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Roxana L. Arguello
Portland State University

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Estella

by

Roxana L. Argüello

An undergraduate honors thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Bachelor of Arts

in

University Honors

and

English

Thesis Adviser

Benjamin Clemenzi-Allen

Portland State University

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Abstract

This collection of short interconnected vignettes is centered on Estella, a young Mexican American woman, and the bicultural lens through which she sees the world. Each vignette is a part of a larger exploration of virginity, identity, and relationships—in particular the one with her mother.

Artist Statement

When I wrote I did not exist—my world did not exist, only Estella and her world existed. My purpose was to follow her, to listen to her, and to transcribe. In the end what I had to show for this was a collection of interconnected second-person vignettes.

The choice to use the second person narrative device was one that I never questioned. This choice was a natural one—an organic one. This was the narrative device that allowed me to bring this character to life. It is one that places greater importance on the relationship of the reader and the protagonist because it forces the reader to think about things differently and see things through a bicultural lens. In the end it allows for a more intimate reading and understanding of the vignettes and the characters in them.

It was another natural choice that I made when I decided to work without an outline. Writing without an outline was the only way that I could immerse myself in the world of Estella. It was never about order. It was always about allowing the character to show me the way. Having a prior and clear understanding of the traditional story structures is what in the end allowed me to organize the vignettes in an order that would make sense to the reader, the story, and me.

One of my influences was Junot Diaz, in particular his interconnected short story collection, *“This Is How You Lose Her.”* In his collection Diaz did what I aimed to do, which was to create a collection of interconnected short stories, to incorporate un-translated Spanish text, and to utilize

the second person narrative device. By doing these things I was able to immerse myself in the world of Estella, and tell her story.

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ESTELLA

To all of your doctors' appointments, until you were sixteen, your mother accompanied you. They weren't awkward at first because you were young, but after your periods became irregular and the line of questioning and exams changed, so did the feel of the appointments, and your mother suddenly was not needed.

"Estella?" The nurse would stand at the door asking, and wait for a response. You would raise your hand, and the nurse would smile. "Follow me, please," she would say. You would get up and normally your mother would follow except for today. Today as she was getting up you told her to wait.

She didn't know how to respond. "Estella," was all she could manage to say. "It won't take long," you told her. And with a look of confusion on her face she sat back down and exhaled.

"Ok pues," she said and picked up the tabloid magazine she had been reading. The nurse forced a smile and you quickened your pace.

You walked into the examination room and sat on the chair. There was no need to change into the robe today. It was not a physical exam, despite what you had told your mother.

You heard a knock at the door, and the doctor came in. You sat up and took a deep breath at the sight of him. Happy. Happy. Happy, you told yourself. "It doesn't hurt to smile," you heard your mother's words echo in your head. "Talk loud and clear," she would say. "Loud and clear."

Dr. Gallagher was tall, nice to look at, and had the whitest teeth you had ever seen. “He bleaches them,” you told your mom after the appointment. “He has to.” You must have stared at him a little too long because he closed his mouth and awkwardly sat on the little black stool by the door. He kept his distance and waved hello.

He was your new doctor. You had requested the change since your old doctor would make you take a pregnancy test every time you were there, despite you telling her that you were not sexually active. “You’d be surprised how many girls like you come in my office and tell me the same thing,” she would say every time as she directed you to the lab attendant. “Then the results come back and they’re really embarrassed,” she would say. “I want to spare you the trouble,” she told you. “Me too,” you said as you took the familiar clear cup with orange lid from her hand and walked to the lab attendant. That was the last time you peed in a cup for her.

"Estella," Dr. Gallagher said. “Very nice to meet you.” He shook your hand and quickly signed on to his computer. He pulled up your record and shook his head. “You were Sara’s patient,” he said. You looked blankly at him, “Dr. Staver,” he said. “Ah,” you opened your mouth, and nodded your head. “Okay,” he said. “I have all your records here, tell me, has anything changed?” he asked. “No,” you told him. “Nothing.”

You could feel him looking at you looking at your hands. “I have a questionnaire I’d like you to fill out,” he said turning back to his computer. You looked up. He was printing something. “It’s very short,” he said as he handed you the sheet. “Ten questions.” You looked at the questionnaire

and told him you needed a pen. He clapped and snapped his fingers. “Right,” he said and pulled one from his pocket.

