peacekeeper, Alicia told, "It's a gift for Carolina."

I looked between the girls. Raul and I had given them money two weeks ago to go to Basset Mall and buy their sister something. They came back with a cute denim purse. I pressed on because I had my doubts, "then show me."

It was Veronica's turn to look at Alicia but she scowled at her sister.

"Ma, it's a surprise," Alicia insisted. Veronica nodded once in agreement.

"And the purse?"

This time both sisters looked at each other.

Veronica spoke, "This is something special. Kind of a special sister to sister thing."

"We used our own money," Alicia added.

"Bueno. Go look at the cake. I finished decorating it while you were gone."

As the girls passed by I snatched the item from Veronica's unsuspecting hands. They jumped back and had o shaped mouths.

As I looked at what was in my hand, I said, "Cierre tu boca o una mosca se va entrar."

It was a roll of paper. I turned it over on my hand. At one end of the thin cylinder was a sticker that read "Bon Jovi."

Raul walked into the room, sensing that he was no longer the target of my anger. "Que es?" He asked and I honestly didn't know how to answer.

"No sé. Alicia, que es Bon Jovi?"

My husband laughed at me, "Aye, Lucia. It's a band."

"Que cantan?"

"Livin' on a Prayer. You like prayers, Ma." Veronica piped in. Alicia slapped her on the arm. She turned back to her sister, "What? She does."

"They bought this for Carolina. A sister to sister gift." I told my husband and he shrugged.

Back on the plane, I sum up the rest of the story, "I made the girls show me the picture on the poster. There was no way I was going to let them hang a picture of boys with long hair and open shirts on my little girl's wall."

The woman next to me laughs. "That must have been shocking to a mom in the 80's. I never thought of that from a mother's prospective. I probably had that poster."

It's my turn to laugh and then I go on, "Well, it was Raul that smoothed things over. The girls got to give Carolina the poster but she had to hang it on the back of her bedroom door so I couldn't see it. He always had a way of making the peace. Alicia's taken over that job since he

passed."

"I'm sorry for your loss," the woman next to me says.

"My dad just died." The melodious voice at the end of the aisle speaks. Somewhere in the middle of my story she had taken off her headphones and begun listening. "That's why I wear black." She points to her clothes. "Everyone thinks it's old fashioned but it makes me feel like I'm remembering him. At the very least, I think of him when I get dressed in the morning."

"I know what you mean." I point to my dress. The girl smiles at me. The mother sits quiet between us. For the first time, I notice she, too, is dressed in all black.

"We buried him at the State Cemetery. That's why we are flying out of Austin."

"What an honor," I say.

"No, it's not," the girl scowls at me and goes back to her iPod.

Her mother shakes her head, "I'm sorry. She's so... I guess I don't even know." She looks down at her wedding rings. She twirls them as she spoke. "She thinks that we should have buried him in El Paso. Closer to home. But the state cemetery is what he wanted. It was in his will. How could I go against my husband?"

I can see the tears in her eyes. It's obvious she doesn't want her husband far either. I reach for her hand. She looks up and Lord, there's this moment between us. This shared understanding that I would guess only widows have.

"Please, tell me. Does it get easier?" her eyes plead with me. She wants to hear that it gets better. She needs to hear that it doesn't.

"Losing a husband is never easy," I explain.

She nods and takes a deep breath to keep from crying. "What about--" Her head tilts back, gesturing to her daughter.

"Mothers and daughters, will always battle. I still argue with my girls, especially Veronica. We just have to hope that at the end of it, they will realize that we come from a place of love. There is no love like the love a mother has for her daughter. One day your girl will know what you have done for her and she will love you like you are her mother and like you as if you are her friend."

They announce we are about to begin our descent. Again, obedient, the girl takes off her headphones and turns off her iPod. She does not look at me or her mother. We release hands and take solace in the fact that we are not alone, even though when we go home and slip into our beds we will both miss our husbands and we will both have daughters who love and hate us.

We land without problems and the row of women in black part ways. I make my way to baggage claim. Carolina is waiting for me. We hug and get my bags. I look around for the woman and her daughter but I do not see them.

My daughter, who is just back from her honeymoon, drives me home. Still tired from her own vacation, Carolina helps me with my bags but doesn't stay. I am alone in my home. I've lived on Taylor St. since the girls were young. I walk around the house, giving myself a tour. I stroll down the hall and peer in each bedroom as if I would find the girls gathered on a bed giggling about whatever young girls giggle about.

With Raul gone there is no ESPN playing on the TV round the clock. With Alicia and Veronica in Austin there are no doors slamming from either their entering the house or their shutting themselves in their room in anger. Now, my baby Carolina is married off and her room feels the emptiest. The house is quiet. Just the opposite of the way it was when we celebrated Carolina's 13th birthday, the one I told the woman about.

I think of the woman on the plane, wondering why I never asked her her name. I think of

how I lied to her, told her that mothers and daughter's come around, become friends even. What a lie! Diosito, forgive me. Even Carolina who I am closest with wouldn't consider me a friend. I was always their mother first. Raul was the fun one. I was the "meany weenie." I still am, but we women in black have to stick together. She will face enough hardship raising her daughter alone. My girls are grown but I still have trouble without Raul.

The girls. Thinking of them reminds me to call Alicia and let her know I am home ok. I walk to the kitchen where I still have a corded phone and an answering machine. The light on the little black box is blinking.

"You have one message."

"Hey Ma." It's Veronica's voice. "So, I was at this little shop on Congress Street. The shop's called Mi Corazon. Great stuff. I'll take you next time you visit. Anyway, I found this beautiful cross for the guest room. Where do you think I should hang it? Call when you have a chance. Hope you had a good flight."

The machine beeps signaling the end of the message. I smile at myself. I have a feeling both the women in black from the plane would be telling me that sounded like an apology.

A Family First

January 20, 2012

Carolina Jimenez-Montevilla

The metal on metal scraping sound of my key entering the door knob caused me to close my eyes. I wondered what I would find inside. Would he have smashed all the plates? Turned the heater off so the winter chill of January crept into every inch of the house? When I asked him to move out and be gone by the time I returned from my business trip, I wasn't worried about those things. Now that I stood at the front door, I was. I couldn't bring myself to turn the key.

"Caro."

I spun around to find Andy, my neighbor, looking down at the ground.

"I saw your car pull up. I wanted to know how the trip went."

"Fine. Thanks," I said. "I didn't lose my job."

Andy answered, "That's good news. I'll let you get settled."

He turned and began to make his way to his house next door when I called out to him.

"Hey. How does it look in there?"

Andy shrugged, "Don't know."

I nodded. It was a useless gesture but I didn't know how to respond. My troubled marriage was public knowledge in the neighborhood. After the last big fight, I'd gone to Andy's house while Manny cooled off. Surely, the neighbors had seen Manny loading up his truck but Andy knew more than most. He knew what others only suspected. I planned on divorcing Manny.

"I don't want to go in" I admitted.

"Then don't."

I smiled. "I have to."

"Another thing." Andy looked down at the ground.

"The neighbors are talking?"

"No. Well, yes but that's not what I was going to say. Your mother stopped by."

I stepped in my house. There was no water on the floor so I figured he didn't try to flood the place. It was so quiet I could hear the hum of the fridge and the whir of the heater. Normally, when I got home from a work trip I'd hear Sports Center, Manny's snoring or both. The silence was a soft blanket on a frigid day.

Closing the front door behind me, I set down my travel bag. The entryway of the home looked normal. The only thing missing was the Dallas Cowboy key chain Manny kept his keys on. They were normally in the crystal dish that sat on the table near the door. The dish had been a wedding present from Tia Vallia. She signed the card from her and Tio Ignacio but everyone knew she didn't live with him anymore. Whether it was from Ignacio or not, my keys looked lonely in the bowl. That is, until I noticed the envelope under the bowl. It was from my stationary set. Manny's scribbled writing dictated the letter was for me. Leaving my bag on the floor, I made my way to the living room.

I walked to the bookcase. Manny'd taken his books; I knew this by the gaps in the collection. I wouldn't miss the sports biographies but I would miss the framed pictures. He'd also taken the pictures, the ones of his side of the family. After we'd married, I insisted he display the pictures since it was our home, our family. Those were gone. He'd conveniently left

behind our wedding photo. I ran my finger over the cherry wood finish of the bookcase. No dust. Taking a deep breath, I smelled Fabuloso. He'd cleaned.

"Jerk." I swatted at the wedding picture, knocking it to the floor. The crash vibrated through the house. Leaning over, I picked up the photo, staring at my husband's face. "How many years did we live together? Now you decide to help me clean the house." I placed the photo back on the bookshelf.

Twist and turn, I could not get comfortable in bed. I kept thinking of the letter sitting on my night stand. Finally, I flicked on the bedside light, got up and threw the letter in Manny's sock drawer. Well, what used to be his sock drawer, but now it was empty. Before I could get situated in the bed, a tapping sound came from the window. I did two things simultaneously: grabbing my phone and opening the bedside drawer to pull out my gun.

I speed-dialed Andy, "Hey."

"Why are you whispering?" he asked.

My eyes watched my window as if the curtains were predatory animals. "Someone's tapping on my window. Is it you?"

"Call the cops!"

Again, tap, tap, tap.

"So, it's not you?" I ask.

"Caro."

"Look out your window. Is there a car in front of my house? Maybe Manny's truck."

"Nothing. No car," Andy answered.

"I'm opening my curtain now."

"Don't! Are you crazy?"

"I've got my gun."

"To answer my question... yes."

"I'm putting the phone down and if I don't pick up again in 30 seconds, call the cops."

I set the phone down, checked my gun and aimed it at the window. I pulled the curtain back and pointed the gun straight at a small, screaming Mexican woman.

"Ma?!"

Through the glass I could hear, "Aye Dios mío!"

I picked up my phone. "Did you call the cops?"

"No."

"You should have. It's my mom."

"Que estás haciendo con una pistola?" My mom asked.

After I'd run outside to make sure the gun hadn't given my mother a heart attack, I brought her inside the house.

"What were you doing at my bedroom window?" I asked

"I didn't want to scare you by ringing the doorbell," my mother said as she sat at my kitchen table. I stood at my kitchen sink filling up my tea kettle with water. My mother did not meet my eyes but she went on, "I don't like guns."

I shut off the faucet and set the kettle on the stove. I moved over toward the cupboard and removed two mugs. "Well, I'm a single woman living alone. I need to protect myself."

"You aren't single."

I slammed the cupboard door. "Is that why you're here?"

"Manny'd never let you have a gun."

"Aye Mamá. He's not perfect. He's the one that gave me the gun. Two Christmases ago."

My mother swatted away the idea as if she were swatting a fly, "he got you the tennis bracelet that year."

I rolled my eyes. "It was a fake. We knew you'd freak if I opened a gun Christmas morning. He gave it to me a week before and we picked out a fake gift for me to open at your house Christmas morning."

"Mentirosa."

I shook my head, "why is it the second Manny became your son-in-law, he could do no wrong? You were the one who didn't want me dating him."

"Knock, knock." called Andy's voice from the front door.

"In the kitchen," I called back, bothered by the fact my mom would not be able to answer my question.

"Quien es?" my mother asked.

"Es Andy. Mi neighbor."

Andy walked into the kitchen. "Hi, Mrs. Jimenez."

She nodded in his direction. The kettle began to whistle, spurring me to action. I turned off the heat and the whistle died down leaving the three of us in silence.

I grabbed the Sanka coffee out of the pantry along with my Sleepytime Tea. "Tea, Andy? I'd offer you coffee but instant doesn't count as coffee in my opinion."

Andy smiled. "No thanks. I'll just get the--"

"Oh, the gun! Yeah, thanks for taking it. Mamá won't sleep in a house that has a gun and

she sent her cab home."

"I'll just get the gun and go. You ladies probably have to talk."

"Pos que se vaya. Porque esta platicando?"

"Ma! He's white but he knows Spanish. He grew up in Laredo and is a freaking Spanish teacher at the community college." I turned to Andy, "Sorry. The gun's in my nightstand. You can go grab it."

"Lo vas a dejar en tu cuarto?" my mother whispered.

"Yes."

My mother made no reply. She simply performed the sign of the cross, touching her fingers to her forehead, chest and each shoulder in turn. Her lips moved a bit and I assumed my mother was praying that I, her youngest, would not go straight to hell for owning a gun and letting a man other than my husband in my bedroom.

A stream of sunlight broke through the curtain that was still askew from the previous night's events. I turned around and tried to go back to sleep. I knew if I stood up to fix the gap between the curtain and the wall I would have to go pee and if I did that I would never get back to sleep. Willing myself to go back to sleep, I pulled the cover over my head.

