

Unraveled Secrets

by Savannah Lopez

Submitted to the Board of Creative Writing

School of Humanities

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of Bachelor of Arts

Purchase College

State University of New York

August 2020

Sponsor: Mehdi Okasi

Second Reader: Monica Ferrell

Table of Contents

The Heart of The Story	3
Estrella.....	7
Josefina.....	35

The Heart of the Story

My senior project is a novella about a Dominican family whose long-held secrets begin to unravel. The first part of the novel is in Estrella's point of view. Estrella, also known as Star, is the younger twin and daughter of Josefina. Star struggles with feeling like she's the burden of her family. She thinks she'll never be good enough for her mother, which makes her avoid telling her and her fraternal twin that she's gay. Star doesn't think she'll ever be accepted because her mother is always hard on her about her looks and even what career path she wants to take. The second part of the novella, is in Josefina's point of view. She carries the bulk of secrets that's been weighing on her for years. Although Star thinks that she's nothing like her mom, Josefina realizes the opposite. She sees a lot of herself in Star, which makes Josefina want to be harder on her. In both parts of the story, I start them off with Estrella and Josefina giving flashbacks of their lives to give the readers an insight of what they've experienced that has molded them into the people they are and why they act the way they do. My story explores religion, sexuality, depression, and forgiveness.

I've been in college since 2014 and it wasn't until 2017 when I realized I wanted to become a creative writing major. I've only been writing for a few years now, so I constantly feel behind. I would read my peers work and think, "*Damn this is so poetic, how can I compete with this?*" I would also sit in class listening to discussions about authors like Jane Austen and Toni Morrison (at the time I had no clue who these legends were) and I would awkwardly smile and shake my head up and down like "*Wow, I am so lost.*" These feelings of self-doubt and anxiety have held me back from showcasing how good of a writer I am. One of my goals is to use my senior project as a way to let go of any negativity, and write my best work ever.

Since I was eight-years-old I've been an athlete. My life has revolved around aiming to get good grades and spending hours in the gym, working on my performance. As well as being behind writing wise, I'm not seasoned enough when it comes to reading. I've spent so much time playing sports, getting nationally ranked, and exercising that I never had time to read. During my time at Purchase College, I've read short stories like "The Doll House" and "Hills Like White Elephants." Other than that, I haven't read enough books to tell you who my favorite author is. I can't say that I have an author who inspires me. Most of my inspiration comes from my personal life. For example, I'm like Estrella in many ways. From keeping my sexuality a secret, to avoiding confrontation, and feeling a burden to my family. My mom can also be like Josefina at times with the way she can be confrontational, her beliefs when it comes to God, and not being able to express herself to us.

Additionally, I get inspired by movies or shows. If I'm not at work or school, you'll find me in front of a TV watching *The Dark Knight* trilogy. I especially enjoy the thriller/mystery genre but I can pretty much get into anything. I often get ideas for a story after I finish watching a movie or series and I write the ideas down in a journal. The idea for my senior project came from a show on Netflix called, *One Day at a Time*. The series is centered around a Cuban family who experiences racism, mental illness, sexism, and homophobia. The mom is a single, veteran who deals with PTSD and raises her two kids with the help of her mom. One of the kids, Elena, is 15 years old and hiding her sexuality from her family because she's scared. For her 16th birthday, she had a quince and invited her father. She came out to her family in that episode and her father ended up walking out of her quince before the father-daughter dance. Although the rest of her family accepted her coming out, they often pick on her and judge her for her political

beliefs and how nerdy she is. Her grandmother especially finds her annoying. Therefore, this show gave me the idea for my story but I put my own twist on a lot of things.

While putting together this story, I knew I wanted to create a dysfunctional, Hispanic family. Honestly, I felt like it would be easy to write about. The main characters, Estrella and Josefina, were inspired by my real life. Estrella is like me because I fall for people very hard and easily, and I also keep a lot bottled up. Josefina is like my mom in the religious sense and can sometimes be overbearing. I knew I wanted Estrella to be gay because it would create tension in a religious household. Having her keep that secret for all these years and feeling like she'll never be accepted by her family, even if she wasn't gay, has caused Estrella to be distant and alone. This creates for further conflict she's finishing college and going through her first break up on top of living in a home that causes her even more stress, Estrella is bound to want to let all of her emotions out. I came up with Josefina's secret about the pregnancy and Karina because everyone has a past even a disciplined, Christian woman. I thought it'd be interesting to have Josefina neglect Estrella but only she knows the reason. Estrella thinks it's because she's embarrassed and disappointed in her when it's actually because Josefina sees a lot of herself in Estrella. Every culture has their own stereotypes, some that are true and some that aren't. People say that Hispanic families are very strict and disciplined while Caucasian families are very laid back. In my experiences, this is mostly true. This gave me the idea for Estrella to come from a strict family where she has all these restraints and is an all work and no play type of girl, then she meets Emily who comes from an extremely easygoing family and she's fun and stress free. This family grew up in the Dominican Republic riding horses, living near beautiful beaches, and selling fruit at markets as opposed to growing up in New York and riding on the filthy subway and constantly smelling garbage, car exhausts, and smoke. Being Dominican makes them feel

unique and kind of important while they're in Los Rios, until they're in America. It's harder for Josefina to find a job and all the wealthy people are above them. There's upper and middle class with distinct privileges, while in D.R. even if you're wealthy, like Abuelo was, you still help out your community as best as you can. That's why folk in Los Rios are so close.

Overall, I aim to provoke positive emotions from my readers with my project. I've been a creative writing major for three years now, and between workshops and stories we've been assigned to read, I've read maybe two stories that dealt with a Hispanic family. Neither story talked about both religion and sexuality, so, I feel like my project is different from what I've normally read.

Estrella:

I grew up in Los Rios, Santo Domingo with my mom and sister. My childhood was kind of perfect. I was surrounded by palm trees, beautiful architecture, art, and beaches. We even had our own chickens. When Celeste and I were about eight, our Abuelo came to live with us for a few years. We'd wake up to the smell of Café Bustelo every day; he always had a saucepan boiling to make it. Abuelo showed my sister and me a type of love that I don't think he ever gave our mom when she was our age. Whenever he sang with us or helped us garden in the backyard, she looked at Celeste and me with a type of resentment. Her forehead creased and her jaw would clench so tight it looked like it was wired shut. She didn't look entirely bitter because her eyes gave away her sadness. Nonetheless, we all still managed to create good memories.

Celeste and I are twins, but she's a carbon copy of our mother. They're equally obsessed about their appearances and their devotion to God. The weekends are theirs. Saturdays they clean and go to the gym for hours then Sundays they stay in church all day. I only stay for an hour and a half, maybe two on a good day. They live by the Bible and believe everything in it but I don't. I believe in God of course but I don't agree with a lot of what's in the Bible. Mainly about homosexuality. I question subjects like suicide and abortion. If He says that these acts aren't in His plans for us then why let women get raped? Or let people experience unspeakable things and live such unfortunate lives that they feel they can no longer hold on? It just doesn't make sense to me.

I spent a lot of time playing with the neighbor kids in The Dominican Republic. My childhood best friend was a boy named Javier. He liked to horseplay and I never minded, but Celeste did, of course. I remember one morning after a holiday party, Abuelo's housekeeper was

thoroughly cleaning the house, even pulling the mattresses into the backyard to create more room. Javier and I decided it would be a good idea to run to the balcony upstairs and jump onto the mattresses. It was only like ten feet high, but I landed on my ankle the wrong way and sprained it. The pain shot up to my leg and I wanted to scream so badly. Instead, I gasped and bit down on my lip. I gripped the mattress and held all the pain in. I couldn't let my best friend see me cry or let him think I couldn't keep up just because I'm a girl.

The last time we visited Abuelo was two Christmases ago. It was 2015 and my sister and I turned 20 earlier that month. He surprised Celeste with jewelry and handed me a check for \$200. We both laughed because he always has a tough time getting me gifts. I'm really picky.

When we got back home from D.R., mom started cleaning houses for wealthy folks in and around our town. I think she needed extra money and didn't want to ask Abuelo for help. We live in Millbrook, Dutchess County where there are *million-dollar* houses for sale. I thought our house was big until I saw the type of houses mom cleans. That's also how I met Emily.

It was a spring afternoon in 2017. Mom asked me to pick her up from East Fishkill, a town that's filled with homes so big they could probably house all the homeless in New York in their guestrooms. The sidewalks were nicely paved, each house had two to three door garages, and *acres* of land. While I was waiting for mom, this girl was riding her skateboard and fell knee first onto the pavement. I ran out of the car to see if she was okay. She looked up at me with big brown eyes and a crooked smile.

"It's nothing," she said as blood oozed down her leg. "I'm Emilia but I like being called Em or Emily." She was wearing a simple outfit that consisted of an oversized t-shirt, shorts, and Converse. When she extended her arm to greet me, her wrist revealed a sparkling silver emerald bracelet and nicely, polished nails.

“My name’s Estrella but you can call me Star.”

“That’s a beautiful name.”

“Thanks,” I blushed. “Let me get you some napkins.”

I ran back to my car and by the time I grabbed a handful of McDonald’s napkins, Emily was standing behind me with a ripped piece of her shirt wrapped around her knee. I thought it was kind of badass. We both laughed and I offered her the napkins anyway so she could wipe off the excess blood.

“You’re so sweet,” she squeezed my shoulder. “I’m actually about to go wash up, my house is just over there.”

Emily pointed to a gated house with white wooden shutters attached to at least ten windows just in front. The long drive way led to a two-door garage that had a Ford Mustang parked in front. How many other cars are in that garage? It was basically a mansion, something you’d see on *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*.

“Wow, it’s nice. My mom is cleaning that house over there.” I gestured to a house across the street from Emily’s.

“That’s cool. You guys live around here?”

“We’re actually over in Millbrook but originally from D.R.” Whenever somebody asks where I’m from, it’s a habit to always mention D.R. because that’ll always be my true home. I’m proud to be Dominican and to have grown up over there.

“Awesome, you’re just a few minutes away.”

“Yeah, maybe I’ll see you again.”

“For sure.” She smiled and picked up her skateboard. “So, I have to head home but give me your number. Let’s stay in touch.”