Thump, thump. I turned and half expected to see my mother at my window again. The noise was duller than the sharp tapping on glass. The noise had come from inside the house.

"Mamá?" I called. Thump, thump. I groaned and got up.

The noise grew louder once I opened the door.

"Ma!"

"In the living room," my mother answered.

Padding down the hall, I wondered what my mother was doing and when I crossed the threshold of the living room I saw.

"Sweet Jesus," I exclaimed.

"Si. Mira qué lindo."

I stared at a poster sized painting of the Virgin Mary holding the baby Jesus. "You hung a painting in my living room without even asking? Where did you even get that thing?"

Making her way down the step stool, my mother kept glancing up to admire her handy work. "What kind of Catholic doesn't have a picture of la virgen in their home?"

"The kind that hasn't been to church in over a decade. Mamá, you can't just make holes in my wall."

Again, my thought received my mother's token hand wave of dismissal. "I suppose you are going to tell me I shouldn't have made breakfast either," she said.

"You really didn't need to." My mother shrugged and I went on, "but just out of curiosity, what did you make?"

We made our way to the kitchen. "I just brought a few things I had around the house. Menudo, tamales, papas con chorizo, borracho beans," Mamá listed.

"Seriously, how did you bring all this stuff? You showed up last night with a purse. No way all that food and the giant Jesus fit in your bag."

"Mamá? Where do you want your suitcase?" called a masculine voice from the vicinity of the front door.

I closed my eyes and shook my head. "Por favor, dime que no... Dime que no es..."

"Manny!" My mother opened her arms as Manny entered the kitchen carrying an old suitcase in each hand. Manny let himself be hugged by his mother-in-law and watched my

reaction. I simply turned and walked out of the kitchen, back into the living room.

"Carolina, donde vas?" my mother asked breaking away from the hug.

"To pray to baby Jesus."

Despite my love of my mother's cooking, I could not bring myself to eat. Having Manny so near me, knowing my mother orchestrated this whole meeting turned my stomach. I gave up, "Excuse me. I have to use the lady's room."

Once in my bedroom, I opened the bedroom window and climbed out, startling a woman walking her dog. I put my index finger to my lip and whispered, "My mother is visiting." The woman smiled, "I understand."

Tiptoeing past the still open front door, I cursed Manny's lack of courtesy. By not closing the door after himself, he was letting the cold air in. Shaking my head at this typical Manny behavior, I made my way to Andy's house. I knocked and as always he answered. He held a coffee mug that read "Keep Calm and Drink Coffee."

"A suggestion?" I asked.

"An order." He answered and looked down at my feet, "Why are you outside and barefoot in January?"

I looked down at my feet, sighed, took a big drink of coffee and said, "I snuck out my bedroom window."

"I'm guessing that means instead of a novelty mug I should have gone for the Khalua?" He gazed over at my house and noticed the red pick-up truck parked in the drive way. "Is that?"

I nodded, taking another sip of coffee.

"Did your mom?"

I nodded and kept drinking the coffee. I emptied the mug. "You should have skipped the novelty mug, skipped the Khalua and gone for the vodka. Straight vodka." I walked around Andy and stepped into his house.

I was in the shower while Andy stood in the kitchen cleaning up the breakfast dishes. There was a knock at the front door. Looking through the peephole Andy saw Manny. He made his way to the guest bathroom, knocked and cracked the door open a bit. "Manny's at the door."

I let the water run over my face. Turning off the water, I reached for a towel. "Tell him to leave or I'll shoot him. My gun is over here after all."

There was a faint knock coming from the vicinity of the front of the house, then the chime of the door bell shot through the home. "How about I just lie and say you aren't here?" Andy suggested

Wrapped in a towel I opened the bathroom door the whole way, "I was barefoot and in pajamas. My phone, purse and keys all stayed in the house. Where else would I have gone?"

"Fine. Gun threat it is."

Andy walked toward the front door of his home and opened it. I followed him but hung back in the hallway so Manny could not see me.

"Hello, Manny," Andy said.

"Where is she?"

Andy shrugged, "I was told to tell you that you should leave because both Caro and her gun are here and only one of them wants to see you. It's not the one you're hoping."

"Why can't she tell me that myself? Why does she have to sneak off to your place whenever things get rough at home?"

"You know what? She shouldn't. But when you know you've been asked to leave and you use her mother to get you invited back, well that's just some low blow shit that she shouldn't have to stand for. Personally, I want you to stick around. I'd love to see you and her gun meet face to face."

For a second, Manny had no words. When he found them his shoulders slumped and he seemed less sure of himself, "I just came to tell her I was leaving so she could go back to the house."

"So kind of you to let her back in her home."

Manny's shoulders puffed up as his anger rose, "That's my house, too. I have every right to be there."

"Is that a fact?" I asked, coming out of the hallway, still wrapped in a towel.

"Carolina?"

"You lost all rights to the house the first time you drained our savings account to pay for your gambling habit. That was a year into the marriage. I bought out your portion of the mortgage. We separated the money. Different savings and checking accounts. Ring a bell?"

"Babe," Manny said as tried to move closer but Andy moved between us. "Let's talk about this in private," Manny said tiptoeing to peer at me over Andy.

I had to look over Andy's shoulder to see my husband, too. It was the first time I noticed Andy's physicality. He had strong broad shoulders, the kind you would expect to see on a man who spent his days doing physical labor not teaching Spanish.

Manny grabbed my attention with his next comment. He must have noticed that I was wearing nothing but a towel. "You're cheating on me aren't you?"

It was my turn to step between Andy and Manny because if those shoulders were any

indication of his workout routine, Andy could knock my pudgy hubby on his ass.

"I'm going to say this once. Andy is a friend. I am not having an affair. He knows, he's always known the crap you pull because he is a friend. If you were half as trustworthy as he is, we wouldn't be in this mess."

Manny's shoulder fell again but he didn't move from Andy's porch. "Go back to my house," I order. "Hug my mother. Tell her goodbye and mean it because you will not come back."

She stared out the window as I walked over from Andy's house. I was dressed in men's sweatpants, an oversized t-shirt from a Rolling Stones concert and men's slippers. She could not watch and returned to her perch in my kitchen.

She could hear as I slid off the slippers I'd borrowed from Andy. I'm sure she was praying the whole time. "Mamá, I'm home. Donde estas?"

"Kitchen."

She held an envelope with an embossed M and I could feel my eyes burning over it. I sat across from her, watching my mother's face but she stared at the letter.

"Di me," she finally spoke. "Why did you kick your husband out of your home?"

I stiffened. "It's private. Like that letter should have been."

She tossed the envelope across the table and when it landed it was addressed to "Mamá." She cleared her throat and began, "When he left for Andy's he was angry. When he came back from Andy's he was calmodo. He marched straight to the office. When he came out, he handed me this, kissed me on the cheek, asked me to forgive him. Then, he left."

I finally picked up the envelope. It was still sealed. Watching me, she added, "I wanted

to give you a chance to finally tell me the truth."

"Oh Ma, what does the truth matter? He's my husband, remember? For better or worse? 'Til death do us part? You were there. You gave away the bride."

"I remember. I was there. But do you remember I am your mother and I am here for you?"

I stared at my mother and broke my silence, "Six months ago Manny began stealing small amounts of my sample pills. He was selling them to cover a gambling debt that had slowly been mounting for the past two years. Last week, the company inventoried my supply. I was almost fired, Mom." I sent the letter sliding back across the table. "I'm guessing this letter is a confession."

"You got a letter, too?"

"I haven't read it."

Mamá nodded. "Go read yours. I'll read mine and we will determine what to do. Marriage is a sacred thing. It shouldn't be broken lightly."

I shook my head, "I'll read the letter but I have already decided what I'm going to do. I am divorcing him."

"No one on either my side or your father's side of the family has ever gotten a divorce. Think this over."

"I have. Trust is a sacred thing, too, Ma," I said as I left the kitchen and my mother remained seated. Entering my bedroom, I made my way to the dresser. Opening the top drawer, where Manny used to keep his socks, I retrieved the letter I found when I returned from my business trip.

After getting settled on the bed, I tore open the seal and dumped the contents of the

envelope out. Two keys fell out, they were his house keys. I picked them up and held them tightly in my hand. That was it. Nothing else was in the envelope. This made the separation more final than the empty drawer, missing books or quiet home.

I walked back out to sit with my mother. Mamá sat at the table, her letter open and read. I began filling the tea kettle again. Without looking at my mother I asked, "What did he say?"

She didn't answer right away. She was quiet so long I had to turn and make sure she was ok. Mamá suddenly looked old. Her shoulders were slumped. "He asked for forgiveness," she answered.

Pulling my coffee mugs from the cabinet I took a deep calming breath. "Your choice. You can forgive him if you want, Mamá."

"He asked for help."

I turned to look at my mom. "Help? What do you mean? Like a gambling rehab?"

"No. He wants me to take him to confession and has asked me to help get you back."

I looked away, squeezing my eyes shut. I busied my hands getting out teaspoons, the tea and setting out my mother's coffee. My mother cleared her throat, "Would that be so bad?"

I slammed down the jar of Sanka coffee. "Yes," I answered as the kettle reached its whistle. The tone of voice and the screeching whistle hung in the room even after I removed the kettle from the heat.

"Confession?" I asked. "He's never even apologized for what he did. He'll beg God's forgiveness but not mine."

"You think you are greater than God?"

"No. That's the problem Mamá, God is all forgiving and I am not. Manny broke my

trust."

"It was medicine. You are going to let a few pills ruin what is supposed to be a lifelong commitment?"

I shook my head, "It wasn't a few pills, Ma. And it wasn't the first time. A year into the marriage, he emptied our savings. Since then, we have separate finances. Which is why, to get money from me, he had to steal the pills. Over the last two years he has lied and stolen. In the end though, the most unforgivable thing Manny has done is steal my mother's love from me."

"What choice did I have but to love him? You brought him into this family." I turned to face my mother and she kept going. "Earlier you asked why Manny can do no wrong. Well, you married him. He is now my son. If I don't focus on the good, I will never be able to understand how my baby married someone so..."

She trailed off. I sat down next to her and placed a hand on hers. "I made a mistake. Let me correct it."

Pulling her hand away, she shook her head.

I stood, went to my room and left my mother staring at the empty coffee mugs on the kitchen counter. Grabbing my cell from the nightstand I dialed. The phone rang twice and when there was an answer I spoke quickly, "Come get your mother."

Marching down the hall to the guest room, I grabbed my mother's suitcases from the hallway. In the room I began to throw my mother's clothes in the bags. After a few minutes, I marched into the living room, leaving the bags off at the front door. I pulled down the picture of the Virgin Mary. When I reached the threshold between the entryway and the living room I spun on my heels and marched up to the bookshelf.

For a moment I stared at my wedding photo. I watched it as if it would move, change.

The tilt of my chin in the picture brought tears to my eyes. The line of my chin reached for him, yearned to kiss him. Pulling my eyes from the photo and my mind from the memory, I seized the photo and added it to my mother's things.

The doorbell rang and Mamá came out of the kitchen to see who had arrived. I took a deep breath to brace myself. When I opened the door, Manny stood there.

"Manny?" asked Mamá.

I turned to face my mother, "Manny is here to take you home."

"Carolina..."

"No. I love you because you are my mother. Right now, we don't agree and I am at a point where I don't need to battle with you."

Manny moved into the house and picked up his mother-in-law's suitcase. His eyes found the picture frame and he glanced up at me. Noticing where his eyes had come from, I nodded. "That is for you." He turned out the door and didn't return.

Mamá hadn't moved. "Carolina, are you sure?"

"There are things I am going to have to do that you will never approve of. You should go."

Mamá walked to the door with her chin tilted up in defiance. I reached for my mother's arm. Mamá smiled until I added, "take la virgen."

Mamá's smile fell. She reached her head up to kiss me on the cheek. "Keep her. Since I can't be here, she'll watch over you." She stepped out of the home and I was really alone. I stared down at the painting my mother had lovingly, if not misguidedly, hung. I picked it up, took it back in the living room and placed it on the wall again.

Part IV

Vallia

Mikimotos

December 12, 1998

Vallia Jimenez-Ortega

I sit in my car at the parking lot of MedPark building. I contemplate rain. I worry about crossing the street in my Gucci heels. As the time for my appointment approaches, I take a deep breath, open my car door and step out. I walk about two paces before I slide, catching myself on the trunk of my Lexus.