I felt like a little kid trying to contain my excitement. I was in awe that someone as cool and pretty as her wanted to keep in touch. That night we texted until about 2am. She seemed eager in getting to know me. She would ask me questions like how it was like growing up in a different country, how it's like having a twin, and we even spoke about my father. Never would've thought I'd open up about him, but with Emily, it was so easy. I quickly became invested in our conversations because they happened naturally and she actually cared about what I had to say. It was nice having someone to talk to.

Both of Emily's parents are wealthy. She lives in East Fishkill with her dad, a stockbroker, and spends some weekends with her mom, a finance manager. However, things aren't always the best for Emily. Besides the very limited conversations and encounters she has with her dad; he rarely checks in with Emily or cares about what she's doing. He gives her money each month thinking it'll make up for him not being there for her. With her mom it's a little different. Emily told me her mom makes an effort to text some days and occasionally go shopping, but just like her dad, her career also comes first.

A few weeks after we met, Emily went to Morocco for almost a year. She graduated high school early three years ago, which gave her the room to take two semesters off. She said she just needed to get away. Not from anyone or anything in particular, but she valued her alone time which I completely understood. So, she planned to explore, shop, and take photos all around Morocco. She's into photography, but nothing serious. Given the life she's able to live, she has a very stress-free and happy personality. She also has a brave demeanor and is very laid back. I craved that way of being. I didn't necessarily want to be her, I wanted to be around her *energy*. To be with someone who I can possibly learn from and help make my life less dull.

While Emily was away, the time difference was about five hours. So, I'd be getting up in the morning while she'd be eating at a new restaurant for lunch or tanning on the beach. I thought it was nice that although she was on vacation, she was still interested in getting to know me. She'd ask me how I was feeling, if I ate, and how things were at home. She'd also email me a bunch of pictures she edited on her MacBook of Morocco. The pictures were sublime. How she would capture people's rawness revealed something about her which made me understand her a little more. Some of the pictures would be of a girl stuffing a huge taco in her mouth with a nice scenery in the background, or a beautiful girl putting suntan lotion on her body but she has a couple stomach rolls (something you wouldn't see in a magazine, girls being unapologetically raw). She saw beauty in a lot of things that other people might not.

A month after just texting, Emily randomly called me. "I'm forgetting what your voice sounds like," she said. I'm not used to talking on the phone, so I was really shy at first. I'd force myself to blurt out random things because awkward silence makes me uncomfortable. The more we talked on the phone, the more our conversations flowed naturally like they did through text. Eventually, we started flirting with each other. She initiated it at first. Emily would send me pictures of her in a bikini or getting ready for bed. She had voluminous, honey brown hair, the most kissable lips that are always layered with lip gloss, and an amazing body. I could tell things with us were progressing and felt like I needed some clarity since we haven't really discussed our sexuality.

"For how long have you known that you're gay or bisexual?" I asked over the phone.

"Well, I don't like to label it. I'm just a person who is attracted to whoever I find attractive." She said. "I've been with two girls, others were guys. If I don't see myself living my best life alongside someone then I won't pursue them."

“Oh, so, can you see yourself living your best life alongside me?”

“I’ve thought about it. I’ve found myself attracted to you since we met, we also click mentally.”

Unlike Emily, I’ve known since a very young age that I wasn’t attracted to boys. I had my first crush on a girl in first grade. Her name was Beatrice and I remember having my mom do my hair real nice for project day. Beatrice was my partner and I wore a purple shirt because that was her favorite color even though I hated it. When I got home from school that day, I ran into my room and I cried and cried because I knew I shouldn’t have felt the way I did. I knew that it was wrong because I would read the bible. I was young, but for the most part I knew that gay people were an “abomination” to God. Deuteronomy 22:23. In high school, my sister would nag me about why I never brought a boy home or went on dates. Unlike her, I didn’t have guys lining up at my locker trying to get my number. Even my mom asked me once if I had a boyfriend. She then reminded me, of course, about my devotion to God and saving myself until marriage. Like marriage would ever happen for me.

When Emily finally flew back to the states, she insisted on hanging out. We went to a 70s themed diner then to get ice cream. I kept catching myself zoning off, staring at her. She was glowing with a nice tan and seemed to be in high spirits. Not that she wasn’t before, but I could just sense that she was genuinely refreshed and happy. As we were getting to leave the ice cream parlor, she put a thick strand of hair behind her ear, revealing a pearl earring that complimented her olive skin. We kept looking at each other like we were waiting for one of us to make the first move. I was terrified because I’m not the type to make bold moves. I’m a year older than her and felt so inexperienced with this type of stuff. I ended up giving her a quick peck on the lips. She laughed then grabbed my face. Kissing her was better than kissing any guy I pretended to like in

high school. After that night, we became inseparable. It was hard for me not to want to spend almost every day with her because her company was comforting. I knew she felt the same way since she didn't get along with her parent either.

This past summer, I begged my mom to let me stay home instead of going with her and my sister to visit Abuelo in the Dominican Republic. The responsibility of taking care of myself and the house for two months would be good for me, I argued. I'd get a summer job and text her with weekly updates, so she didn't need to worry about my being alone. It was time I grew up. "I'm 22 after all," I persuaded her. A part of me knew that it made my mom content to hear that I wanted more responsibility, to be more active, to be more like her. That wasn't actually the plan though.

The next two months were ours. In the beginning, I was still in my natural routine. I'd wash the dishes after every meal, wake up early, and do my regular chores. This was until one Saturday morning. I turned over to Emily and kissed her on her forehead.

"I'm about to go clean the bathrooms," I told her while putting on sweats.

"You ever just relax?" she laughs.

"Uh, not really." I chuckled. "I've been disciplined to have a work ethic like my mom. I don't really have days off."

That changed with the weeks that came. Emily insisted on me unwinding.

"I have a surprise for you," she said with big eyes and a wide smile. "Take everything but your undergarments off and put on the robe I left on your bed." While I was in my room, the doorbell rang and within seconds these women were setting up massage tables in the living room. A masseuse and esthetician gave us facials and massages. For the first time, in a very long time, I was able to experience tranquility and I had her to thank.

Mom thought she was slick by having our neighbor, Solo, bring me home cooked meals when he was really just checking in on me and making sure I wasn't starving or throwing parties. Emily would stay in my room while I assured him everything was fine. Trust is hard to earn from mom but with Solo and his wife, she's grown fond of them. I really like them also. They're genuinely kind people; always inviting us to their barbeques and when we first moved in, they would bring us home baked treats. Celeste thinks they're *too* nice but that's typical because she barely trusts anyone, especially men. I just think they're a happily married couple who likes to spread joy.

"How's it going over there?" mom would ask me over the phone throughout the weeks.

"Aw, so you do care about me?" I'd reply in a joking tone.

I'd ask to speak to Abuelo the times mom called. Although, I didn't regret putting myself and my happiness first that summer, I still missed Abuelo. I missed his laugh and waking up to a home infused with the scent of Café Bustelo.

"Keep working hard mija. Wish you could have been here, but we always have next time." He told me.

It made me feel like shit that I was lying to him about why I couldn't come. Emily assured me that he'd want me to be happy more than anything and I agreed.

We never wanted to leave the house; it didn't matter to us that it was summer because we knew everything was temporary. We'd eventually have to go back to being responsible adults with goals. I'd start my senior year of college the end of August and she'd go back to school for her last year to finish her business degree at Stanford in Connecticut. We wanted to make the most of our leisure time together and not having to sneak around.

Even though she lived in a big house and her dad was rarely home, she also lived with her aunt, younger cousins, and their housekeeper. They didn't know about her sexuality and since we both couldn't hang out at our houses were always at the movies or trying different restaurants.

"Do you ever see yourself telling your family that you're into girls?" I asked.

No response. She was lying on the couch, texting. She seemed really invested so I waited. If Emily was texting her mom, she knew I highly respected that and didn't like to interrupt because I knew they didn't talk often.

"Sorry, Star. Just texting my mom," she said.

"No, it's okay. I just asked if you ever plan on coming out to your family?"

"Coming out?" She said confused. "I'm not fully gay, you know. I like both."

"I didn't mean it like that," I apologized. "It's just, since I've met you, I've given a lot of thought about when I should tell my mom."

"That's really sweet. I uh...give me a sec. Sorry. My mom again."

Emily seemed a little off that day. She was typing fast on her phone and looked angry and a little worried. I figured her and her mom were arguing about her dad or something. I never asked because I didn't want to overstep. In my family, we deal with everything in private and in person. That's how Abuelo taught my sister, mom and me. They're very confrontational, but me, not so much. I rather just let shit be and not deal with the extra stress and drama. It's worked out for me. I never dealt with drama in high school or obsessed over things like my sister. She'll be stuck with forehead wrinkles when we're 40 years old while, I'll have perfect smooth skin and it'll enrage her.

She plopped her phone on the couch, crossed her legs, and grabbed my hand.

“Star, I think you’re old enough to stand up to your mom. I think you should tell her; she doesn’t control your life. For me, I’m still figuring things out.”

“What do you mean?” I asked her.

“I just, I don’t know. I love spending time with you, we have lots of fun. We’re getting really close and I don’t want any titles to ruin that or put pressure. Let’s just keep going with the flow of things.”

I didn’t want to put pressure on Emily. I wanted to make her just as happy as she made me, so that’s what I focused on. Our time together was vulnerable and pure. We sang in front of each other, farted, and laughed our ugliest laughs. I even counted her birthmarks, head to toe, several times. One night, she wanted to count mine and fully undressed me. Emily bent down and started kissing my legs, then threw me on the bed. Having sex with a girl was everything I hoped and more. I fell in love with learning all of her and growing closer together.

My time with Emily flew by and it was already the last week of our summer. It was a bittersweet feeling because although school started the following week, I was content with knowing we bonded and had fun together. Mom and Celeste have been gone since mid-June and I honestly felt refreshed enough to actually deal with them. It’ll take a lot for them to ruin my good spirits.

One morning, during that last week, I baked Emily a fresh croissant served with a fruit salad and orange juice. I also gave her a small rustic box. In that box, was a necklace that was very important to me. Abuelo made it for me when I was 14. I wanted to give her something that symbolized how much she’s grown to be a part of me.

When Emily opened the box, she was shocked. She smiled and asked what it was for. After I explained to her, her smile faded. She said nothing, then gave me a long hug. The next

morning, I woke up alone. The necklace was on the kitchen table and Emily was gone. I must have called her over 30 times and she ignored me each time. She left me with a hollow pit feeling in my stomach that never went away. I cried into my bedsheets that smelled like her; they were consumed of her sweat, cum, and saliva. For nights, I would cry myself to sleep on a bare mattress clinging onto the unwashed bedsheet, hating myself for messing up the one thing that made me feel alive. What did I do wrong or could have done better? I tried texting her, but my messages weren't delivered and when I tried calling, it was clear that she'd block my number.

Two nights before my mom and sister were to return home, my neighbor's wife, Shanice, came by to give me a container of freshly cooked lasagna. When I opened the door, my eyes and cheeks were swollen from all the crying. She asked what was wrong, but the way she asked felt like she truly cared, like in a motherly way, and I started crying again.

"Can I come in?" she asked.

I let her in, and I walked her to the living room.

"What's going on, dear?" she asked.

"I just feel like I'll never be good enough for anyone to stay in my life," I wiped my eyes. "not unless they're obligated."

Shanice looked at me in a way my mom never looked at me, like I was insane for thinking any less of myself. "You should never let *anyone* make you feel this way. We're all special in our own way." She said. "If anyone can't see that then to hell with them."

I felt comforted and wanted to jump on her and hug her.

"Thank you," I smiled sincerely.

Like most people when they're sad or heartbroken, I felt like I needed a change. Shanice worked at a hair salon so I asked her for a favor.

“I know it’s almost 8 o’clock, but would you be able to give me a pixie cut?”

She looked intrigued. “You sure? Your hair is so long, it’ll take a while to grow back.”

I thought about my mom and how she wouldn’t approve and then thought about when Emily used to braid my hair. “Oh, I’m sure.” I replied.

I fell in love with it. Mom on the other hand, nearly fainted in disbelief.

When her and Celeste got home, mom came to my room holding a bag in her hand. When she saw me, her jaw dropped along with the bag.

“People would die to have *beautiful*, long hair like yours. You’re practically bald now.”

She yelled. “And with the way you dress, I mean, are you trying to look like a boy?”

“No.” I snap. “This is how I feel most comfortable, accept it, or don’t.”

*

It is mid-December; months have passed since I last saw or spoke to Emily. I still think about her which has only made me grow angry. How can I still think about her when she didn’t give my feelings a second thought before ditching me? I hate that I still care, but I never tried driving to her house to confront her because I’m not the type of person that needs closure. I try to accept things for what they are. Even when my dad left, I thought about it over the years, but never wanted to reach out to find him or find out why. You know, her leaving me without any explanation hurts so much because she knows my dad left us without telling us why. She knows about my situation, so why would she have me experience that pain twice? Emily is just a coward who stepped all over my feelings and only cares about herself. That simple. So, if I ever saw her, I’d probably want to smash her knees with a bat.

So, this past semester has been challenging, to say the least. I haven't been the same since Emily because I've felt numb and alone. My motivation to do anything hasn't been the same because I've been questioning everything. Why does everyone I get close to leave? I can never keep a friend for longer than a couple of months. Am I too clingy? Emily left me with no note, no text. What did I do wrong? Did I push her too hard? I think I scared her. She's never been in a serious relationship, so maybe she was scared she was falling too hard and my gift to her pushed her away? Failed friendships and relationships always circle bring me back to my father. He left when I was nine. He was my best friend, I wanted to be just like him and then he just left us. If my own father didn't want him then I'm doomed. I've always wondered how different my life would be if he was still in it.

Mom and I don't talk very often and when we do it's mostly about school or stuff around the house. She was harder on me this past semester because she noticed my lack of motivation. I couldn't complain because she constantly reminds me that she pays for my tuition and if I have to repeat a class it's out of *her* pocket. Each month, she had me mark up a calendar that's in the kitchen of all my due dates for assignments and exams. She made sure I didn't procrastinate. My 3.5 GPA is all because of her. It's not a 4.0 like Celeste but it makes do. I can't say my mom's a terrible mom because she's not. She just clearly shows favoritism towards my sister, doesn't accept me for who I am, and always treats me like I've done something to her.

When my sister and I were toddlers, our mom would try to put us in matching outfits. Celeste would throw tantrums if she had to wear pants or sweats and I would cry if our mom put a dress on me. I always played too rough for my sister to handle. She liked her tea parties and Barbies and I preferred Legos and Pokémon. We've always liked and wanted different things which has always gotten in the way of our bond.

Recently, Celeste has tried talking to me more. When they got back from D.R. she also noticed a change in my mood. She'll knock on my door and ask if I want half her sandwich or if I need help with any of my assignments. She makes an effort but it's not like I can talk to her about Emily. If she were to know, she'd be equally as disappointed as mom. I can picture the look she'd give me. Almost like a look of disgust. I miss when she wasn't so much like mom. She's three minutes older than me and takes the term "older sister" to heart. Which is a good thing, I guess? But most of the time it feels overwhelming. She was easier to talk to back then. Whenever I was scared to sleep alone or broke something around the house, I went to her and she protected me. Now, I just suffer in silence.

It's a quarter to ten and there's sunlight peeking through the corner of my curtains. The light illuminates my computer desk that holds a dead plant, old mail, crumpled paper, and my laptop. I'm dreading getting up from bed. I have a set writing schedule, that was helped made by mom, in order to get my senior thesis done on time.

My arm is dangling off the side of my bed, feeling my cat's tail brush against my fingertips. I sit up in bed to crack my back and scratch off dry drool from my chin, then walk over to the desk and open my laptop.

I'm not sure if I'm sick of trying to decipher Shakespeare's plays, or writing comparison papers about Old English writers that don't interest me, but being an English major doesn't excite me like it used to. No other subject or profession has really caught my eye in college either. However, when I was a freshman, I wanted to try out psychology, so I could become a therapist. I'm someone who hasn't had the luxury of having a place where I can experience unconditional acceptance or peace, so I thought of becoming someone who can provide that for others. I've also been told, I'm a great listener. Unfortunately, the classes were really challenging

for me. No matter how much I studied, I barely passed. So, I moved on to a major I knew I could do well in because I didn't want to keep wasting time and money.

Since my family moved to the U.S., I've had more access to libraries and books. As a result, I've fallen in love with reading and language. I think being able to express feelings through words can be such a powerful thing, especially for younger people. I don't plan on being an ordinary English teacher. My goal is to be the type of English teacher that inspires their kids to be creative and want to learn; to teach them interesting stories like *The Odyssey* and *A Raisin in the Sun* but make it interesting and *fun*.

I have this desire to want to impact my future students with innovative techniques that they'll remember even years after. But there are days, like today, I wonder if being a teacher will be enough. Will I be able to look back on my life when I'm 50 years old and be content with my career path? Will I be happy and be able to inspire my future students like I hope to? Over the years, I've struggled with being confident or believing in myself. Mom is my sister's cheerleader, encouraging her every step of the way because she's going to be a nurse and help save lives. While, I on the other hand, am going to be a teacher, which my mom doesn't fully approve of. "Why don't you study to save lives like your sister? English is so boring and unbeneficial to your future," she would say. I've never had anyone who believes in me, so it's easy to doubt myself. I know that I won't know about my future until I try but sometimes, I don't know if taking that chance is worth it.

When I overthink like this, I often dig myself into a "funk" that'll last me a couple weeks. I try to distract myself with reading or watching movies. The key is for me to keep my mind occupied enough so I don't drown in my thoughts. Then I'll be okay for a little while, but I always fall right back into it. I go right back to doubting myself and wishing I was smarter or

more talented. There are people who were *born* to be surgeons, people who can sing like Billie Eilish or paint like Van Gogh, and then there's me. I don't do anything extraordinary.

Whenever I'm feeling lost, empty, and worthless, I can't even allow myself to fully feel sad. I can't stay in bed all day or take a two-hour bath listening to music and crying. The only time I have to myself is at night when no one bothers me. It's like I don't have the time to be depressed because my mom constantly has me doing chores around the house or making sure I'm at my desk working on my assignments.

I don't know who I'm supposed to be if I can't be myself? I'm stuck in a household where I feel like my family would be disgusted if they knew the real me. Most of the time, they can't even accept the way I dress or hobbies that I'm into because they're too masculine. It's like mom would be prouder if I looked like some Dominican Barbie. I often think about Pecola Breedlove, a character in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, because Pecola thinks the only way you can be defined as beautiful is if you have blue eyes and white skin. She doesn't think she's beautiful because she's African American. I don't think there's just one definition of beauty, I think that beauty is whatever a person believes it is. Often times, I don't feel beautiful because I'll never live up to my mother's beauty standards.

My laptop makes a loud sound that startles me, notifying me of new mail. I'm still sitting at my desk and look at the time. I've wasted an hour scribbling on a crumpled piece of paper, overthinking my life away. Might as well waste more time and check my Twitter feed. See, this is why I need to have a writing schedule.

Why do people feel the need to post about every freakin little thing that happens in their life? Like nobody gives a crap about how many clementines you've eaten today @RashardW4. Why do people think anybody cares about...wait, that can't be?

I immediately get goosebumps. I lean into the computer screen as if my eyes are trying to deceive me. This has to be a joke, some type of YouTube prank.

A girl from my college just made a tweet congratulating Emily on her pregnancy. Her picture is on my laptop, she's bloated and wearing a long peach dress with one hand on her enormous baby bump and the other holding up a poster that proclaims, "It's a boy." She looks very plump, she's gotta be what? Five months pregnant?

Wait, she's having a fucking baby boy in March? If it's currently December, which makes her six months pregnant, which means she got fucking pregnant sometime in June? While we were living together? In my home? Oh no, this can't fucking be. I start laughing. God, please tell me this is a joke. I'm nibbling away at my thumb nail and click on the tweet to find other people congratulating Emily, posting pictures from her gender reveal party.