Despite the rough start, I make it to the building without slipping again. The entry way makes me pause for thought. I've never understood the design concept that seascape colors make guests in your home or office feel calmer. The seafoam colored walls, the painting of the lighthouse, and even the framed sand dollar scream that the décor is a sham. This is El Paso, Texas and while we have the Rio Grande, water isn't really natural in this desert town. I bet the framed sand dollar is actually plastic.

There are two doors before me and I know which one to choose but I hold back. It isn't until the door behind me opens that I remember I can't stand in the hall all day. Entering, a woman dressed in black from head to toe, walks with the shuffle that only an elderly person who has lived a full life can entirely own. As the woman opens her mouth to say hello or good morning or some other equally kind greeting, I give a nod and quickly enter the correct door, leaving the mourning woman behind.

As I sit in the empty waiting room, I wonder if the woman in mourning is judging me. If she knows what I'm here to find out. Could she know the actions I will take? The woman probably would judge me. The papers on the clipboard are filled but I hold on to them a bit

longer. I don't want my hands to be empty.

A few more women enter the doctor's office, and I look at them. Some are reading their own books, some flip through the selection of year old magazines. I want something to keep my hands entertained. I look about but even the items that are there to busy me seem to mock me. *Ladies' Home Journal* seems to wag a finger at me. The liberal and open minded *Cosmopolitan* shakes her head in disapproval. Running from the raised eyebrow the cover of *Marie Claire* is about to give me, I return the clipboard.

Twenty minutes of torture later, I am called back to the exam room. I follow the nurse's instructions, neatly folding my clothes and resting my purse on top of the pile. The posters for monthly self breast examinations, while not your typical wall décor, ease my mind as the paper exam gown scratches at my skin. I lay back on the exam table and wait.

There is a light before my eyes. It's not the "I'm about to die" kind of white light. It is more the fluorescent "I'm about to have a medical procedure done." At this point, I pray for the former. Everything about this room starts to scare me. I've come to this doctor for the past six years but today is different. Raising my head to look around I notice the sterile instruments sitting on the doctor's tray. I swallow hard and put my head back down.

A single smiley face sticker, about the size of a quarter, sits in the middle of the fluorescent light panel. It is a normal yellow smiley face with the black lines for the smile and eyes. I stare at it as my Nokia cell phone rings. I curse myself for not remembering to turn it off. The caller ID says Ignacio. I curse again and answer.

"Hey babe. I'm stuck at the hospital, again," he explains.

I close my eyes and rub the bridge of my nose. The opening of the exam room door changes my expression from pain to embarrassment.

My doctor speaks as she enters, "Hello, Vallia. Nice to see you again."

"Where are you?" my husband asks.

"Sorry," is all I can muster and I direct it at both. I shake my head as if my face were an etch-a-sketch and the movement resets me. Turning my back on my doctor, I continue speaking to my husband. "Don't worry about tonight. I won't wait up but I have to go. I'm at the manicurist. Bye."

The blush on my face can't be concealed but the doctor, ever the professional, pretends not to have heard the bold faced lie her patient had just told. She clears her throat, "Alright Vallia. Talk to me."

I sit on the exam table. "You first."

"Fair enough," my doctor nods and looks down at some paperwork. "The urine test came back positive. You're pregnant."

I lean my head back. I may have been looking to God for guidance but I find the smiley face sticker instead. The smiley face lies.

"I'm pretty sure my husband is having an affair. I'll need a full STD check done. As for the urine test..." I look at my doctor. I wait until the doctor stops making notes on the chart. When she looks up at me, I continue, "I can't have a baby. Is there anything that can be done today or will I have to come back at a later date?"

I walk out to my car. Despite the wet asphalt, I don't falter this time. I make it to my car. I start it but can't bring myself to drive just yet. Without turning, I notice someone getting in the passenger side door of the car next to me. As I reach to grab my seat belt, I catch the eye of the neighboring car's passenger. It is the lady in mourning. The woman doesn't smile, she merely gives a nod as the driver of her car backs them out of the parking spot and out of the lot. As I

watch the car leave, I shut off my car. I rest my head on the steering wheel and wait for the tears to come. They never do.

A month later and I'm still not happy. Picking a necklace for the hospital's annual Christmas party isn't easy. The outfit itself took several hours of searching fashion magazines for the latest trends, a week of shopping and an amount of money that would have made me cringe a few years back. Labels are not my thing but when your husband is the most successful surgeon in the city, certain things are expected.

Sitting on the bed next to my outfit, I stare at the tag on the dress. Versace. Four years earlier the names of canonized 19th century authors rolled off my lips to class after class of college freshman. Now, the only names of note that pass my lips can be bought at Nordstrom's, not Barnes and Nobel.

Sighing, I turn to open my jewelry box. I flip open the top cover and pull out the diamond pendent on a gold chain. Mamá and Papá gave it to me when I graduated college. As I stood my mother reached around my neck doing up the clasp. "Tu papá quería que te regalamos esto para tú boda, pero..." Mamá gave a not too subtle hint.

Mamá didn't want me to go to college at first. I was supposed to marry and have children right away. Dad didn't believe this. He made it so Mamá thought that letting me go to school would enable me to meet a man who would go places. After all, her college educated boys were doing well for themselves.

I threw her a crumb of hope about the prospect of her youngest getting married, "you may just have to buy another as a wedding present."

"Ignacio?" she asked.

"He hasn't asked, but I think maybe soon."

Mamá smiled brightly and hugged me close to her. "He's a good man. He's going places."

I pulled away and sat on the edge of my bed, "Yeah. To med school."

My mother sat next to me and put her hand on my knee. I leaned my head on her shoulder, "I know if he goes it will be better for our future but I'd miss him. And you know what they say about when the cat is away."

Mamá laughed at me. "Que cat?" I smiled but I was still too sad to laugh. "You will marry him Vallia. He will get you a big house and make you happy."

Sitting on my bed, alone, I'm still not happy. Turning away from the dress on the bed and back to my nightstand, I open the drawer of my jewelry box. When I do, I notice my pearls are not in their usual place. I turn back to the bed where the age appropriate cocktail dress spreads out across my down comforter. The decision made for me; I stare at the diamond pendant on the dress.

With the last choice made, I become almost robotic in nature. For the rest of the night the path lies out before my feet. I'll shower, dress, and as I put the final touches on my makeup, Ignacio will arrive. He'll pour himself a drink and change into a tux. He'll help me fasten my necklace, assist with my coat, and open doors for me. Arriving at the party, we'll locate the senior surgeons, mingle, have a drink, smile for photos and head out to the car. By the time we arrive back home, the door opening chivalry of earlier will be nothing but a memory.

I turn the shower knobs and let the water run for a while. Sitting on the edge of the tub, I occasionally dip my manicured nails into the running water. Once the temperature's right, I stand and begin to disrobe. As I unbutton my shirt I turn and look at the door. Stopping before I

finish undoing the second button, I make my way to the door and turn the lock.

Someone has taken my pearls. Someone who shouldn't have been in my bedroom, has been in there. With the door locked, I feel better. Taking a deep breath I continue to disrobe.

Once under the water, the missing pearls and the locked door are lost in the steam filling the bathroom. The water melts away my worries, the way it carries away the suds that linger on my back. As I lean my head back into the water I think I hear a knock at the door. Snapping my head forward, I listen. Nothing. It's nothing.

But, there it is again. This time, "Vallia? Why's the door locked?" follows the knock. I throw open the shower curtain and only as an afterthought, turn off the water.

"Coming," I answer.

I rush to the door, but before I can reach for the lock, I turn and grab for a towel to wrap myself in.

I open the door with a simple, "Hi."

Ignacio scans the bathroom. His eyes open the way a toddler stares at a jack-in-the-box that has already gotten the better of them. He leans forward and kisses my damp hair but stops short of embracing me. He disrobes, loosening the strings of his surgical scrubs.

"May I join you?" he asks, smiling for the first time.

I step away from the door, "We'll never get out of here in time. I'll use the guest shower to finish up." And with that, I go.

I pause at the top of the stairs to look at him. He stands by the door, his hands held in front of him, more like a bodyguard than my husband. With a sigh, I make my way down the steps. He never turns to look. When I stand a few feet from him, my presence forces him to

look at me. "Are you ready?" he asks.

I shake my head, eyes looking at the hardwood floor of our entry way. "Can you fasten my necklace?" I hold the diamond pendant up. He opens the door and walks out toward the car.

We sit in the Maserati in utter silence. Ignacio doesn't even turn on the radio. I'm able to fasten the chain around my neck before we pull out of the drive but that's not the point. While I know why he's so cold, I am angry at him for upsetting our normal routine.

I brave a question. "Did something happen at work?"

"No."

Silence. I clear my throat out of the need to hear something other than the hum of the engine. I try to keep the conversation going. "I was just wondering. You came home early and-
_"

"And your husband can only come home early if something bad has happened?"

Breathing deep in through my nose and out my mouth I prepare for the argument. I start my defense, "You can come home whenever you like. You know that."

"Come home to a locked door," he says.

I stare at his hands clenching the steering wheel. In noticing his white knuckles, I also see he isn't wearing his wedding band.

"I only had the door locked because I'm on edge. You see, my pearls are missing." I point to his hand, "just like your wedding band."

He scoffs, "you know better. I can't wear it in surgery."

"You aren't in surgery. You are going to a party."

Ignacio clenches the steering wheel tighter. I go on, "I'm worried one of the maids is stealing. Then I got to thinking, what if it isn't them? What if someone else was in the house?"

It's, well, it's hard to be home alone. Locking the bathroom door was an extra precaution. Probably unnecessary, but honey, my pearls. Someone's been in our room."

I turn my upper body to look at him better. He maintains his posture, eyes fixed on the road. Even at the stop light he doesn't face me. I'm sure he will counter with comments like "You have an over active imagination" or "Imagine my surprise. My wife now locks me out of our bathroom." But, for the second time tonight I'm shocked. He says nothing.

I'm shy at these events. Normally, Ignacio leads me around by the hand. When he wants to introduce me, he begins by turning back to find me. Then, taking his hand out of mine, placing it on the small of my back, he ushers me a few steps forward so I can shake the hand of Mr. and Mrs. So and So who've been donors for the hospital for X number of years.

Tonight's different. He doesn't hold my hand. I'm forced to catch up with him and latch on to his arm. So, rather than hiding a pace or two behind him, I'm next to him. People notice me first. "This must be your wife. Ignacio, where have you been hiding her?" people tease. I smile, shake hands and join in on conversations.

"What do you do, Mrs. Ortega?" a man in an Armani tux asks.

"I'm a housewife, though I used to teach 19th century English Lit."

His nose scrunches up as if a bad smell had arrived in the middle of our conversation. "I'm horrible at that kind of stuff."

"What kind of stuff?" Ignacio asks.

"All of it. 19th century, literature, poetry, Shakespeare," Armani tux replies.

I step in, "Shakespeare was writing from the late fifteen hundreds to the early sixteen hundreds. Not the 19th century."

Ignacio, afraid that I've embarrassed him and cost the hospital a potential donor, squeezes my hand. The man picks up on Ignacio's gesture. "She's right. See how awful I am? I don't even know the correct century of the most famous writer of all time."

I laugh, "Don't worry. You should have seen some of my students. But they left my class better literature scholars than when they entered so I feel like I did my job."

I glance at Ignacio, who normally would say something along the lines of now my job is being his wife, but he is distracted, eyes wandering to the bathroom. "Excuse me," he says and is off in that direction.

"Tell me more about yourself, Mrs. Ortega," the man continues.

I smile again, "Please call me Vallia."

He holds out his hand for me to shake, "I'm Joseph Cooper."

Unused to the attention, I absentmindedly toy with my necklace, the concern for my missing pearls never far from my mind. Joe, as he insists I call him, tells me about his law firm while I detail my charity work. It is when Joe offers to get me a drink that I realize Ignacio has been gone a long time. I decline the drink, "I really should see where Ignacio ran off to."

After circling the room and not spotting my husband, I decide to wait by the restroom. The door to the men's bathroom opens and a woman steps out. I don't meet her eyes and she doesn't meet mine. I do glance at her outfit. More specifically, I notice the clasp on her pearls. It has moved from the traditional spot at the back of her neck to just below the collar bone.

The woman is about to enter the female bathroom when I call her, "Wait."

The woman freezes the way a child does when they have been caught trying to sneak out of the house. I take a step closer to her and say, "I was just noting your necklace."

The mere mention of the pearls causes the woman to draw her hand towards her strand.

She meets my eyes. "They were a gift," she says by way of explanation.

I give one nod and ask, "From?"

The woman looks down, taking a sudden interest in the tile. She doesn't move and so I go on. "I have a strand just like that. The reason I stopped you is your clasp is showing. You might want to turn the strand so the clasp is in the back."

The woman follows the suggestion. She stares at me as she does this and for a moment I burn with anger. She can stand there in my pearls and look me in the eye. Does she feel no shame? I want her to speak. I would love to hear her made up excuse or reasons or even an apology.

I swallow to quiet the flame burning in my stomach. "Funny, my strand does the same thing. Jeweler said the pearls aren't weighted right. It makes the strand heavier on one side and the clasp, without fail, moves to the front."

The door to the men's room opens again and Ignacio walks out. The woman flees into the safety of the women's bathroom. I stare at my husband not sure what else to do.

"We should get going," Ignacio announces.

He puts his arm out for me to link my arm but I don't move from my spot. He shakes his head, "I'll tell everyone you felt ill and we need to head home. Wait by the door."

I feel like I'm screaming but I know it is only a whisper that escapes as I say, "I guess there was someone in our room."

He takes a step toward me and he is so quick I step back in an instinctual retreat, "Don't you dare go in that bathroom."

I walk around him and head toward the front door.

"Vallia!"

I look up from my place on the wooden bench near the entrance. Joe walks toward me, a little short of breath. "When Dr. Ortega said you weren't well I wanted to check on you and say good night."

"That's kind of you, but I'm fine," I say but don't meet his eyes.

"So I didn't have to sprint out here to make sure a sick woman wasn't left alone to wait for her husband to say his goodbyes and pull the car around?"

I laugh a little, and as my shoulders move up and down, I realize the laughter has turned into tears. Joe sits next to me on the bench and puts a hand on my shoulder. "Should I go get your husband?"

"No," I say loud enough for another couple exiting the party to stop and stare at Joe and me. I notice that his hand is still on my shoulder and I find it comforting. "I lied. I'm not fine. I just confirmed what I had guessed for months. Ignacio has a mistress, and the son of a bitch gave her my pearls."

Joe pulls a handkerchief out of his tuxedo pocket. "My dad always told me to carry one." I dab my eyes and look at this man. His blue eyes stare into me and I know that I'll be able to smile again. He removes his hand from my shoulder and reaches into another pocket. He hands me a business card.

"Oh God. You're not a divorce lawyer, are you?" I ask.

He laughs. "See. You made a joke. We are making progress." He points to his card, "My firm is currently looking for someone to head up a new PR department."

"You're offering me a job? Why?"

"I'm offering an interview and I don't really know why. Maybe because you're pretty?"

I look at him with a look that must have displayed my suspicion because he went on, "God. You haven't even been hired and I've already opened up the firm to a sexual harassment lawsuit. Give me a chance to take my foot out of my mouth."

I nod, "Give it a try."

"I think you are the type of woman that helps those around her achieve great things. And while, yes, you are lovely, which does help in the PR world, I think if you helped your husband in his success and you could give our firm half that attention then we will be able to achieve many great things."

I look at the card, "I know nothing about public relations."

"Then toss the card."

I blink, surprised at his blunt response. "My minor was in communications."

I notice Ignacio walking over. I hide the business card in my clutch purse and stand. Joe stands as well. The men shake hands. Ignacio holds out his hands and I hand him my coat. He helps me put it on but I am sure it is for Joe's benefit.

"I'll get the car," Ignacio says and with a nod in Joe's direction he exits.

We stand in silence until Joe speaks, "He puts on a good show. Had you not said anything, I really would have thought you were sick and he was a concerned husband."

"Joe," I start, "I'll take the interview."

He smiles, shakes my hand and leaves me to wait for my husband.

As Ignacio drives us home, I lean my head back and close my eyes. "Mr. Cooper offered me a PR job at his firm. I think I'll take the interview."

"You don't need a job," he responds.

I shrug, "You don't need a mistress."

"Vallia, this isn't up for discussion."

"Neither is my potential job. You have your distraction. I'll have mine."

Ignacio clears his throat, "Maybe we should get you some new pearls. That'll make you feel better."

"I liked my old pearls," I answer. "New pearls aren't going to make me want to keep being a stay at home wife. New pearls aren't going to make me forget that you fucked another woman in the men's bathroom tonight."

Ignacio's hand snaps toward me and I flinch. His hand never makes contact. He stops himself and returns to clenching the steering wheel.

"Tomorrow, you will get new pearls. A symbol. A new start." Neither of us said anything more. What could we say?

The revelations of the evening put a damper on the mood at home. Instead of Ignacio drunkenly fondling me, he undresses and goes straight to bed with his back to my side of the bed. If he were a lesser man, he would be ashamed. If he were a greater man, he would have asked for forgiveness. However, Ignacio is the man he is so he sleeps.

When I wake the morning after the Christmas party, I hope the doctor visit and the party have all been one long, crazy nightmare. Ignacio walks in from the bathroom, dressed in slacks and buttoning up his shirt. His face makes no sign of having emotion. He states, "Let's go buy some pearls." Apparently, the party, and the information I learned at the party, had not been a dream.

I sit up but linger in bed. Resting my head against the headboard, I pull my wedding

band almost all the way off my finger to the point where the ring encircles the tip, like a halo on an angel. I push the ring back down and repeat the procedure until, minutes later, Ignacio peers into the bedroom again. "Would you rather I go pick? Have it be a surprise?" I shake my head, remove my legs from the warm protection of the bedding and place my feet on the bedroom floor.

I look at my husband as he signs the receipt at the jewelry store. I'm now the proud owner of a set of Mikimoto pearls and with Christmas so close, Ignacio even buys me matching earrings. Staring at the reflection of the strand of pearls around my neck doesn't make me smile. At sixteen inches of length, the jeweler called the necklace a pearl choker. I slide a finger under the necklace and pull it gently away from my neck. It isn't all that tight but I assume nooses don't feel tight at first. My eyes flick to the case with the wedding rings. Staring at a promotional photo of a husband and wife, I twirl my own ring and wonder if Ignacio and I are ever as happy as the models in the photos pretend to be.

"Vallia?" my husband calls.

I turn at the sound of my name. I smile even though my eyes sting with potential tears. I hold them in. I usually do. Mirroring the smile of the woman in the photo, I clear my throat and ask, "Are we done?"

While Ignacio turns on the radio and even rests his hand on my leg, I can't help but feel this car ride is quieter than the car rides to and from the Christmas party the previous night. When we arrive home my quiet intensifies to the point Ignacio clears his throat just for noise. I make myself busy by cleaning even though the cleaning service arrived just as we left for the jewelers that morning. Fed up, Ignacio stands up. "I'm making lunch. What do you want?"

For a moment, I stand, silent. Then I tilt my head and just look at my husband. In

response to my head tilt, he replies with a movement of his own. Shaking his head, "What did I do now?"

"Nothing, you never do anything wrong," I reply.

"Everyone makes mistakes."

"Deliberately going into the kitchen and making a mess after I just cleaned, isn't a mistake."

"I know that you've been trying to busy yourself around the house but you and I both know it was the cleaning service I paid for that cleaned the kitchen. I can mess it up if I want to."

"So," I snap at him, "because you make the money you are entitled do whatever you want?"

Ignacio shakes his head. "You want to yell at me? Yell at me for what you want to yell at me for. Don't yell at me for trying to make a sandwich."

"I have no idea what you're talking about." I look at my hand, avoiding his eyes, and toy with my wedding ring.

Ignacio throws his hands up in the air. He has either given up or is asking God to send a lightning bolt to his wife. He stomps out of the room but not toward the kitchen. I take up his spot on the couch. I sit at the edge of the seat, back so straight I would make an etiquette teacher proud.

A moment later, Ignacio appears in exercise clothes and running shoes. "Where are you going?" I ask my husband. I stand from my spot on the couch and make my way to the front door, standing between him and his exit. I look like a sentry that'd been dressed by Coco Chanel.

"I can't dirty the kitchen so I'll go for a run and then grab some lunch out."

"Don't go. You can use the kitchen. As a matter of fact, I'll make you something. Whatever you want."

Ignacio moves around me. "I want to go for a run and grab lunch out."

"Ignacio," I call out, not sure what I want to say.

Turning to look at me he softens his furrowed brow and fakes a smile, "You're tired. You had a tough night. Why don't you go to bed and rest?" And then, he leaves.

For a while I stand stunned, staring at the closed front door. I reach up and feel the round pearls caressing my neck. Jerking my hand away as if it burns, I start toward the kitchen.

When Ignacio arrives home, night's fallen and the house is dark. "Vallia," he calls as he flips on some lights in the entryway. I don't make a sound. He arrives in the dining room. I look nothing like the woman whom he left at the front door hours earlier. Stripped of my Chanel skirt and high heel pumps, I am in a simple pair of jeans and a white t-shirt.

His favorite dishes decorate the table. There are the albóndigas his mom gave me the recipe to, homemade refried beans, fresh tortillas and a pitcher of his favorite white sangria. With so much food to notice it is easy to miss the taper candles that have been lit so long the wax drips on the table.

"What's this?"

"You were hungry when you left." I stand and blow out the candles. Continuing to talk, I move to flip on the light switch. "And now, you are home so late. You're probably hungry again. Eat."

Ignacio reaches out for my hand. "Thank you. Join me?"

Pulling my hand away, I move back to where I sat. From behind the chair, I wheel out a

suitcase. Ignacio eyes the suitcase and then me. Stopping in front of him, I reach for the clasp and undo my necklace.

"I'm sure you can still return them," I tell Ignacio as I drop the pearls on the plate intended for my husband.

He doesn't breathe. He must be thinking, things were bad but this bad? He doesn't look at me. Maybe he wonders what it is that is finally making me go. He doesn't speak. The only reason I realize he can still move is because he lowers himself into a seat. "They're for you." He points at the pearls, "Christmas gift."

I close my eyes tight. Grabbing the bridge of my nose I take a sharp breath in. "They weren't a gift. A replacement, maybe, for the ones you took from me to give her."

He pulls something out of the pocket of his pants. They clink on to the plate next to the Mikimotos. My old pearls. He looks up at me, "I went to get them back."

I shake my head, "You went to see her?"

"I had to get them back. I didn't give them to her. She must have taken them."

I slam my hand on the table, "I don't care if she took them or if you gave them to her. I care that you are fucking someone who isn't your wife."

He stands, knocking the chair over and yells, "Maybe if my wife would fuck me, I wouldn't have to get it elsewhere."

"No soy pendeja. I know this happened before. I got an STD test done. When it came out clear I decided I wouldn't sleep with you until I knew you were clean. You're a doctor, Ignacio. You should know the dangers of multiple partners."

Stunned into silence, he leans over to pick up the fallen chair. I begin to wheel my suitcase to the front door. Something holds me back. I feel the pearl earrings in my ear. I

deposit them in the plate with the others. "These pearls were a bribe. Take the pearls but don't leave me. Take the pearls but don't tell anyone I cheated."

"You and I both know you aren't the type of woman to compromise virtue for luxury."

"I'm not? Isn't that exactly what I've been doing the last twelve years?" I ask.

Ignacio sits again, turning to look at me. My face betrays nothing. His expression is one of confusion. He can't read his own wife.

I go on when he, apparently, cannot. "I'm not leaving because of virtue. I'm not leaving because you cheated. I'm leaving because a month ago I had an abortion. I cannot live with that and live in this marriage. I cannot live with the woman this marriage has turned me into."

I walk towards the entrance of the house. I feel Ignacio's hand on my arm before I even realize he is following me. I hear the sound of his hand on my face before I feel it. The cold of the marble catches me as I land on the floor.

"You killed our child?" he screams.

I take a few slow breaths as I watch Ignacio's chest heave up and down. "Answer me!" I don't say a thing as I get to my feet. I grab my suitcase, look him straight in the eye.

"Yes."

I walk out of the house that was my home for twelve years. Loading my bag in the back seat, I get in the car. I start the car but stop short of putting the car in drive. Tiring, I rest my head on the steering wheel just as I had a month ago outside the doctor's office. I reach down and touch my belly. This time, the tears do come.

I sit for a while sobbing until I hear a tap on the glass of the car window. It's Ignacio. He holds the cordless phone from the kitchen. He hands it to me and says, "It's your brother. You need to take it."

The phone call brings on tears for another reason. My father has just had a stroke. He has just died. I hand the phone back to Ignacio but I don't get out of the car. I don't know what to do.

"Vallia," Ignacio starts. He waits until I look up at him, "I'm sorry. Your dad was a good man."

I hold up my hand to stop him. I could easily put the car in reverse and speed out of the driveway. I just can't move.