I feel hot and nauseous. How? How is this happening right now? Did this girl seriously have me run to the dollar store to get tampons for her *pretend* period? Then proceeded to sleep in the same bed as me knowing she fucked someone else? I laugh. This has to be a fucking joke or a dream. I mean, we were with each other almost every—FUCK. I forgot that there was a period of time in May where she spent almost a week with her mom. Apparently, there was stuff going on with her dad, so she decided to go to her mom's house to get space. I laugh again at how much of a fool I was/am because I should've known that was suspicious. Why would she go to her mom's place for a *week* to try and "relax" when she often complained about her mom getting on her nerves. She'd go hours on end not texting me back because she was "spending quality time" with her mom A.K.A. the guy who got her pregnant.

I slam my laptop shut and throw each of my pillows across the room as hard as I can and accidentally knock down a picture frame. The glass shatters. I didn't think this pit in my stomach could get any deeper, but it has, and I feel like throwing up.

"Everything alright in here?" my sister asks.

"Not now, please." I close the door in her face and start pacing my room.

I don't want to be rude to Celeste, in fact, I wish I could talk to her but she'd only judge me and make things worse. She's too much like our mother.

Tears keep flowing down my cheeks. I walk to the pillows on the floor and drop to my knees. I bury my face deep into one of the pillows and scream. I'm trying to refrain myself from breaking everything in my sight. Relax, Star. Relax. I inhale deeply and exhale slowly and repeat a couple of times.

All those times Emily was distracted, on her phone, wasn't because of her mom. Always her mom who she wasn't even that close to, right? Ugh. It had to be whoever she cheated on me with. Is cheated even the right word? We never spoke about what we were to each other. I'm a fucking fool. Maybe this is my fault. I was so invested in her and how she made me feel that I couldn't see *her* intentions. Yes, we cuddled and had sex but she treated it more like we were close friends with benefits. And I couldn't see that she didn't want anything more than that. We spent so much time together that it was evident I loved her, she knew and not once did she tell me her true feelings or intentions. She had so many chances to tell me she didn't feel the same but she just let me keep falling.

I get up from the floor and open my laptop again. Rage is all I feel. I decide I'm going to make a new account to message Emily, since she had my number and social media accounts blocked months ago.

“Congratulations, you insensitive whore.” I write. “I hope your baby grows up to be a better person than you are. After everything, I can’t believe you. Go to hell. Sincerely, Star.”

I don’t hesitate to press send.

What kills me is that I haven’t been able to cope with anything the way I want to. I have to bury all my emotions in my chest because my family is so fucking complicated.

My face grows numb from all the crying, my eyes feel heavy. They hurt when I blink. I grab a sleeping pill from my drawer. I need to try to sleep these feelings away. Mom isn’t home, I can care less about my damn chores.

I’m suddenly awakened by my mom banging on my door.

My body feels sluggish, my heart is pumping loudly. I feel disoriented. Mom looks pissed at me as always. She’s talking with her hands and alternating speaking between Spanish and English.

Please leave me alone, I wish I could say.

“Mom,” I say, massaging my temples.

“Don’t interrupt me,” she replies back. “We all have things to do in this house and you don’t see me or your sister slacking.”

“It’s winter break, sorry if I forgot to wash the dishes for once.”

“The dishes I need in order to prepare dinner. A dinner that has to be delayed because you also didn’t defrost the chicken like you were supposed to.”

Fuck. The chicken. I know mom is trying to figure out how I forgot because each morning, she either texts me and Celeste or leaves us notes on the calendar in the kitchen of what we’re supposed to do. She always says that as long as we live at home, we need to stay disciplined so that when we’re off on our own we are focused and hardworking enough to

survive. She also never lets us forget that we're supposed to be here to make her life easier, not harder. So, she damn well puts us to work.

Mom is harder on me than Celeste because in her eyes, Celeste is a perfect little angel that can never do any wrong... which is basically true. My sister does great in school without having to try, she's a social person with a lot of friends, and dedicated when it comes to working out and eating healthy; things come easy for her and I can't be mad at that. Although it can be frustrating living in her shadow, I've never been jealous of her or her relationship with mom. I'm glad Celeste has someone really close to her. It just sucks because if our dad was still around, I know we'd have an inseparable bond too.

"I'm sorry mom. It truly slipped my mind."

"How could you forget when I texted it to you? You're on that damn thing 24/7."

I get up from the floor and take a sip from my water bottle. She's standing at the door with her arms crossed. Her face is scrunched with confusion, waiting for me to respond. I just stay quiet.

"You're something else," she says.

"Yup, good to see you too."

"I am so sick and tired of your attitude. I'm sick of—"

"No, mom. I'm sick of *you* and this house."

She presses her lips tightly together and her cheeks turn slightly red. She definitely wants to backhand me on my mouth, I can feel it.

"You have it *easy* and you're sick of me? Why don't you leave if you're so fed up with everything, huh?"

“Easy? Just because I’m young means I have it *easy*?” I raise my voice. “You don’t even know the half of it.”

“The half of what?” She says with a smirk as if I’m joking around.

“Just forget it, ma. You don’t care.”

“I work two jobs to get you and your sister through college—”

I start aggressively picking my pillows up from the floor and putting them back on my bed. “Yup, you never let us forget.”

“I don’t force you guys to have jobs as long as you do what you’re supposed to at home and school. Those are your jobs and you don’t have it easy?”

“Yeah, ma but what about outside of that, huh?”

She takes off her coat and places it in the cup of her arm. “What do you mean, Estrella?”

“Like outside of school, what is there? You don’t make an effort to start conversations with me. You don’t know me, it’s like we’re strangers.”

“Oh, stop being dramatic. I can’t with you.”

I look at her with disgust. There she goes, dismissing my feelings like she always does. I throw on sweats, slip on some sneakers, grab my wallet, and hope to walk past her without her grabbing onto the little hair I do have.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

“For a *long* walk.”

I’m more than halfway near the front door, I’m surprised I made it this far. Mom is probably too fed up and I’m too nervous to turn around and check.

“Star, where are you going?” my sister asks standing on the top of the stairs.

Celeste sounds concerned. I really wish I could talk to her sometimes because despite our many differences, I would still fight anyone for her or give her my kidney in a heartbeat. My pride would never let me tell her that though.

“Please clean the dishes and counter for me, I’ll owe you.” I say to her in a gentle voice.

It’s one in the morning, I get out my Uber and stumble up the stairs. I lay on the front porch and take in the crisp, winter air. I feel numb and warm from all the alcohol which makes not wearing a coat or jacket doable.

I hear the front door creak open.

“Star, you need to come inside before you catch pneumonia,” Celeste says standing in front of me with her breath steaming in the air.

My beautiful sister. She’s wearing leggings, a cardigan, and a sports bra that shows off her toned abs. Did she just finish working out? Doesn’t even look like she broke a sweat with the way her hair neatly falls down her shoulders.

“You... you needa leave me alone before I barf all over your sneakers.”

“Here, drink this.” She hands me a glass of dark green guck. “Its celery mixed with tomato juice.”

“So, you just assumed I was gonna come home drunk?”

“Well, this isn’t the first time you and mom have a heated argument like this. She’s furious, you really need to come—”

“*She’s* furious? HA.”

The problem with mom and I is that we’re both extremely stubborn. We expect apologies from one another and refuse to give them. I chug the drink and try getting my body up from the floor. A pregnant woman probably could’ve done better. Ugh. *Pregnant*. Emily. I can’t even

think about that bitch right now. I'll for sure throw up. Celeste tries to help me up, but I push her hand away. I hand her the empty glass and finally stand up.

"Listen to me," I tell her. "Whatever is going on between me and ma is between us. I don't need you to trying be the peacemaker and shit. Please."

"I always end up in the middle anyway," she rolls her eyes.

"Yeah, because you put yourself there. I appreciate you wanting to help Cel, but please, just leave it alone."

I try my best to gather myself and deeply inhale the cool air for the last time. Celeste goes upstairs and mom is sitting on the couch. She actually looks... calm. When she sees me, she stops filing her toe-nails, wipes them with a damp cloth, and covers her hands with a thick beige colored lotion. I can't tell if she's still calm because now she's looking at me like she wants to beat me with a broom. I always get extra bold when I drink so, before I can let her say anything, I open my big mouth.

"You know ma, it's bad enough that you make me feel like I'm a damned child, that I will never be good enough to be your daughter, but not to care about my feelings? Calling me 'dramatic'?"

I pause trying to make sure I don't say anything disrespectful while still expressing my true feelings that I always hold back.

"What kind of mother continuously makes their child feel this way?"

She gets up from the couch and blows out lavender candles she had lit above the fireplace.

"Estrella, I raised you to be tough and not sensitive. Just because you have some bad days doesn't mean you 'diagnose' yourself with depression."

“You are not understanding that it’s not just some bad days... It's different times a month.”

“You are unbelievable, do you know that?” She snaps. “You have a roof over your head, clothes on your back, and food on your plate *every* day. What in the world is there to complain about?”

While she continues, I feel my body tremble as I’m trying to hold my composure. She thinks that just because Celeste and I are young and don’t have real jobs or bills, that we can’t have real problems. Apparently, our “problems” can’t compare to hers.

“... I just wish I understood you, Estrella. You don’t have to act the way you do just for some attention,” she finishes and stares at me.

“Are you kidding?” I scowl at her.

My body is burning up, I feel my heart rate increasing. I’m livid. An attention seeker? How could she say that? As if I let myself have breakdowns and mood swings because I want to be fucking coddled? My finger-nails are deep into my palms.

I start my breathing exercise and begin to try and look at this situation from a logical standpoint. I’m frustrated, hurt, and angry but yelling and going crazy won’t make this any better or make my mother understand me; even though I want to yell. I want to yell so badly and break this T.V. and shatter this coffee table but I can’t. So, since she’s being honest with me about how *she* feels, maybe it’s time for me to be honest for once. She always preaches about how invested she was with my sister and I when it came to school and raising us with discipline. She likes to say that we ended up on the right track and haven’t gotten pregnant or use drugs because she didn’t let us party or stay out late like other parents. Yeah, I may not be pregnant, but I’m gay as

hell and that's going to crush her little, Christian heart. I don't even think she'll be able to fathom the fact that I want to marry a woman someday.

"I'm gay," I say less confident than expected.

"Speak up, Estrella. I cannot hear you."

I take a couple seconds to ask myself if this is really the right way to do this. It's not. But I can't keep living a lie just so my family can live comfortably. Emily is the last person I want to think about but she was right about one thing. I need to stand up to mom, she doesn't control my life. I'm tired of sacrificing my sanity for the sake of my mother's. I have to do it. I have to. The opportunity is right fucking here.