"Come inside. Our stuff can wait. You shouldn't drive when you're this upset."

I nod. In some part of my brain, the part that still works despite the fact that my heart is aching, I know he's right. I have to go to my mother and she could not take the pain of her youngest daughter getting divorced, not after she has just lost her husband.

A few days later, I attend the funeral mass of my father, Victor Jimenez, Sr. Ignacio escorts me. He hugs my mother and offers his condolences. "Gracias. Ay mi handsome yerno," she tells him. Mamá is so happy to have him as a son-in-law. How can I end that happiness? I watch him for a moment. I have to admit, he is a handsome man, my husband. He wears an Armani suit and I wear Mikimoto pearls.

Concealer

April 14, 2000

Vallia Ortega

I lay on my back, drifting further and further down, and when I tried to open my eyes, I still couldn't see anything. My lungs began to ache as I tried to take in air but was unsuccessful. I needed air and began to panic. Trying to keep from falling further down, I waved my arms and realized I was in water. I was drowning. Air. I needed air.

His snoring woke me from my dream. Attempting to expand my lungs and take a breath, I found them weighted down. His arm was draped over my body. I thought it was a subconscious attempt for him to claim space rather than an attempt to claim me. Using both of my hands, I gave a slight push to his arm. Still sleeping, he felt the gentle nudge and rolled over, giving me his back. The snoring stopped and the room went silent. The silence was more suffocating than the arm draped over me, more than the water in my dream.

I wanted to get up but the alarm clock dictated I had a four minute wait. Ignacio started to snore again. If the noise picked up, I would be able to escape to the bathroom without being noticed. I waited, counting the seconds. The clock now read 6:27am. His snores increased in volume and I decided to risk it.

Using one loud snore as a mask I rolled on to my side and wiggled out from under the covers. My side of the bed had a telling squeak that usually gave me away, but another snore and I'd be able to get out of the bed.

"What are you doing?" he mumbled.

I feigned a sleepy voice, "Hmm? What?"

"We still have a few minutes. Stay." He rolled back over and placed his arm over me once more.

Again, I pretended I was sleepy with a mumbled reply. I scooted my body back and pressed it against his. He held me tighter. My eyes flipped to the alarm clock. 6:29am.

Since I started working again, mornings had become routine. Ignacio got out of bed and went to pee while I made the bed. After the bathroom, he started the coffee, complaining we should just buy a coffee machine with a timer. I would take my turn in the bathroom. I'd exit the bathroom with my teeth brushed and ready to swap roles. Pouring coffee into travel mugs, I prepped our coffees as he showered. His coffee, black. Always black. Mine has a splash of milk, a half teaspoon of sugar. I'd finish it off by dropping a piece of Abuelita Mexican Chocolate in and stirring until it melted.

Once I prepped the coffees, I'd scan the fridge. Glancing above the fridge, I saw only Cheerios but found no bananas to chop and add to the cereal. I crossed cereal off the list of possible breakfasts.

From down the hall I heard the water in the bathroom turn off. The door to the bathroom opened a crack. Ignacio stuck his head out and called, "English Muffins. Toasted with peanut butter and honey." I smiled. It was my favorite on-the-go breakfast. Sometimes he could be so thoughtful. Ignacio came down the hall in only a towel. Drops of water clung to skin the way drops of oil float in water. "I'll finish up. You shower," he offered.

I started the water, then turned to the bathroom mirror, still foggy from my husband's shower. Using a hand towel, I wiped up the fog and saw myself clearly. My eyes locked on my reflection. I lowered my pajama pants, and raised my foot to rest on the bathroom counter. I

twisted and turned my leg to examine it. Repeating with the other foot, I checked my leg. Nothing.

With a deep sigh I lifted my long-sleeve pajama top over my head. When I dropped the top on the floor I looked at my reflection again. My eyes met in the mirror. As the fog began to fill the mirror again I caught a glimpse of a purple bruise on the left side of my abdomen. I turned so my left side was more visible and found more bruises. These were greener in color, older. As the mirror fogged up almost completely, I let out another sigh and stepped into the shower.

I reached up to remove the rubber band from my hair and as I did, I felt a slight pain in my left arm. I let my hair fall and stepped back in the water to wet it. Touching the place on my left arm where I had felt the pain, I winced as I applied pressure. A red mark on my skin, about the size of my loofa sponge was present on my arm close to my elbow.

Short sleeves wouldn't hide it. The only three quarter length blouse I had was white and went down just past the elbow. If I raised my hand and the arm of the blouse shifted someone could see. I continued to think as I rubbed the shampoo into my scalp.

I got out of my car, purse slung over my right shoulder, coffee mug in my left hand and half eaten English muffin in the right. I wore a knee length black pencil skirt, capitalizing on the fact my legs were free of any kind of blemish or mark. The blouse I chose was a long sleeve button up business shirt in pale blue. My black high heels clicked in the garage of my office building.

After my father died, my pearls never went missing again. We had stayed together for my mother's sake but I could not stand the silence of our home. He never brought up the fact

that I had aborted our child without even telling him I was pregnant but he let the angry silence that filled our large home speak for him. I couldn't take it. With my English major and Communication minor, I took up a job as PR rep at a law firm in town.

"Late, are we?" A voice called from behind me.

Smiling, I stopped and turned. "Yes, WE are Joe."

He smiled, "You can slow down now. You're with the boss. No one is going to comment on you being late if you walk in with me."

My clicking heels matched the rhythm set by his Prada loafers. "Listen," he began and I did not want to meet his eye but in looking down I saw the way his suit fit just right. His words called my eyes back to his face. "Tonight, I'm meeting with this guy. Some real estate developer. He wants to donate money to the side project we have going. The literacy drive you started."

"Oh. I can set you up with some figures and pamphlets and that kind of stuff to pitch to him."

"Wouldn't it be better coming from you?" He stopped walking.

It took me a step or two to realize he had not kept moving. I turned and looked back at him.

"It is your pet project," he reminded me.

"Only because you asked me to handle it. You were the one with the idea. You were the one with the initial funding."

"You were the one who took it to the next level. Don't be modest. Your job is to make the firm look good and you have done a good job so far. Come to dinner."

I looked down at my shoes. "I'm not dressed for it. I'd have to go home."

"Dinner isn't 'til 8. Take off at four. Go home, change and meet us there."

"I'll have to talk to Ignacio."

He shifted his stance as he cleared his throat and straightened his tie. He took a step closer to me and I could smell his cologne, which I knew was custom made for him because I could not recognize the scent. He leaned in, whispered in my ear, "then ask," and he kept walking.

I sped up to catch him as he neared the garage elevator. Next to the elevator I saw a trash can. I tossed my unfinished breakfast and joined him for the ride up to the office.

"Let's go to lunch," Carla demanded, bursting into my office without knocking.

Shaking my head and covering the phone, I tried to shoo Carla out. Carla sat in the chair meant for clients.

"Ok. I've got it, Joe."

At the mention of the boss's name, Carla jumped out of the chair and looked around, expecting the boss to catch her goofing off.

I hung up the phone. "It's bad enough he caught me coming in late. Now you make it sound like I'm cutting out to take lunch."

"Since when is lunch 'cutting out.' Besides, everyone knows Joe couldn't run this place without you. He knows it. That alone should ensure you are entitled to meals."

"Not when I'm leaving early," I said as I began to put papers in file folders and put my pen back in my desk drawer. "I've got some dinner thing with a potential donor for the literacy project I've been working on."

"What'd the hubby have to say about that?" Carla laughed and sat back down in the chair.

I stopped organizing things on my desk and eyed my friend, "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing." Carla started to fan herself with her hand, "Jesus, your office is hot."

"You're telling me. And don't change the subject. What did you mean about Ignacio?"

Carla grabbed a file folder from my desk.

"Don't use that! I need it for the dinner tonight," I scolded and handed Carla another folder.

"Seriously, how can you stand it in here? And in long sleeves? It's April in Texas, what are you doing in a long sleeve blouse?"

"It's cold in here sometimes," I said as I tugged at the sleeve of the blouse.

"So wear short sleeves and bring a blazer or cardigan. When it's cold you have a cover and when it feels like hell in here, you can take it off."

Trying to change the subject, I asked again, "Ok, fashion guru. Thanks for the advice. Now, are you going to tell me what you meant?"

Carla stood and set the folder down on my desk. "I'll bring you a sandwich and a soda, you shouldn't go all day without eating." Carla began to walk to the door. She stopped in the door frame and turned to me. "He can be bossy and possessive. I meant the comment as a joke but well..."

"It's only funny because it's true," I said without a smile.

"And because it's true, it's not so funny anymore," Carla said and left the office.

I found myself in the shower once again. The hot water ran and I stood staring at the adjoining closet. How could I find something suitable for dinner when all I could think of was

Carla's comment. I shook my head and began to trail my fingers over a long sleeved silk blouse. How could I find something that would not reveal the bruise on my arm. It had been about a day but my arm showed signs of purple.

My phone rang from the bathroom counter. The caller id said Ignacio. I turned off the shower and answered the call.

"My love," he answered sounding happy, "will you forgive me?"

The mirror lost its fog and I could see my outline.

"Forgive you for what?" Instinctively my eyes went to my arm in the foggy reflection.

"Last minute surgery. I'm going to miss dinner. I'll probably be home late, if at all. I may just camp at the hospital"

"No. It's fine. I understand. Work. What can you do?"

"You are the best wife."

I smiled again, ended the call and turned to the closet. I reached toward the back and pulled out a form-fitting backless red dress, short sleeved. After turning on the water and going back to the closet for my matching red peep toe pumps, I pulled out my makeup collection.

Once I completed my shower, I went to work on my arm. First, I applied a thin layer of my yellow under eye concealer. Over the last three years I learned the best way to hide bruises, you should start with the yellow. The yellow of the concealer would mask the purple tones in the bruise. I started in the center of the bruise, working my way out and a little past the edge of the mark. Even the slight pressure from the touch of my finger caused me pain but I kept working. When the concealer dried, I added a coat of my facial compact powder. My work complete, my left arm looked just like my right arm.

"You sure know how to get what you want," Joe commented as we left the restaurant.

"Do people really just write checks for large amounts of money over dinner like that?" I asked.

Joe nodded. "It was all you. You impressed him."

"It was the wine."

"It was the dress."

I caught myself blushing. "My secret weapon, my wardrobe." I laughed.

He smiled and watched me until I looked at him. The gaze went on longer than a boss and subordinate should stare at each other on a dark street after a luxurious dinner. He stepped toward me and I didn't back away. I looked up into his eyes and tiptoed up to him. I kissed Joe. He placed his hands on my shoulders and let them trail down. I almost forgot the makeup but pulled away from him right before his hand reached my covered-up bruise.

"I'm sorry," He declared. "I'll stop. I won't ever do that again."

"No."

He stared at me in shock. I laughed and shook my head. "I just mean you don't have to stop. I just don't think we should kiss like this. On the street. Where anyone can see."

"Then come home with me."

I lay on my back, drifting further and further down, and when I tried to open my eyes rays of sun pierced the clear blue water. I used my arms to swim, pulling myself up to the surface. As I broke the surface of the water and inhaled a wave caused me to bob in the water.

A wave in the bed caused me to open my eyes. I rolled over on to my right side and saw him. There was Joe. He smiled at me and I smiled back. He lifted his hand and his fingertips

traced my chin, so gently it tickled.

"Sorry. You looked peaceful, I tried to move without waking you."

"This is a nice way to wake up."

"It's early. The sun's not up, yet. Do you want to sleep some more?"

I shook my head and leaned into Joe. I kissed him. I pulled away. He kept his eyes closed, waiting for more and when it didn't come he opened them to see me smiling at him.

"I'll be back," I said and tilted my head toward the bathroom.

"Hurry."

I used the blanket to cover my body as I searched in the dark for something to wear. Joe reached for something on the floor on his side of the bed. He tossed me his undershirt. Happily, I inhaled his scent and covered my body.

In the bathroom, while washing my hands I looked at myself in the mirror. In the clear, non-foggy mirror I saw the morning sun spilling in the bathroom window and in its glow, a smiling woman. I walked back into Joe's room and found the sunrise had illuminated that room as well.

He stared at the sheets, tinted with light tan smudges. I looked down at the bed and then looked to him. His eyes looked at me up and down until he saw the darkened spot on my arm. I covered the bruise with my right hand.

Sunday Dinners

Early Summer 2000

Vallia Jimenez-Ortega

When Papá died, I think it killed my mother. Not in the traditional sense. Not like those couples you hear about where one dies and the other follows a week later. For Mamá, it was more in the way she stopped cooking. The way she stopped playing with the grandchildren, choosing just to sit in a recliner and watch them instead.