I straighten my posture.

"I'm gay, mom." I say loudly. "I'm gay... Sorry if this hurts you but I really don't care anymore because I've been hiding this for years."

The gin and tonic are catching up with me. The living room seems to be floating around me. Between the adrenaline rush from coming out to my mom and this dizziness, I feel exhilarated and nauseous.

She sucks her teeth. "What? Stop the games, Estrella. This isn't the time for nonsense."

"I am not playing."

This is the first time I've seen mom scared. She's such a fearless woman but in this moment her eyes are filled with fear. Who knew that I could provoke such a foreign emotion in her? Her arms are folded and held close to her body. She's barely blinking and her shoulders are tense. Mom quickly places her hair into her small, rough palms not caring about any fly away hairs and zips up her sweater. She's quiet but I can tell she's deep in thought.

At first, I was terrified. This is probably one of the craziest things I've convinced myself to do since trying to tell myself in middle school and high school that I liked boys.

It may be wrong to say this, but the fear in my mom's eyes brings me a kind of excitement. It's like I *finally* got her to give a fuck about me; to show real emotion because of me. Every thought that is going through her mind, every feeling in her body is because of me. Whether it's positive or negative, I finally matter that much.

"Celeste," she yells from the living room. "Come down here."

Why is she calling my sister?

Celeste looks nervous. She starts walking down the stairs.

"Did you know about this?" mom asks her.

"Know about what?"

"Your sister is saying that she's gay. Did you know?"

Celeste's eyes widen. She stands on the last step of the stairs, gripping onto the railing. Her head doesn't move but her eyes keep looking back and forth at me and mom.

"No, I didn't know," she says softly.

The house becomes so quiet my ears start ringing. The awkwardness is killing me. I need someone to fucking say something. Anything.

The house phone rings. Celeste steps forward as if she's going to answer the phone then stops. Mom's eyes glance over to the house phone but her body is still. The call goes to voice mail.

"Can someone say something?" I say.

Celeste gets off of the stairs and starts biting her lip.

"As of right now, I have nothing to say, Star." Celeste says.

“You do know that is a sin against God, right?” mom asks me. “Or were all those years of church, retreats, and catholic school a waste?”

“Mom I—”

“You are falsifying His plan.” She cuts me off, talking louder. “Only a *man* and a *woman* are supposed to have sex within their marriage. You are rejecting His plan.”

I look over to Celeste and she’s starring at the ground, not making any eye contact. Why isn’t she saying anything? She’s not even agreeing with mom or having her back.

Before I can try to respond, the phone rings again. It’s a little past 2 A.M.

“Who in the world is calling at this time?” Mom goes to pick up the phone. “Hello?”

I follow Celeste into the kitchen to try and see what’s going through her mind. She starts pouring some water. I grab her shoulder.

“Don’t touch me,” she says trying to keep her voice low. Her eyes are watery. “How could you keep this from me?”

“Celeste, it’s not like—”

“No. I get that we have our differences but we’re *sisters*. It hurts knowing that you felt you couldn’t confide in me, whether I agree with you or not.”

Suddenly, we hear the phone crash to the floor and mom screaming loudly. Celeste and I run to the living room. Mom is on her knees, sobbing.

“Mom, mami... mami what’s wrong?” Celeste asks, grabbing onto her hand.

She just keeps crying. No words, just wails. The pain on her face hurts me. Her fear isn’t a worried, angry fear like before; it’s more like she’s scared. She looks lost and confused. I’ve never seen mom this vulnerable. I’m just standing here, stiff. Do I grab her hand too? Never mind, I’m sure I would just make everything worse.

I leave to go grab her a box of tissues and some water.

When I get back, mom is now sitting on the couch. She's stopped crying, she's just staring at the house phone on the floor.

Celeste grabs the stuff out of my hands.

"Mami, can you please tell us what's going on?" Celeste asks after giving her a tissue.

I want to say something, but what? I should probably just let Celeste keep handling it. But then it looks like I don't care. Ugh.

"Ma, are you—" I attempt to say.

"It's your Abuelo," she says just above a whisper.

Mom is frozen from shock but her face tells me all I need to know. Her eyes are sad but keep scanning the room, like she's trying to grasp everything that is happening. There's sweat dripping down her head and neck. She's become very pale. Mom idolizes Abuelo, she's very close to him. My dad left when I was barely nine years old, he was my best friend and it hurt like hell. So, I can't imagine what mom is going through, having him in her life for all these years. Fuck.

Josefina:

I remember riding through Santo Domingo with my papi when I was a little girl. We had this yellow and green carriage with big, red wheels. During the summer, we would load the carriage with crates filled with exotic fruits. He would sit on the high seat up front, holding onto the reins to guide Ester, our horse, through the market. I always sat in the back to the right so that each time we passed my favorite booth, I could lean out and run my fingers across the hanging suncatchers. The chiming of crystals and clattering hooves are sounds that always brought me peace, even till this day.

“I have ripe coconuts and fresh papayas,” he would yell in Spanish.

Everyone who knew Papi loved him. He’s a very generous and hardworking man. On top of owning a bodega and selling fruits on Sundays, he built seven rooms that were originally meant for his siblings and ended up renting them out for affordable prices. To say the least, he’s very well-known in our city.

I loved riding around in that carriage because I felt like a princess whenever people would smile and wave at us. It was rare for me to feel that way at home. I knew he loved and cared for me but I’ve always felt like he wished he had a son instead. He always called me José instead of Josefina and dressed me in baggy clothes with baseball caps. He was tough on me. My mom died when I was two and when I got older, I came to the conclusion that maybe he treated me like a son because I reminded him so much of her that he sometimes couldn’t handle it. He didn’t want that reminder every day and I guess I understood.

From a very young age, he taught me how to be disciplined and to have a good work ethic. He never let me sleep past 8 A.M. I learned how to wash my own clothes, scrub

bathrooms, make simple meals, and pick the right fruits from our trees in the backyard. He taught me that the most perfect mangoes will snap effortlessly from their stem. They shouldn't feel too solid or too soft.

When I got older, I was only allowed to go to the community club or Boca Chica during the week when I was done with all my chores, then I had to be home by 6:30 to cook dinner. On Saturdays and Sundays, he wouldn't allow me to stay out past 9 P.M. Not that it meant anything because weekends were devoted to cleaning, working, and praising God. No one wanted to hang out with the tomboy who had an early curfew. Needless to say, I often got lonely not having many friends and being an only child. Nonetheless, Sundays were always my favorite day because church was my serenity. On top of that, I was able to spend the day with Papi and make people smile by simply selling them fresh fruit.

I never went to college because Papi always wanted me to have my own business so that I didn't have to depend on anyone. In the Dominican Republic, it's easy to build and have your own business, especially if you're well-known, knowledgeable, and have money on top of doing the requirements like get your liquor license, for example. After I graduated high school, he gave me his bodega. I cleaned up the store, added some new tiles, and let my neighbor, Karina, sell her handmade clothing and fresh baked goods outside to bring in more thirsty customers. She and I were childhood friends up until about middle school. Karina was a big sports person and was into school clubs so she developed her own crew of friends. She was very popular. It was ironic that we lost touch even though she lived 10 feet from me since we were babies. During our senior year, her mom had her bring over tupperware that belonged to Papi. I answered the door and we started talking like we never stopped.

One late afternoon, before the bodega closed, a young man came in asking if we sold tire sealant spray. I showed him where the cans were and a conversation sparked. Before that encounter, no one ever caught my attention. He had nicely combed hair and smelled so rich. When he spoke, his eyes, lips, and energy smiled at me all at once. I was comfortable in his warm presence. His confidence was reassuring because he spoke like he had his head on straight and knew what he wanted in life. How much more perfect can someone get? Later that night, he took me to dinner. Karina covered for me and told Papi that we had plans because he would've wanted to meet this guy. I kept seeing him for about three months until I stopped getting my period.

"I've never been this late before, what do I do?" I said crying to Karina.

After I stopped returning his calls, he showed up to the shop. He was a very persistent man, so I told him I had feelings for someone else. He was hurt and it kind of hurt me, but I was 18. I was supposed to be this independent, focused, Christian woman but instead I let the comfort of a man's touch and warmth corrupt my vow to God. I felt *disgusted* and embarrassed.

"Would you get an abortion?" Karina asked.

"You know that's against my religion. I don't think I could."

"Fifi, you should really talk to your dad."

"Are you serious? He would disown me. The thought of disappointing him makes me sick to my stomach."

"Well, that feeling could just be from the little fetus growing inside you," she chuckled.

I gave her the side eye and wanted to pinch her, but I knew she was just trying to cheer me up. In a short amount of time, she proved to be an extremely loyal and loving friend, she

hasn't changed since our childhood. She then came up with a pretty good idea that didn't involve abortion.

"Let's tell our parents that we are going to travel together just for a few months," Karina said. "We can go to my cousin's house in Costa Rica, you can give birth there and then figure out what you want to do."

"Your cousin will be okay with us staying over there for that long?"

"Yes, don't worry. Her house is huge and she's a nurse. She'll love to help."

I used money I saved from chores and the bodega to pay for our flights.

"José, make sure to call me every night, okay? Be safe and make the right decisions."

Papi told me.

Throughout my pregnancy, Karina and I became very close. She made sure I felt comfortable and got me everything I needed, even when I didn't ask. One night, I was having bad back pain and she helped me sit straight in bed. She grabbed the end of a cold rag and wrapped it around my neck. Her face was so close to mine that I felt her warm breath on my neck. Our eyes locked and I couldn't even think about my pain anymore. She leaned in for a kiss and I remember thinking, what the hell is this girl doing? I wanted to turn my face but there was a small part of me that wanted to stay. Karina constantly gave me butterflies and made me feel special. No one ever made me feel that way but I knew I couldn't allow those feelings to grow. A woman is supposed to be with a *man*. "Make the right choices," is what Papi said. So, I let her give me a kiss because I knew after that, she could never do it again.

"Karina, this meant nothing. I appreciate you but you know we can't be together." I told her softly, watching her eyes water up.

Was it the hormones that made me feel this way? Why would I ever have feelings for a woman? I just knew Papi wouldn't approve and homosexuality was a sin.