They married when she was only seventeen. By the age of eighteen, my mother started the process of creating a family for him. Having two sons and two daughters, she made my father proud of her. She was a hell of a wife, a good mother but that seemed to be where she ended.

The little blood vessel in Papá's head, the one that clogged up and killed him, caused the neurons in my mother's brain to overload. What was a soft tremble in her right arm became spasms that would cause her to drop and break her coffee cups, sometimes it was even her body that hit the floor when the spasms came. After a visit with her, one in which I witnessed a spasm that nearly shook my mother to the ground alongside the coffee cup, I called up Victor in Austin.

My brother and his wife Esther moved to Austin not long after they married. Named after our father, Victor inherited Papá's sense of adventure. The move shocked us all. All except Mamá who knew, since her son started walking early, he would be the first to move away.

"Hermano, Mamá needs help. Her shakes are getting worse," I said as I spun my office chair to face the back of the room.

He sighed, "Have you talked to Raul?"

"He said that he and Lucia would check in on her more often, but I think we need something more permanent."

"Like a nurse?" he asked.

"Like a home."

"Have you been talking with Iris?"

"Mano. You live in Austin. Raul works and his wife is too busy criticizing her daughters to care about Mamá."

"Don't cast stones, hermanita."

I glared at the phone, "What do you mean by that?"

"How's your husband?"

"Te voy a colgar!"

"Don't hang up. Look I get it, you work, you have a, como se dice, demanding husband. Raul works, but there is Iris. Why can't she help? She doesn't work and Molly's away at school."

I shook my head. Mamá and Iris hadn't always gotten along. When Iris wanted to go to college, like her older brothers, Mamá thought she should focus on Javier. Mamá thought marriage and family were the two most important things in the world for a woman. When it seemed like Iris could only produce one of those things, she managed to marry Javier but couldn't get pregnant, Mamá and Iris drifted apart. When my sister did get pregnant, even naming the baby after Mamá couldn't get her back in Mamá's good graces. Though, Mamá did love that little girl in a way that none of us had ever seen Mamá love before.

"I think Molly is the reason Iris won't help." I told Victor after spinning my chair around again and scanning the family portrait on my desk.

"What do you mean?" He asked.

"I don't know. Just a feeling."

Victor thought for a moment and then replied, "Molly wants to help. Isn't that why she's going to nursing school?"

"I think that's the problem. Iris doesn't want Molly to help."

"No te preocupes con Molly y Iris. Ay ellas. Talk with Raul. Maybe he can help. Let's see if we can pull money together for a nurse."

Just like that Victor had decided that we would go with a nurse. After hanging up with my brother, I readied to leave my office. Packing up my briefcase, I walked over to my boss's office. "Hey, Joe."

He stopped everything he was doing. He even excused himself from his phone call. "Vallia, how are you?" I moved my head from side to side weighing the question. He asked, "Can you sit for a minute? Close the door."

I did as I was asked. "Is everything ok?"

"Yes," he answered, "I'm just worried about you."

I smiled. Joe was the first and only person that knew what my husband Ignacio's temper was capable of. I could tell he wanted to ask if Ignacio had hit me again but he couldn't find the words. I stepped in, "Oh, no. It's nothing like that. It is just my siblings and I can't agree on how to help my mother."

He nodded. "Not to sound heartless but this is the woman who told you to stay with your abusive husband."

"Joe!" I jumped up from my seat. "Don't blame her. She doesn't know. No one knows. You know what, I have to go."

"Sorry."

His apology stopped me. I had just put my hand on the door handle but I couldn't turn. I could not face him because if I did, I would never be able to go back to Ignacio.

He spoke again, "It's just you should be with me."

I opened the door, "I have to go."

Ignacio was out of town, some surgeons' conference, so I decided to have the hermanos over for Sunday dinner. I prepped the sauce for chile colorado. Dipping my pinky finger in the sauce, I tasted it. When the red liquid hit my tongue I smiled. It wasn't like Mamá's, no one knew her secret but Molly, but it was pretty damn close.

I was still cooking when my ever punctual sister, Iris, rang the door bell. She never just came over, she always waited for an invitation. Raul and Victor, when he was in town, would just open my front door and call up the stairs. Ignacio hated it but he tolerated it. Today, it didn't matter because Ignacio wasn't here.

After letting Iris and her husband Javier in the house, Iris began her micromanaging. She sniffed the air. "Chile colorado?" she asked as she kissed me on the cheek. I nodded and gave my brother-in-law a kiss when it was his turn to say hi. "It won't be as good as Mamá's," Iris said. Javier smiled and patted me on the shoulder, sympathizing.

I swung my hip out to bump hers, "It'll be better than yours."

"Y tu Nachito?" Iris asked as I led my guest towards the kitchen. The comment wasn't physical but it was definitely a counter swing for my comment on her cooking.

"You know he hates it when you call him that," I replied, still stirring the sauce.

Iris lifted the top off my Crockpot. In it were ranchero beans that had been slow cooking

all day. She inhaled. "Help yourself, I tell her. "The francesitos are above the fridge." Javier found the bag of bolillos. Iris gave him a look. It was a look a few of the women in the family had mastered but one I could never pull off. Iris would turn her chin slightly off center of her body, it would lower just a touch and then her right eyebrow would arch. Javier, knowing the look meant trouble, set the bag on top of the fridge.

"We'll wait for everyone else," Iris said more as a means of scolding her husband than as a means of letting me know their plan.

It was then that Raul and Lucia walked in, "Buenos días, 'manitas." I ran up to my big brother and hugged him, leaving Iris to greet Lucia. She received the same hug that I received the first time I met Lucia. As Iris's arms moved around Lucia, Lucia's back stiffened, her right hand came up and patted Iris's back a single time and then her arms stayed limp at her side. She'd never been warm with us but I never let that effect how I treated her.

"How are your girls?" I asked, taking my turn to hug her.

Raul jumps in, "ask Victor. He sees Alicia and Veronica more than we do."

"Y Caro?" Iris asks.

"Carolina," Lucia corrects. "She's out with her new boyfriend."

Iris pokes back, "Does Veronica have a boyfriend, yet?"

I step in on my niece/goddaughter's behalf, "She doesn't need a boyfriend. She's got a PhD."

Raul sensing the kitchen was getting too hot, grabbed his wife's hand. "We're going to go check out the garden. You and Ignacio always plant the best stuff." They walked through the kitchen, into the dining room and out the French doors that led to the backyard..

"One of these days!" Iris declared.

I laughed, "One of these days, what? Raul loves that woman. Since high school they've been inseparable. Just leave them be."

Iris shrugged. She never liked being told what to do, especially when the person telling her was right. I turned my attention back to the things on the stove. As Iris watched out the French doors, Javier made a move to get the bag of bolillos from the fridge. I winked at him, my way of letting him know I wouldn't tell on him.

The family sat down for dinner and the sounds of laughter, loud talking and Spanish music filled my home. It made me happy to see my family smile. The food disappeared before the laughter and if I wasn't careful people would start to leave before I could bring up what I brought them here for.

"We need to talk about Mamá." Silence fell on the table. Every eye was on me. "She's getting worse. We all know that."

"Where is Mamá?" Raul asked.

"Her friend Chita picked her up after church. They went to play bingo. I didn't want her to hear this." I answered feeling a knot of guilt form even though my mother was well out of ear shot. It was rare that anyone ever did anything without my mother's knowledge and approval. Joe was my exception to that rule.

Iris set down her glass of wine, "Vallia's right. Mamá will soon be to the point that she can't take care of herself anymore. Her Parkinson's has gotten worse since..."

"Dad" Raul said.

We all nodded, but Iris spoke, "I think, soon, Mamá will need to go to a home."

"Iris!" Raul said her name with the heat of a flame.

"Victor thinks we should try a nurse first." I added.

Javier stepped in, "maybe he should be here when you all talk this over."

"Victor only comes for the holidays. He's trying to make it for Molly's graduation but Bianca is graduating in New York a few weeks later. He's not sure he can do both trips. I don't think Mamá can wait 'til Thanksgiving. I talked to him Friday. He votes for a nurse."

Iris added, "So Victor says nurse. I say home. You and Raul have to break the tie."

Quiet settled over the table. I spoke up tracing the rim of my empty wine glass with my pinky finger. "I'm with Victor on this."

Iris's head snapped up. She looked at me as if I had just spit on her famous tres leches cake. My betrayal would have to be paid for later. Now, she scanned the room for another accomplice. When she found none she brought up the obvious point, "And Mamá is just going to let some stranger into her home?"

"And you think your Mamá will just leave her home," Javier spoke but only received Iris's raised eyebrow as a response.

"Then one of us takes her?" Raul asks. Lucia flashes him a look similar to the one Iris had just given Javier.

"I hate to cop out but I've got enough on my plate with work." I said but I couldn't look at my siblings. We all knew that wasn't my real reason.

"I work, too," Raul added. "Plus, I've got Lucia to think of. We also don't have the room. Carolina is still with us. You are the only one without kids, Vallia."

With eyes on me, I give the only answer I can. "I know I don't have kids, and I have the room but I just don't have the time and..." I stalled short of saying the thought on everyone's mind.

"Ignacio would never go for it," Lucia spoke up.

Everyone turned to look at my sister-in-law. It was well known that Ignacio was the male version of Lucia. He wasn't really the most open with the family. He put up with them but where I loved his parents and called them Mom and Dad, my parents were always Mr. and Mrs. Jimenez.

Raul spoke up trying to shift the attention away from his wife, "Iris, with Molly away at college you have room in your home and you are the only one who doesn't work here."

"Don't you remember what it was like when we all lived together. I love my mother but she can't live with me."

"And Molly?" Raul piped in.

"Y Molly, que?" Iris said as her chest puffed like a mamma hen protecting her chick.

Raul cleared his throat, realizing it wasn't a good time to bring this up. Yet, he'd opened the Molly discussion so he had to proceed. "Molly and Mamá have always had a special relationship. The reason she wanted to be a nurse is to help care for Mamá. She's about to graduate, no?"

"Si, and when she does, she is going to find a job at a good hospital. She will not be used by the people at this table to fill the job we don't want."

I had been sipping my wine and set the glass down harder than I should have, splashing red wine on my ivory table cloth. "That is my mother. It isn't that I don't want this job, but what do I, what do any of us, know about caring for someone who's body is fighting against them? We need someone with medical experience. I vote for a nurse."

"Your husband is a doctor. That has got to count for something," Iris snapped back.

"Aye, hermana, you just heard Lucia. You going to make me say it? Fine, there is no

way Ignacio would ever help me or Mamá, much less let her move in with us."

Raul tipped his beer into his mouth. "I agree with Victor and Vallia. Vamos Lucia." Raul walked around the table shaking hands with Javier and kissing me. He avoided Iris, who didn't even look at him as he passed. Lucia stood by her chair and waved before they exited my dining room.

It was just Iris and me. Even though Javier sat there neither of us noticed him as she began tearing into me. "How could you? We talked about this and we were in agreement. Mamá should go to a home. None of us can bring her into our home and she needs to be taken care of. How could you let Raul even suggest that mijá take care of Mamá."

"Me? Let him? Since when does Raul need my permission. I love you, Iris, but you are crazy if you think this is what I want to happen."

"What's the matter 'manita? You afraid if Mamá moves in here, your husband will leave for good."

I stood quickly causing the table to shake. The soft tingle of china and glass bumping into each other was a sharp contrast to my anger. "How dare you! In my home."

Iris stood. We stare at each other over the table. "Let's go," Javier told his wife. She doesn't move. "Iris!"

They exited without saying another word but at the doorway Javier turned around and blew me a kiss. I blew a kiss back to my brother-in-law. When I heard the front door close, I stood to begin clearing the table. I stared at the table, empty plates and empty chairs. I couldn't bring myself to do anything. I flopped down in my chair and took a sip of what was left of my wine.

When the wine was gone and the table was cleared, I got in my car and drove to Joe's

house.

In the weeks and months following the Sunday dinner our family fell apart. Iris was not speaking to me or Raul, though, apparently, she'd been calling Victor to yell at him. Even when we were all together for Molly's graduation, she would not speak to me. Victor was able to fly in and he claimed it was for the graduation but I thought it was also so he could try to calm Iris.

The day after the graduation, Mamá insisted that since her children were all together we should have Sunday dinner. In honor of Molly, she cooked all her favorites. Tamales, molé, rice, beans and instead of cake, biscochos. It was the first time in a long time that I could remember Mamá cooking for all of us.