"Your beliefs shouldn't strip you of happiness," she told me.

After that night, Karina continued to help me out. I was six months pregnant when I had a miscarriage. I had extreme cramping and lower back pain. It felt like someone was standing on my pelvis. Karina was helping me to the bathroom when she noticed blood dripping down my leg. Getting pregnant young wasn't something I was proud of but it was something I was getting used to. I became excited. Maybe the miscarriage was my karma.

Years then passed and Karina and I were still close. We moved past our Costa Rica experience and agreed it'd be our secret to the grave.

When I was in my early twenties, I started to really care about my appearance. I let my hair grow really long, started wearing blush and mascara, and even started working out. I read a magazine article that talked about how one of the most natural ways to stay feeling young and prevent wrinkles is doing yoga. I ended up doing more research and trying stretches at home and fell in love. It took almost a half an hour to do something that made me feel exhilarated for the rest of the day. It slowly became my passion and I knew it was something I wanted to do for the rest of my life. So, for my 24th birthday, Papi sent me to Florida to do a 15 day 200-hour training to become a certified yoga instructor.

The experience was unforgettable. Yogi Apu was our guru who meditated with us, lectured us, and transformed us in just two weeks. We had two hours of personal time in the afternoon but from 5:30 A.M. until 8:00 P.M. we were dedicated to practicing and learning. I left the training facility feeling the best I've felt my whole life.

Two years later, I had saved up enough money to turn the bodega into a yoga studio. None of that was possible without God and Papi. I started brainstorming the layout for the studio and went furniture shopping at Casa Cuesta and met this guy, Santiago, who worked there. He helped me pick out a nice hanging rope chair and a few adult bean bag chairs.

“Seems like a fun room you’re putting together,” I remember him saying.

“I’m building a yoga studio. Hope to have it ready by next month.”

He then told me that his sister is into meditating and he’ll tell her to check out my studio once it’s ready. I gave him the phone number to the bodega that eventually became my business number.

A month later, I had the grand opening. I had incense burning and soothing music playing from a speaker. There were groups of people in and outside of the studio, talking and laughing. I didn’t expect such a big outcome; I felt so blessed. Papi was a huge contributor because everyone he knew had kids around my age so he’d tell their kids to tell their friends. He didn’t say it with words but I knew he was proud.

It was already past five when I went to get more sign-up sheets and ran into Santiago drinking sparkling water with his sister. She scheduled her first class with me and left right after but her brother wanted to stay.

Santiago stood to help me clean up and we spoke for a while. In the corner of my eye, I saw Karina walk into the studio. She looked beautiful as ever, tall and thin with her red lipstick and pinned up black hair. She saw me and raised her champagne glass in the air. Her smile was bright and she gave me a thumbs up. Before I could excuse myself and go say hi to her, she was gone in seconds.

Santiago was different from what I slightly remembered at Casa Cuesta. Maybe it was the hideous uniform? I couldn't remember him having such nice hair. He was very tall, suave, and had a medium build. One of his front teeth was slightly chipped but he was able to pull it off.

That night, he walked me home and ended up meeting Papi. They hit it off, it was like they were the best of friends. They had a lot in common; mainly with their views on politics and the importance of family and hard work.

We continued to see each other for months. I grew very fond of him and how he made me feel safe and loved. He never stopped walking me home, he was always surprising me with little gifts, and made a great effort to be close to Papi. Sometimes, it was good that they were alike but then sometimes it would cause us to argue. After a year of being together, we moved into a house down the block from Papi. There would be times I was so stressed out with my business and the transition into our place that I would want to cry out of frustration. I rarely cried but I often got into funks and wanted Santiago to be there for me. Instead, he would give me that tough love and tell me to stop complaining when I should be grateful that I'm so blessed. He would keep on and, in those moments, I didn't want a lecture, I just needed a hug. Or, for him to simply tell me, "You got this."

I've never been the best at showing love. I'm not a super lovey dovey person but if I love you, I will tell you. Maybe not ten times a day but you'll know, especially through my actions. I'd cook his favorite meals, have a beer ready for him when he came home from work, and made sure he always had clean clothes. With Santiago, he barely told me he loved me. He left the furniture store a few months after we met and he became the head technician at a mechanic shop so, he was working a lot of hours. He would come home, eat, watch his shows, sleep, and go to work. It was like this every week. In my head, I constantly asked myself if he even missed me.

I couldn't take it anymore so one night I threw his dishes in the sink and yelled. I yelled for so long and not once did he interrupt me. He just sat there. When I was finished, there was complete silence for a moment, then he stood up from the kitchen table, kissed me on the forehead and said, "Sorry, babe."

After that day, instead of coming home from work and watching his shows, he would ask me if I wanted to watch something with him. Sometimes, he would even ask me how I was feeling. Then, every night, he would grab my face and tell me he loved me before he went to bed. Things were actually turning around.

We both did well saving money and when we felt it was right, we decided to get married and start a family. Our wedding was on a beach, it was perfect. There were twinkling lights, gorgeous flowers, there was even a horse that Papi arranged but Evie was the one who planned the actual wedding. I made sure she felt comfortable doing so and she assured me that she was.

I was 26 when I had our twins, Celeste and Estrella. They were the most perfect little coconuts. Celeste smiled for the first time listening to Santiago sing to them in the hospital room and Estrella kept holding onto my finger. I was in love with my life. God truly answered all my prayers that day, I was wholeheartedly content.

From a young age, I could tell how different the twins were. Celeste was always playing with my makeup and heels. She barely cried, but when she did it was usually when I had to leave for work. She loved coloring and doing puzzles. I had to read her a story every night, she loved learning. I knew she was going to be a bookworm. On the other hand, Estrella was such a daddy's girl. She loved being outside watching him work on cars. She would sit in her little blue plastic chair, drinking juice and watching him. When she got a little older, she'd pick up his tools

and tell him she wanted to help. He was a great father to both of them. We ended up naming Celeste after my mom and Estrella after his grandmother. Estrella means star in Spanish.

When the girls turned seven, Santiago's grandmother passed away. She was the only person in his life who cared for him, she raised him. Her death brought out a side of him I never knew existed. He took time off from work and spent every day in the basement. He wouldn't eat or spend time with the girls, he wouldn't even have his daily beer. Granted, everyone grieves in their own way but he started getting aggressive and easily agitated.

One afternoon, Estrella put a hole in the living room wall by playing with one of his wrenches. Santiago started yelling at her, he trembled with rage. He never raised his voice at her or Celeste before. I remember Estrella looking so scared, she just kept saying she was sorry. He raised his hand as if he wanted to hit her and I ran from the kitchen to stand in between them two. I don't usually swear but I cursed him out and told him to go for a walk until he calmed down.

Months went by with me and the girls walking on eggshells in the house. I made sure they were always playing in the backyard or watching T.V. in their room so they couldn't bother Santiago. I think what he wanted more than anything was silence.

Once he went back to work, things started to get worse.

His days at the shop would usually end around 6 P.M. and he wouldn't get home until almost one in the morning. I wasn't able to sleep. The first couple times this happened, I was waiting for him to come home reeking of booze but he never did. Instead, when he got home, he wouldn't really rest or even speak to me. He would occasionally kiss the twins on their forehead while they were sleeping but he spent most of his nights in the basement.

I wish I had noticed sooner how abnormal it was for the amount of energy he had to work long hours without getting much rest. Or noticed his twitching, bloodshot eyes, and sniffing.

There was a week Santiago was off from work which meant I was able to stay longer at the studio and he had one on one time with the girls. I came home one night to find him unconscious on the basement floor. On the table, there was a line of coke with even more coke in a small, plastic baggies.

He was supposed to be helping the twins with their homework, they hadn't even been fed dinner. I taught Celeste and Estrella how to make simple meals just like Papi taught me but we didn't have much food at home at the time. Santiago forgot to go food shopping.

I was shaking uncontrollably. At first, I was unsure of what to do. Then, I put two fingers over the side of his Adam's apple to see if he still had a pulse. Was this an overdose or did he just sniff too much and fainted? He was on his stomach so I rolled him over. There was no vomit and he made a weird, moaning noise which I guess was a good sign.

The reason why I didn't call for an ambulance is because despite the year he had, he was still a good father. Santiago didn't deserve to be put in jail. I didn't want the girls to lose him, they need *both* of their parents.

Instead, I called Papi because he had experience with this type of ordeal due to his brother being addicted to meth. Papi stood with us for a few months to help Santiago get back on his feet. We told him that if he wanted to keep seeing his daughters again, he had to be completely clean. Papi made him do a detox and had him eating healthy and going to bed every night at ten.

One night, Santiago left and we never saw him again. He left a note saying, “Lo siento, Fifi. Tell the coconuts I love them.”

I never fully recovered from that heartbreak. It changed the way I view love, even till this day. To think that a person’s addiction can be strong enough to make them leave their family, a wife and two young daughters, it just completely baffles me.

The girls never knew the reason why their father left. When they got older, I just told them that he left one night and I never knew why.

A week after Santiago left, my neighbor got robbed, beat, and tied up to a tree in front of his house. This wasn’t entirely uncommon. Maybe, the tree part but during that time, a lot of people were getting attacked and robbed.

Papi had just finished his morning prayer when he went into the kitchen and saw my neighbor through the window. He woke me up and told me to call the police while he went to go help. I called from the house phone in the kitchen. The neighbor’s face was so swollen I wasn’t even sure he still had eyes. He had blood dripping from his forehead and lip.

That was the last straw for me. I couldn’t take being in Santo Domingo anymore, a *long* break was needed. It hurt having to leave the yoga studio I worked so hard towards, my house, and Papi but, I needed to think of what would be best for Celeste and Estrella.

He gave me money and told me to meet a good friend of his in New York City. His friend was a landlord and was able to set us up with an apartment in Queens until I was able to find a nice house upstate. We were able to move into a white picket fenced house with a porch and spacious backyard when the girls were 10. The girls and I visited Papi on different occasions, and he even encouraged me to stay here so we can have a better and safer life. Celeste and

Estrella made friends pretty fast. The first week of school they were already asking to have a friend over. They were happy and that came first.