Since Mamá's kitchen table couldn't hold us all, we scattered around the house sitting with paper plates perched on coffee tables, knees or any other flat surface we could find. Ignacio sat next to me but said nothing. He was there for Molly since he had missed the graduation ceremony for an emergency surgery. Handing me his plate when I was about to take a bite of tamale, he excused himself to get a beer from the ice chest out back. I sat, each hand holding a plate, waiting for him to return.

"Class act, that one," Victor said as he took Ignacio's plate so I could eat. I smiled at my brother. I didn't admonish him for his comment about my husband but I didn't let the line of conversation continue. "You talk to Iris?"

Victor laughed.

"De que te ríes?" Mamá asked coming in from the kitchen. She was wearing her normal tamale making gear. Brown orthopedic shoes, sweat pants and the matching pull over sweatshirt and it was all covered with an apron that had been around since I was in college. Her glasses

hung from a cord around her neck, which was decorated with beads to make it look more like a fashion accessory than an item of utility.

"Como siempre me río de Vallia." Victor said, standing and offering Mamá the seat that had been Ignacio's.

As soon as my mother eased herself into the chair, Ignacio walked in from the backyard where he had retrieved a beer from the ice chest. His eyes narrowed and I visually took the blame for Victor's generosity. Victor handed Ignacio his plate but he didn't look me in the eye. Mamá must have noticed because her hand began to shake.

"Ma, you ok?" Iris asked.

Mamá just gave a curt nod but subconsciously her left hand reached for her right arm in an effort to stop the shaking. Molly walked in from outside, wearing her graduation cap, something Mamá had insisted on. Molly's presence seemed to take the edge off. Mamá removed her left hand from her arm and smiled.

"Me da gusto a ver a mis niñas graduáate. No mas falta Eve."

Iris stood, collected her husband's empty plate and left the room. She made it seem like she was leaving to start helping Mamá clean but it was really because she was the only one of Mamá's children who never went to college. Victor went after Iris. Everyone else seemed to not notice the situation. Ignacio oblivious of Mamá's overt slight of her own daughter, took Iris's chair and finished his food.

Javier was telling a story to those of us in the living room when from the kitchen came the crash of a pan. My eyes went to Mamá and her arms were a step above the normal tremble but not up to the spasms that could overtake her.

Victor stomped out of the kitchen. "Tu di le, Iris. It's what you want. You tell her."

Esther, Victor's wife, followed him out of the kitchen. My brother was sweating and seemed off balance. I glanced over at the spot near the TV where he had stood to eat his dinner. There were two beer bottles, one was almost full. There was no way he could be drunk.

"Tio!" Molly called to him and he almost fell over when he tried to look for who was speaking to him. Esther caught him and steadied him. I set my food down and went to my brother. It was only when Iris heard her daughter's voice that she came out of the kitchen to see what was happening.

Molly put index and middle finger on Victor's wrist. She looked at him. "Tio, when is your birthday?"

Victor chuckled a bit. He was stalling. "Me vas a mandar un present?"

"Mano. When were you born?" I asked.

"June thirf. Um, nineteen..."

Molly's eyes went wide. She never moved her gaze from her uncle. "Ma, call 911. Tio, I think you might be having a stroke."

We sat in the waiting area of the emergency room at Thomason Hospital. Iris cried, as Javier whispered to her. Mamá and Esther had gone to the chapel to pray. Lucia, a surprise to all of us, joined them. Raul went outside to make calls to Victor's kids. Even Molly had someone. She was in the corner of the waiting room talking to her boyfriend who was back in Albuquerque celebrating his graduation with his family.

I sat alone. I had driven Molly's car since Esther had asked that Molly accompany her in the ambulance. Ignacio had taken the car home. My surgeon husband had helped Molly with Victor until the ambulance arrived, but after that, he went home. At the time, everyone was too

busy to notice but I did. I was about to get out my cell phone and call Joe when my mom tapped me on the shoulder. She and the other ladies had returned from the hospital chapel .

"Di me la verdad. No one else will." It was an order.

I always obeyed my mother. "Ok."

"Why were they fighting?"

"You're not well, Mamá. Victor wants to get you a nurse to come take care of you. Iris thinks you should move into an assisted living facility."

Mamá pursed her lips, tilted her head to the side and looked up to the ceiling as if the solution to this family mess would be found on the off white paint of Thomason's ceiling.

"Oyen me." Mamá declared, standing up. Everyone turned at the authority of her voice.

"Mijo is in there. He could die."

Because I was sitting and Mamá was standing I could see her hands and for once, the tremor was not there. It was kept at bay by the importance of her declaration.

"Yo no voy hacer la persona que destruye esta familia. Amalia," my mother called to her granddaughter and namesake. Molly came straight over and reached for my mother's hand. Mamá gave it to her. "Find me a nursing home. A nice one, close to mi casa."

"Nana. I can take care of you. You don't have to go to a home. I'm nurse now."

"No." Mamá's word was final.

Looking over her shoulder, Molly shot her mother a cold look. Iris couldn't bring herself to look up. She blamed herself for Victor's stroke and now, she would have to take the blame for breaking her daughter's heart.

Once the doctor's informed Esther that Victor would live, though it was a possibility there

was some neurological damage, everyone started to make their way home. Molly took Mamá home and offered to stay the night with her. I was the last to leave the hospital and I left only when Esther insisted that there was nothing I could do. It wasn't until I reached the parking lot that I realized I didn't have a car to get home. I finally got to make the call I had wanted to make since I feared my brother would die.

Joe's BMW pulled up in front of the hospital and I jumped in. Before he could say anything I wrapped my arms around him and cried. With my head resting on his shoulder, Joe maneuvered the car towards his home.

"No." I said when I saw him about to get on I-10 East.

"Where do you want to go?"

"Home."

"Ok." He seemed disappointed, but he changed lanes and made to get on westbound I-10. He drove across the overpass and was about to make the left turn to get on the highway when the light turned and he had to stop

"I'll scoop up a bag of things and then we can go to your house."

As the light turned green, he looked at me and smiled.

Part V

Alicia and Eve

An Upset in the Routine

September 1992

Alicia Jimenez

I took a deep breath. There was nothing I wanted to do less than go to the grocery store with Felipe. I slid the keys into the ignition and then moved my hand to my mouth as a wave of nausea rolled over me. Felipe snapped his seat belt on.

"I'm not feeling too hot. Can we postpone groceries 'til tomorrow?" I asked.

Felipe sighed. "I'll drive?"

I understood this about him. He was the type that had meatloaf every Wednesday, ritualistically went out with the guys to watch Steelers' games and did his grocery shopping first thing Saturday morning. The only ritual I had was brushing my teeth every day.

I pulled myself from the Jetta and walked around the car to the passenger side door. As we crossed paths near the back bumper, he wrapped his arms around me. "You've been under the weather a lot lately. Maybe you should see a doctor, baby."

I sat in the car in silence and moved only to roll down the window. Felipe protested. "I'll turn the AC on." I nodded and the movement of my head only aggravated the nausea. I swallowed hard.

Felipe glanced at me, lifting his sunglasses and resting them atop his head. He kept driving toward the store; even my visible discomfort could not deter him from making his weekly ten a.m. trip to Albertson's.

"Should we get some wine to take to dinner with your parents?"

I began to shake my head, remembered what nodding did to me, and went with a verbal

answer. "Nah, I'm actually craving something sweet. Let's take them a dessert. Oh, how about peach cobbler?"

"You hate peaches."

I shrugged and smiled the way a child who took the last cookie smiles. Felipe shook his head and I knew he had to know something wasn't right. We had made it to the parking lot of Albertson's and Felipe searched for a spot.

I closed my eyes to hold back another rolling wave of nausea. In my distraction, I didn't notice the black Ford truck pulling out until Felipe swerved and slammed on the horn. The swerve of our vehicle pushed me over the edge. Felipe maneuvered us to a stop in a parking spot and without unbuckling, I opened the door and vomited on the asphalt.

When I turned back to see Felipe's wide eyed worry I knew there was no better time. I pulled a water bottle out of my purse and rinsed out my mouth, spilling the remains of the bottle to wash off the parking lot. I closed the door of the car.

I reached for Felipe's hand as I turned to face him, "I'm six weeks pregnant."

Felipe closed his eyes in thought. After a moment, he removed his hand from mine, put the car in reverse and took us home.

I watched him as he drove. The two lines that had formed between his eyebrows seems to melt away in the morning sun. By the time we had reached our street, Felipe was smiling.

"I'm going to be a father," he said. I simply nodded at his words.

Engagement Photo

November 14, 1992

Alicia Jimenez

I stood slightly behind him as he sat on the park bench where we met. The photographer said it would slim me if I were partially hidden. My arms were wrapped around his shoulders, his hands gently placed on mine. The click of the camera reminded me of the click of the ring box shutting.

I closed the box after placing the ring on my finger. The shutting clap woke him from his sleep. He rolled over, back aching from a night spent in the same position, arms folded over his chest and back to his girlfriend. I was only his girlfriend not his fiancé. That was until he stopped rubbing his eyes and opened them to see me and the ring on my finger. My only acknowledgment of the previous night was a shrug of my shoulders.

I closed the box with the ring in it. I slid it back across the dinner table. His eyes locked on the tiny purple box that held his future. He picked it up and placed it in his coat pocket. He couldn't look at me so he scanned the restaurant for the tuxedo clad waiter. When the men locked eyes he motioned with his hand as if he could sign the air.

He signed on the dotted line and the sales associate handed him the purple and black bag. He opened the ring box. The black velvet inlay cradled the one carat diamond ring. He smiled, looked up at the sales person. His smile faded and he put the ring away. As he stared in the bag he cleared his throat and asked, "My girlfriend, Alicia, just told me she is pregnant. What if the ring doesn't fit?" The sales woman smiled kindly, "Don't worry Felipe, the warranty you purchased covers sizings.

New Year's Eve

December 31, 2012

Eve Bautista

I sit down in the middle of my new apartment's living room. There are moving boxes and garbage bags full of my stuff scattered everywhere. Forty-eight hours ago, I was kicked out of my house. Sorry, my boyfriend's house.... Sorry again, my EX boyfriend's house. I found a decent apartment. Calling in some favors, I got a bunch of friends to help me move.

Alone, I look around at the mountains of boxes. I moved in such a hurry nothing was marked or labeled. I have no clue where to begin. Standing, I pick the first thing my hand touches, a black plastic trash bag probably filled with clothes or sheets. I tear open the knotted bag, turn it upside down and spill the contents. Old over-sized concert t-shirts catch my eye. There is one concert tee that I can't stop staring at. A men's large Dave Matthew's Band from this year's tour. In the hurry, one of his shirts got mixed up with mine.

I pick up the shirt. It would be cliché to smell it. It would be, but I can't help it. It should smell like him but it just smells like the knock-off Gain dryer sheets I use on our laundry. I decide to return it to James. It is his shirt after all. I fold the shirt and place it near the front door of the apartment.

I'm surprised when there is a knock at the door. I look down at James' shirt. Could it be him? I hadn't told him where I was moving. I open the door.

"What are you doing opening the door without asking who it is?" Veronica asks as she hugs me.

"Tia Veronica? What are you doing here?"

She cups my face in her hands, "My only niece is going through something big. Where else would I be?"

Tia Vero walks into the apartment and stares at all the boxes and bags scattered in the living room. I'm standing by the door watching her. When she turns around to face me, I say, "A break up isn't really something big. You didn't have to come all the way from Austin."

She smiles at me and shakes her head, "It's not the break-up that is big. It's the being on your own for the first time. It's a magical time in a young woman's life."

"Alicia wouldn't think so," I say.

Tia raises her eyebrow at me, "You still on that kick?"

I shrug and roll my eyes. Veronica rolls her eyes at me in turn. Then she claps her hands together. "Well you can't do all this in one night so start with the main things. Get your bed set up and get your toiletries and clothes put up. Those are the things you need first."

"What are you going to do?" I ask my aunt.

"Order a pizza and set up this bad ass TV," she said pointing to what had been James' Christmas gift. James told me to take everything I had paid for. I had saved all semester to buy a 42" HD 3D TV as a Christmas present for him. I brought it with me. After all, I paid for it.

After ordering the pizza and fiddling with the TV, Tia Vero calls, "Got it!" I don't have cable but we manage to get the Time's Square New Year's Eve Celebration.

On my way back to the pile of shirts I trip over a small box. Books tumble out. When I shove some texts books back in the box, I see a leather bound journal about the size of a 4x6 photo.

"Que es eso?" Vero asks.

"Tia Vallia gave it to me for Christmas last year."

"Weird. She normally writes a check or sends a gift card," Vero comments.

"That's why I used it. I figured if she thought it was important enough to give it to me, she had a reason."

"What did you write?"

January 1, 2012

So last night was interesting. James and I went out on the boat with Mom, Dad and Raulito. James timed it perfectly. Right before the New Year he announced that he had just found out that he would be getting a football scholarship to ASU. Mom passed around plastic champagne flutes, Dad filled our cups with sparkling apple cider and I announced that I would be going with James. The fireworks started and I'm not being cutesy or artistic. It was midnight and the fireworks started. Mom, taking a page out of Grandma's book, performed the sign of the cross, praying for my immortal soul.

I want to set down the journal. I want to fold up my clothes and get some kind of order back in my life. Yet, I pick it up again, flip forward a few pages, stopping at the page with a little heart drawn on the upper right hand corner.

"Read me another," Vero said as she flopped down on the floor and started folding tees from the bag I had dumped.

"Really?" I ask, shocked that anyone would care about my inner thoughts.

February 14, 2012

James and I celebrated our two year anniversary today. I can't stop smiling. He got us reservations at Uchi. On Valentine's! Mom and Dad even extended my curfew an extra hour. It was perfect.

Well, almost perfect. James seemed bummed out at the end of the night. We left the restaurant and James asked where I wanted to go. We still had about 30 mins before we had to start driving back to home. I suggested Amy's for ice cream. He sighed funny. I don't know. I'm probably just imagining it. Because after the wonderful meal we had, who could be grumpy?

"I wasn't imagining things," I tell Vero. Tossing the journal aside, I sit down to help fold clothes. After a pit stop at IKEA earlier, my bedroom is furnished. I need to fold these clothes and put them in the dresser with the name I have no hope of pronouncing.

"Enough reminiscing," Vero says as she hands me a pile of folded clothes. I walk into the bedroom and set the clothes in a drawer. I pick up a maroon t-shirt. It is an ASU shirt.

"Have you called your mom?" Vero asked from the living room. I walk in carrying the shirt with me.

It wasn't just any ASU shirt, it is the first ASU shirt I bought when I came to visit the campus back in March.

Spring Break 2012

The family and I took to the road to explore the ASU campus. We drove from Austin to El Paso and visited la familia for two days. Then we went on to ASU. Something amazing happened. My parents smiled. When Dad was satisfied with

the credentials of the business school and Mom had spent hours talking with Tia Veronica about any and all contacts she had on the ASU campus, I finally saw a smile of pride cross my parents' faces. Their little girl would go to college.

I hold the shirt close for a while. As if holding the shirt tight enough would take me back in time to when I bought it. "I don't want to talk to Alicia right now."

"Does she know that James kicked you out?"

I shook my head and set down the journal again. I went back to work. Folding more shirts and pj's than one person has the right to own, Vero and I finally clear away the first plastic bag. I know I should go on to the next bag or box but I feel like I have earned some down time. Luck is on my side, because the pizza arrives and Vero gets up to pay the man. I pick up the journal one more time. The last time I tell myself.

April 7, 2012

Yikes! James just told me his dad is getting him a house off campus. He wants me to live with him. This wasn't part of the deal, but I think I like it. I can cook for him and he can mow the lawn. I imagine a house with a porch and in the cooler months of the year, we'll take our books outside and study. Mother did not see it this way at all. She is online looking up the rules about freshman living on campus.

Vero hands me a slice of pizza on a paper towel. "No more reading," she says.

"My professor aunt is discouraging reading?"

"It's not like that is going to make you smarter," Vero says eating her own slice.

She's right. There are things I don't want to remember and they all started happening around then. I see the DMB t-shirt on the floor. I don't want to see it. I don't want anything of his in this apartment. This is my place.

"What is that?" Veronica asks pointing to the shirt I keep staring at.

"James' shirt," I answer and look away. "I want it out of here."

"Then throw it out," Vero suggests.

I shrug, "He was nice enough to give me time to get my stuff out. I should be nice enough to give him his things."

Vero gives a dry laugh, "He gave you 24 hours."

"He extended it to 48 hours."

"Oh what a sweetheart," Tia says. She walks over to a pile of boxes and picks up the one on top, a small square one. Throwing everything out she hands me the empty container.

"What's that for?"

"Throw all his stuff in it. You can either give it to him or burn it at the end of the night. Your choice. But this way, you don't have to stare at it. Why look back when you can look forward?"

I take the box from Vero and begin to walk toward the door to throw the shirt in when I spot a paper among the things Vero dumped on the floor. It's the slip for January 2013's mortgage. James will need this.

Vero leans over my shoulder to see what I picked out of the pile. "Rip it," she suggests. For a second, I let myself think about tearing it up. How satisfying the sound of the paper would be. After a second, I decide against it. I head toward the door, box and mortgage slip in hand. I

set the box on the floor, place the tee inside and then stare at the bill. Instead of ripping it up, I crumple the paper and throw it in the box on top of the concert t-shirt.

Vero walks over and hugs me, "Not what I would have done, but you're probably a better person than I am. Come on. Let's read a little more. It's bound to be healing."

May 8, 2012

I HATE HER! My mother and I just had a huge fight. James's father has arranged for us to live off campus. He knows some Dean of Admissions or Dean of Housing or something. Mom was begging me to stay, or at the very least, not move in with James. "The dorms are amazing," she said.

I begged her to cut the apron strings. She said James would hurt me. That I'd get pregnant and he'd use his daddy's money to buy his way out of my life. Does she even know me? Who does she think I am? Her?

I reminded her that I wasn't exactly planned and that the baby bump was clearly visible in all the wedding photos. Dad stepped in, "Don't you ever speak to your mother that way again. You may leave this house but I'll be damned if you go out into the world thinking that behavior is ok." This is the only time in my life that I can remember my dad issuing out the discipline. And it's all my mother's fault.
UGH!

Tia sets down the journal and I say, "Maybe it wasn't all her fault."

When Vero doesn't say anything, I grab the journal and toss it in the pile of office supplies. I don't have a desk, or room for a desk, so that stuff has to wait. "She just didn't want

this to happen. She was trying to watch out for me," I say.

I need to be busy. I get up and go to the next box. It's smaller than the office box. This one is a shoe box, an old box from James' football practice shoes. I dump the contents on the floor. The items from my nightstand tumble onto the floor. I see a picture of my family from a Christmas before Grandpa died. We looked happy. Vero comes over and takes the picture, smiling. Under the photo are more things from the nightstand. I see my bible and rosary, gifts from my Grandma Lucia when I made my first holy communion. Under that is the charger for my cell phone.

June 8, 2012

I got my cell phone back today. Taking it away for a month hurt, but it didn't fix things between me and Alicia. Oh that's right. I'm calling her by her first name and it is driving her crazy. I'm not proud of resorting to this. Dad gets mad at me but I just tell him it's symbolic, my way of asserting my independence.

Oh. I just got a text from James: "Ready for another road trip? July 23 we are meeting with a realtor to look at houses near campus." I am so ready to get out of here.

"I am so ready to get out of here," I read out loud to the boxes and bags. "Works as well now as it did then. I could have gotten out of here with just a phone call."

Vero smiles, "I could picture your dad driving all night, helping you load up a U-haul and heading back to Austin."

"I could still call. I could still go home."

"You didn't make that call. You called me instead. Why?"

I throw the journal at the couch. "No," I say, "I will not drop out of school just because James dropped me."

"And you don't think your parents would support you staying in Arizona?"

"Dad would. Alicia? She'd want me home. She would tell me she told me so. No, I can't go back to living with that woman."

"That woman is your mother. You will respect her."

"Please," I exclaim, "the only person that fights with her more than me is you."

Vero took a deep breath. I hit her where it hurt, but she tried to keep her voice calm and still. "Ok. Me and your mom have different views on marriage and women working and even on our mother. But I love that woman and I know despite your differences, you love her, too. Remember when you left? Your mother cried for a week, I think."

August 1, 2012

James and I left Austin today. We are going to stop in El Paso for the night and then drive on to our home. It was harder than I thought. Leaving was hard. Alicia was crying. I didn't cry in front of her but when James pulled the U-haul out of the drive a few tears slipped out.

James reassured me. He said, "When we are in our home, you won't even miss your family." I hope he's right. This is the furthest from my mother that I have ever been and we aren't even out of Texas yet.

I set down the journal, gently this time. I smile. I can't help it. "Guess they aren't so

bad."

"They?" Vero asks.

"James wasn't always so bad." I search for a bag, a specific one. I open it and remove some swimsuits and underwear. Under some pink socks with green elephants on them I find the box to my lipstick taser. I show it to my aunt. Then I explained, "Before James' first away game, he bought me the taser so I would feel safer being alone."

September 15, 2012

With a full class load, football season roaring to life and my part-time job, James and I never see each other. He's started throwing around the idea of joining a frat. He wants me to try and get into the sister sorority. When I said I didn't want to he claimed I wasn't doing enough to keep our relationship alive. My response? "I left my family and everything I knew for you."

Alicia, Dad or Raul have always been there. I don't think I've ever been alone. Even if the parents went away, Tia Veronica would come by. Today is the first away game. The first time I'm alone in the house. I'm not sure I like this.

I get up and set the taser on my night stand. When I come back into the disheveled living room I decide to grab the bag of underwear and fill another drawer. I pick out matching socks and fold them. I come across something I'd rather not see: yellow and black lace. His favorite colors. Steelers' colors. It is a pair of Brazilian cut panties. I think they're uncomfortable and ride up places underwear shouldn't go.

"What are those?" Veronica asks.

I toss her the journal, "I don't want to talk about it, but you can read about it. Start on Halloween."

October 31, 2012

I'm livid. James and I went to a Halloween party tonight. We were dressed as Edward and Bella, we even had the crazy colored contacts. Well I was talking to this guy dressed as Mitt Romney, when a very drunk James accused me of wanting to sleep with the faux presidential candidate. I was just asking if the costume was an homage or a joke.

I begged James to leave. He just kept drinking. We're both underage. What is he thinking? James got louder and drunker so I left. We live near campus and the party was at one of the houses nearby, so I just walked home.

November 1, 2012

So. This just happened. I'm getting ready for class and James walks in the kitchen while I'm eating. "I'm sorry," he says. I nod, eat my cereal. "I was drunk," he says.

"You shouldn't be drinking. You're underage," I say.

James slams his fist on the counter, "Lighten up, Virgin Mary."

Virgin Mary? What a low blow. He knew, he's always known, that I want to wait for marriage. So he throws it in my face. This is not what I thought it would be.

What do I do?

"Virgin?" Veronica asks as she sets down the book.

"Yup," I sigh, "my big secret. I plan to stay a virgin until marriage. James kept trying to break my vow."

"That's got to be a hard vow to keep this day and age."

And on the last day, the last hours of December Vero closes up the journal. I pick up the panties again, "They were James's last ditch effort to get me to break my 'I'm going to wait 'til marriage' vow, a not so subtle stocking stuffer."

Vero stands up and looks around the room. She finds my pink crafting suitcase. Inside are all my scrapbooking, knitting and sewing materials. She pulls out my cloth scissors. She hands them to me. I take them but don't use them right away.

"It's ok to be mad. It's ok to feel something, mijá. You don't always have to think about what is right or wrong."

The sound of the steel rubbing against steel as the thin fabric of Victoria's Secret is shredded fills the room. Then, I hear the fireworks outside. Midnight. The crowd on the TV smiles, hugging and kissing. I am snipping away at fabric.

Tia Vero's phone rings. It's Alicia. She talks to my mom, "No. I'm here." She pauses as I finish snipping the last piece, setting down the scissors and extending my hand, asking for the phone.

Vero hands me the phone and I hear my mom, "Happy New Year's, Eve!"

I collect all the pieces of fabric in my hand and then I let them fall into the box of James' belongings.

"Mommy," I sob into the phone.

Curriculum Vita

Monica Vanessa Martinez was born in El Paso, Texas. She graduated from Maxine L. Silva Magnet High School for the Health Care Profession. She entered the University of Texas at El Paso in the Fall of 2002. She graduated with honors and received awards for both Outstanding Creative Writing Major and Outstanding Women's Studies Minor. After graduating with a Bachelors of Arts from UTEP, she moved to Austin, Texas and began to pursue her MFA in Creative Writing through UTEP's online program. In pursuit of her MFA, she published a short story "Chat" in the e-book *Espresso Fiction: A Collection of Flash Fiction for the Average Joe*, which was an Award-Winning Finalist for The 2012 USA Best Book Awards.

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