Trying to come up with a business of my own was difficult because I had no connections over here. I knew no one at the time. Do you know how many yoga studios there are in New York? I would've spent more money renting out a studio and paying for my old furniture and equipment to be shipped to me than what I would've earned from clients booking my classes.

I started working part-time at a gym as a greeter and cashier. I'm trying to work my way up to be a Zumba instructor, something close enough to yoga.

Over the years, I've built an inseparable bond with Celeste. It's so easy to spend time with her because we're alike in many ways. She goes to church with me every Sunday and does yoga with me at home. Her devotion to God is just as strong as mine. She's naturally smart and so fashionable. Celeste has long, wavy curls like me and wears minimal makeup. If she didn't have such a bright future ahead of her, I would've pushed her to be a fitness model. The potential she has is unmatched; with her flawless skin, dimples, long legs, and contagious smile. I couldn't have prayed for a more perfect daughter.

With Estrella, I've struggled with her as she's gotten older. Especially after the twins turned 16. I don't know what it was. She's always moody which makes it difficult to simply talk to her. She can sometimes be so attention seeking. It's like she'll mope around the house as if she's waiting for someone to ask "what's wrong". If she were to dedicate her spare time to going to the gym like her sister or spending time learning how to cook, she wouldn't have time to be "sad". I don't even think she has many friends, if any at all. She doesn't bring anyone over like she used to when she was younger. She just goes to school, does her chores, and sleeps.

Celeste has told me a few times that she's noticed Estrella crying or looking "depressed". I don't know what that could be from. We have a routine at home especially on the weekends. If it's not church then it's cleaning. Her mind should always be occupied enough with her busy schedule that she can't have time to be sad. I got the girls into having a routine from a young age so that they can stay on track with their lives and be successful.

With Santiago, I allowed myself to become too vulnerable and weak just like I did when I was 18. I want my girls to be as independent and strong as they can. I raised them to be just that. I've worked my ass off saving up money so they can have a good life so it just confuses me when one of my daughters acts like her life is so terrible. How can she be miserable with food on her plate every night, clothes on her back, and a roof over her head? I'm not able to fathom how that makes sense. Anything that comes her way, she can overcome it. I know that because I raised her. I know she's tougher than Celeste because I was harder on her.

Maybe in the back of my mind, I resent Estrella for being and looking so much like her father. It's not her fault, I know that. Santiago was very hard headed and stubborn and Estrella has followed in his footsteps. Most of the time, I forget that this is probably how Papi felt when it came to me reminding him of my mom when I was younger.

*

In just one week it'll be Christmas, Papi's favorite holiday. And now, I have to bury him in a few days. I only just received the news on the phone yesterday, and nothing could've prepared me for it. I mean how is anyone prepared to hear that the person they admired the most was run over by a drunk driver? It's causing me unimaginable pain. My heart feels like it's cracked open in my chest. I don't want to experience life without him in it. Besides my girls, he's all I had.

Papi taught me that everything happens for a reason, that I must trust God's plan... but how could this be in His plan? This isn't humane, this isn't right. My papi was a *devoted* child of God. It didn't matter if he was exhausted or sick, he'd still wake up at five in the morning, *every single day* to pray. My faith in God will not change but I need Him to help me understand why He'd let this happen. Papi deserved better, to die in peace, at least.

Being back home in D.R. always brings me joy and comfort but I wish it was under different circumstances this time around. We always celebrate Christmas in D.R. I wish Papi visited us in New York more often. He only came a couple of times. He always felt like the people of Los Rios needed him because he was always helping families with food, gardening with neighbors, and keeping his extra rooms available for whoever needed it. Papi's house is the same from the last time Celeste and I were here. It's very clean and there are pots of healthy plants and succulents in every room. His walls are painted a light-yellow color and decorated with eccentric picture frames and paintings. A painting that has always stood out to me is one of Frida Kahlo. She looks stunning and fierce with red lipstick and her infamous unibrow. Her hair isn't actually hair but a beautiful bouquet of flowers sprouting and there are waterfalls of tears painted from her eyes down her cheeks in different dark colors. It's supposed to symbolize the importance of growth no matter how painful it can be. He loved having meaningful wall art. I guess in this current situation, this painting is supposed to resonate with me; that even though his death is painful, I will grow stronger from it. I want to believe that because I know Papi would want me to but I can't shake this uneasy feeling. If he was sick and his death meant that he's not suffering anymore and he's now at peace, then that would put me a little more at ease. But he was strong, healthy, and murdered.

The girls and I haven't eaten since the news. I notice a couple dirty dishes in the sink and start to tidy up the kitchen before I make some dinner. The refrigerator is full of cut up fruit, organic milk, left over rice and beans, and a half-eaten churro. I smile. Papi loved his churros. In the back, of the fridge, there's a container with cooked pork chops, potatoes, and corn. It's labeled "*Alvarez, Thursday, 5pm.*" The Alvarez's are an elderly couple that live a couple houses down from Papi. During our phone conversations, he'd tell me he's been helping them out by making them cooked meals because Mr. Alvarez has gotten really sick, so the Mrs. has her hands full. Yesterday was Thursday. I'm sure they wouldn't mind me bringing this over to them today.

"Where you going, mom?" Celeste asks as I'm putting on jacket.

"To drop some food off down the street. I'll cook some dinner when I get back."

"Oh, I really don't have an appetite and I don't think Star is going to eat either."

"I don't have much of an appetite either but we can't make ourselves sick by starving ourselves. At least have some fruit."

"Okay. When are you going to talk to her?"

"When I'm ready, Celeste. Abuelo comes first right now."

It's a dreary day with a slight breeze in Los Rios today. I close the door behind me and take a look at the thick, grey clouds covering the sun. A gentle breeze brushes along my face and ruffles my hair. I close my eyes and smile because it was Papi.

Our community has always been a close one here. Almost everyone knows each other and they're friendly and kind. People are always sharing food and inviting each other to big get togethers. Some start to notice me coming out of Papi's house. Because he was so well-known here, so was I. Some are whispering and pointing, not being too discreet either. Others are

looking at me with sad eyes. There's a little girl dressed in an oversized shirt with long shorts and sneakers. She's running just ahead of this boy. They're racing and remind me of Estrella when she was younger. Oh, Estrella. What am I going to do with her?

"Excuse me, Ms. Diaz?"

A familiar voice taps me on my shoulder from behind.

"Javier. My goodness, look how much you've grown."

I haven't seen Javier in *years*. He was Estrella's best friend growing up and the son of Karina. A little after my wedding with Santiago, Karina decided she didn't want to wait to fall in love or get married to have a kid. It was her greatest desire to be a mother.

"I want to experience unconditional love and reciprocate that love. Just me and my baby against the world." She said.

She felt as if having a child would make her the happiest, she would ever be. I encouraged her to do what she felt was best. So, she used a sperm donor and gave birth around the same time as the twins. It was fun being pregnant together.

"Were you heading anywhere in particular?" He asks. We can walk together if you don't mind."

"How sweet of you. I'm just going to drop this off at the Alvarez's."

We begin walking on the cobblestone trail. He's so tall, I feel like he's looking down on me. Javier resembles Karina so much from his mannerisms to his physical traits. In his hands are a huge bouquet of lilies.

"Wow, before I forget." He laughs nervously. "These are for you, Celeste, and Star. I heard about Alejandro. I'm so sorry. How are you guys holding up?"

I grab the flowers from him. “We’re trying the best we can. Thank you. What about you? How are you and your mom doing? It’s been so long.”

He cocked his head and squinted his eyes. His whole demeanor changes.

“I, uh, I thought you knew, Ms. Diaz.”

“Please, just Josefina is fine. Is everything okay Javier?”

“Mom passed away last month. She was really sick.”

I stop walking. My face falls lifeless. Chills form throughout my body.

“No,” I let out a deep, shuddering breath. “He... he would have told me.”

“I’m sorry, Ms. D— Josefina. Maybe he wanted to give you the news in person. Alejandro knew how close you guys were.”

I try to fight back tears. Karina and I were close up until the twins and I left D.R. to move to New York. Everything just got so hectic. I was consumed with finding a job and home, and making sure the girls were okay. The fact Celeste and Estrella had to grow up without their father really broke my heart. Months then years went by and neither one of us reached out to each other.

“There was no funeral?”

“No, she was cremated. She made me promise not to let anyone see her. Her body was extremely swollen from the cancer.” Javier pauses for a couple seconds, then clears his throat. “‘I want people to remember me for my radiant energy and beauty’ she said. Her ashes were scattered in the ocean.”

The wind suddenly grew colder and stronger. My knees are shaking and I’m finding it hard to breathe. I lean onto the wall to the left of me for support. Dear God, I’m begging you, please don’t take my girls, too.

“Woah, are you alright? Do you want to sit down?” Javier asks.

“No, no. I think I just need to go home. Here,” I hand him the bag of food. “Please drop this off for me.”

I stare at him one last time; losing myself in his big, narrow eyes that take after Karina. She used to give me the death stare with those eyes whenever she was mad at me. I always ended up making her smirk, though. Nothing was too big to tear us apart. Well, at least until our kids started growing up and took over our worlds.

“I’m so terribly sorry for your lost Javier,” I put my palm up against his cold cheek.

“You’re so strong.”

I start walking away when he gently grabs my arm.

“Wait.”

“What is it?”

“After she died, my grandmother’s been looking after me but Alejandro helped me a lot too. Even before she passed.”

“That’s who he was,” I smile.

“I know how much he meant to the community. He’s been a great help to so many people but what he’s done for me, I could never repay him. He was the father I never had Josefina.”

I grab his hand and we both start tearing up.

“I got together with a bunch of people in Los Rios,” Javier continues. “And we spoke to an old friend of Alexandro’s at the Altagracia Funeral Home.”

“Oh, that is such a thoughtful gesture, but you didn’t have to do that.”

“We really did, for all he’s done for us. We covered expenses and arranged for him to be buried next to your mom.”

I stay silent as I'm overwhelmed with gratitude and sadness.

Javier coughs uncomfortably. "I'm so sorry if I overstepped. We just didn't want your family to have any extra stress. He used to talk to me about being reunited with her, so I just thought—"

"Javier, thank you. I wasn't totally looking forward to planning his funeral, so I'm genuinely grateful. I'm sure Papi is happy you did all that for him."

I hug him tightly, trying to refrain myself from crying into his chest. We depart into the afternoon sun in different directions. I need to lock myself in the bathroom with a cold shower running and just cry.

My hands are trembling, making it hard to put the key into the door knob. I finally get the door to open and drop the bouquet on the coffee table. Strong winds cause a branch to smack against the patio door and startles me. I stare off into the backyard, remembering how much Papi loved to lay on his worn-out hammock and when Javier and the girls used to play freeze tag while Karina and I helped Papi cook. Those simple memories have always been so close to my heart. It pains me that I didn't get to say goodbye to my favorite people.

"Hi, ma, you're back." Celeste says walking into the living room. "I know you have a lot on your plate right now but Estrella won't eat or drink. She doesn't want to do anything until you talk to her. She's just been sitting on the floor in our old room."

I find myself paralyzed, unable to move. As I keep remembering old memories that happened in this house alone, I realize that Papi would want me to bring the girls and I together. We need to get through this together. There will be time for me to cry for Karina and Papi later, but what I need to do right now is more important. The truth needs to come out.

"Celeste, please get your sister."

I put a kettle on the stove and bring one of the wooden chairs from the kitchen into the living room. Papi's had the same small couch for decades now.

"Are you ready to talk to me now?" Estrella says.

"Both of you, sit on the couch please." I say.

The chair is placed in front of the couch. I tie my hair up and take a slow deep breath before sitting down.

"The things I'm about to tell you are going to be shocking. I shouldn't have kept this from you guys for so long, but here we are."

The girls look at each other confused. They have no idea what's about to hit them.

"Well first, I want to start off with some news I just found out today. Javier's mom, died last month of cancer."

"What? No, that's terrible." Celeste says.

"We should walk over later, to check on him." Estrella suggests.

"I think you guys should. I'll send over some soncocho for him."

My left leg starts shaking viscously and my palms are covered in sweat. The kettles whistles and I shoot up from my seat to head into the kitchen.

"Tea anyone? I ask.

"I'll take a cup," Celeste replies.

"Uh, it's terrible what happened to Javier's mom but that was your big news?" Estrella asks.

I pour tea into two mugs and head back to my seat; my mouth is drying up.

"What I'm about to tell you is going to be a lot, so if—"

"Ma, please, just get on with it." Estrella rolls her eyes.

Celeste is sitting up with a strong posture. Her hair is in a neat bun, just like mine and she looks very eager with her eyes locked on me. Estrella is slouching on the couch, not making much eye contact. She's acting as if she doesn't care but I know she's just as eager at Celeste. I've always enjoyed how different these two are because they keep me on my toes. Life is never boring with them. I take a long sip of my tea.

"Javier's mom, Karina, and I were really good friends, for years."

"You guys went to high school, right?" Celeste asks.

"Yes, we were childhood friends who drifted apart but reconnected the end of high school. And uh, I ended up getting pregnant when I was 18."

"What?" Celeste and Estrella both yell.

"We have a sibling we don't know about?" Celeste asks putting down her mug.

"Can you guys just listen without interrupting," I say. "This will go a lot quicker and I'm sure all your questions will be answered."

"Hmm, so, you're not as much of a saint as you want people to believe." Estrella says fixing her posture.

"Watch yourself," I reply. "It was a huge mistake that I made out of frustration and loneliness. Karina and I traveled to her cousin's house in Costa Rica so that I can give birth and put the baby up for adoption. Abuelo didn't know, of course. We ended up only being there for a little over five months, though because I miscarried."

"I'm sorry mom," Celeste says.

"Sorry you went through that," Estrella adds.

"Now, during our time in Costa Rica, Karina and I grew very close. One night... she told me she had deep feelings for me."

My heart sinks when I say those words out loud. It had to be said eventually. Probably should've been sooner because it would've been easier for Estrella to talk to me. I've been so hard on her because as much as everyone thinks Celeste is a version of me, so is Estrella in her own ways. I see so much of me in her. That girl is tough. As much as I get on her, she deals with most things very maturely. She also looks so much like her dad at times, especially after she cut her hair which made me resent her. I should know better from experiencing how Papi used to make me feel when I reminded him of my mom, but I just couldn't let it go. Celeste's eyes are widened and Estrella stands up from the couch and walks behind it. She bites down on her pointer finger knuckle to prevent herself from blabbing out the first thing that comes to her mind.

"I let her kiss me once, then I told her it meant nothing."

"Are you fuc— I mean, this can't be real right?" Estrella says pacing behind the couch. "You're just messing with me, right?"

Celeste stays quiet. I can tell her mind is spinning from the way she's gazing off, looking at the floor. She's just as confused.

"No," I tell Estrella. "I lied to Karina. I had similar feelings for her but not as strong. She was the first and only woman I've ever been attracted to. It was so much deeper than looks. Karina made me feel unconditionally loved and cared for, she gave me butterflies, and I knew she'd never hurt me."

I begin to choke up. Estrella is now on the floor, sitting with her knees to her chest and holding her head up with her hands. Celeste is still starrng at the floor. This is the quietest they've been this whole time.

"I knew I could never be with her because it was a sin. I was meant to be with a man and to create you two."

“A man that you’re not even with anymore,” Estrella shouts. “How *dare* you basically shun me for who I am when it’s half of what you told yourself you couldn’t be?”

“I need you to listen to me,” I say stern, getting up from the chair. “I was caught completely off guard and I reacted poorly.”

Estrella stands up too. “Well, how do you feel about what I told you?” She asks.

“I’ve reflected and realized that you’re growing into your own person and you’re going to have your own beliefs. Karina once told me, ‘your beliefs shouldn’t get in the way of your happiness’ and that’s stuck with me all these years.”

Celeste gets up from the couch to grab some water from the kitchen. Estrella looks relieved but in shock at the same time.

“I’m sorry I’ve been so hard on you. Believe it or not I want what’s best for you.” I say. “Life will fly by before you know it and you need to do what makes you happy.”

“So, what does this mean?” Estrella asks. “You’ve always been so hard on me about everything. Even about stupid stuff like the way I dress.”

“I’m sorry.” I say. “You just remind me so much of your father. You are beautiful and can dress however you like.”

She smiles.

“I also can’t forbid you to like who you like.” I continue. “I don’t want you to feel like I’ll disown you. You’re my child, we’ll take it day by day. Baby steps.”

Estrella walks over to me and gives me a hug. She hasn’t hugged me in months. Her warm, gentle touch brings so much peace to my heart.

“Thank you,” she whispers.

“Celeste, you okay?” I ask. “Anything on your mind?”

“You’ve just had a change of heart all of a sudden,” she replies.

“What’s going on with you?” I ask.

“I’ve tried *so* hard to be the perfect daughter for you. There’s some things that I’ve questioned myself that have to do with God and the Bible and I’ve shut those thoughts up to please you because I thought you’d *disown* me.”

I have never seen Celeste this angry before. A vein is bulging out her forehead and her shoulders are extremely tense.

“My fear growing up was that Abuelo would disown me if I ever made one bad decision.” I tell her. “It worked for the most part, besides me getting pregnant, but I thought that’s how you guys should be raised; very strict so that you guys can do good in school and keep a good head on your shoulders. I’m sorry.”

“So, now you don’t think that anymore?” Celeste asks.

“A lot has changed for me since Abuelo’s death. I’ve never been good at expressing my thoughts. All I know is, I want us to be happy. Life is too short for there to always be tension or unhappiness in this family.”

“Okay,” she says quietly.

“Now, there’s just one more thing I need to tell you guys,” I say.

I walk over to Papi’s room. His bed is neatly made. It smells like laundry detergent in here. He was always cleaning something. There are stones scattered across his dresser, accompanied with polaroid pictures of us and the girls, and a Rosary. There’s a black box underneath his bed with old newspaper clippings, empty films packs, and the note from Santiago the night he left. I told Papi to hide it because the girls can be very nosey. They wouldn’t dare go through his stuff.

“Girls, I know things have been hectic and a lot to process but I rather tell you this now then keep waiting.”

I hand them the note, “**Lo siento, Fifi. Tell the coconuts I love them.**”

“This was from your father,” I say swallowing hard.

“Why the hell are you just showing us this now?” Estrella asks.

“Because you don’t know the reason why he left... After his grandmother passed, he... became addicted to cocaine. Abuelo and I tried to get him clean, but he was struggling too much and just left one night.”

“I thought he just didn’t want us anymore. I wish you would have told us sooner, that there was a reason, even if it’s drugs.” Estrella says with watery eyes. I can’t believe it was drugs, though... this isn’t much, but it’s a type of closure for me. I’ve learned about addiction in school and it’s basically a disease. It’s sad.”

“Me either, I wonder how he’s doing now.” Celeste says.

“Neither me or Abuelo know. About ten years ago, someone spotted him in Samana but nothing else since then.” I say.

“I wish I could remember more of him.” Celeste says. “I just remember him coming to tuck us in, and us occasionally watching T.V., nothing too vivid.”

“I remember me and him always being outside, he was always working on cars.” Estrella says. “

“Yup, you were a daddy’s girl,” I reply. “You look a lot like him too. I don’t really care how you dress or if you want to cut your hair. You just resemble him so much, it’s hard sometimes. Abuelo had the same problem with me and my mom but he *never* actually spoke to me about it. I know I’m late but—”

“Thanks, mom.” Estrella says smiling.

“Yeah, you’ve opened up a lot tonight.” Celeste laughs.

“I have, haven’t I?” I chuckle.

“Anymore deep dark secrets, ma?” Estrella adds.

“Why don’t you girls go freshen up? I’ll start dinner in a little.” I say.

I pour some more tea in my mug and walk to the backyard. I sit in a cushioned chair with a blanket that smells of Papi’s cologne. My fingers are wrapped around the mug, I let the steam rise to my face. The afternoon sunlight gleams on the mulch, illuminating the dozens of flowers he planted himself.

I’m so sorry I didn’t know you were sick, Karina, I say out loud. I love you and promise to look after Javier, like you would’ve Celeste and Estrella. I know you look as beautiful as ever.

Papi, I wish I could talk to you one last time and hear your crazy laugh. You didn’t deserve any of it. You always told me to make more of an effort with Estrella, and that’s exactly what I’ll do. Through forgiveness, patience, and perseverance, I think we will grow closer than ever. I love you and I will make you proud.