In the mirror the size of your door the reflection looks shameful and disgusted. Fifteen and unsure of many things in life but of this thing you are sure—prancing around in a dress, in a room full of strangers is not your idea of fun. These people would be fools to believe you're something you're not. And your mother's porcelain doll is one thing you're not.

“Turn around and let me see,” she says. So you do and you ask her if you can take off the dress. You study her face, paying particular attention to the way she admires you—her *niña linda*, to the way her lips are pulled in opposite directions, to the way her right cheek is pinched slightly higher than the other, and to her hazel eyes—glossy like fresh varnish. The smile that is plastered on her face—it's disgusting.

You ask her if she smiled that much—that widely—the day you were born. Your words dissolve her smile. She's going to pretend you didn't say that—for her sake, not yours. “One day,” she warns. “You'll have a daughter.” Needing a distraction you look at your reflection. You think of the things you'd rather be doing. Sleeping. You could be sleeping, but you're not. You're in a boutique on a Sunday morning. Trying on dresses that cost more than the rent.

It's “the day of The Lord,” you want to remind her. You want to ask her why she is not in church and why you aren't in bed, when she yanks you back to reality. “Turn around and stay still,” she tells you and then asks if you have to go to the bathroom. “No,” you tell her, realizing that you had been shifting your weight from one leg to the other. “Then stop that,” she says and you do.

She lifts the skirt of the dress exposing the tulle. “It needs more,” she comments. You tell her you don't like the dress, that it's too tight. You can hardly move. “It's a mermaid dress,” she reminds you. “I thought you liked this style,” she says. You tell her you like the way it looks on others, not on you. You tell her you feel like a veggie spring roll and the way she looks at you, you can tell she doesn't know what you're talking about. “Never mind,” you tell her and she's back to studying the dress. She's not pleased. “Your tia Vira can fix it,” she tells you as she studies the stitching. “She was a dress maker in Mexico,” she says. “She made my dress for my Quinceañera.” You tell her you thought they were poor, and she tells you they were but a Quinceañera is a costumbre. Right, you think, una costumbre. You should know by now that customs are sacred. You keep those no matter what.

You plop down on the floor unable to move. She looks at you in disbelief. “Ni una hora aguantas,” she complains. “One hour is one hour,” you tell her and remind her you're not in Mexico, that you shouldn't be doing this. “No,” she says. “But we're Mexican and this is what we do,” she tells you as she picks out a white dress from a nearby dress rack. “We have traditions—we have culture.”

She helps you up and hands you a dress. You make it clear to her that you're not wearing white. She shakes her head side to side. “Hoy no,” she says. “Cuando te cases,” she informs you. You don't say anything. Then you ask her if that's another Mexican custom you must keep. “Claro,” she says. And reminds you that all the women in your family wore white on their wedding day—that you will too, when the day comes she will remind you.

“Este no,” she tells you. You take one more look at yourself in the mirror and wish you had grown two more inches because then this dress would have looked good. You like the way it wraps around you. It’s true, you can hardly move, but you like the way it makes you look. And so you stand there, studying the outline of your body, then shake off an eerie feeling.

You tell her to hurry with the next dress. You're getting tired and cold. You say this knowing that your words have no power. It is her right of passage as much as it is yours. However long this fitting takes is up to her, not you.

You come out of the dressing room wearing a strapless taffeta gown. She gasps. You imitate her gestures, and hurriedly cover your mouth with your hands pretending to gasp. She drops her arms to her sides. She's not amused. “Alsate el pelo,” she instructs. You show her your wrist and tell her you don't have a hair tie. She walks back to the chair where her purse is sitting and fishes one out for you. She hands it to you and you do as she said.

She looks at you pensively. You ask her what’s wrong. “You’ll need a push up bra,” she tells you. You tell her you don't like them because they deceive boys. Then you catch yourself looking in the mirror thinking of what she said. She notices this. “I was the same when I was your age,” she says looking up at you. “Pura nalga, no pecho.” You walk back to the dressing room without saying a thing. You don't care that she wasn't done examining the dress or the way you look in it. You simply march off. “Maleducada,” she says.

From inside the dressing room you tell her that this is the last gown you're trying on. You tell her you're tired of playing dress up with her, it was only fun when you were little. "Ok then," she says unfazed. "But I hope you picked one or I'm choosing for you." You look at the light pink dress hanging by the door, and tell her you already have. It was the first one you picked when you came in—one with a sequined corset bodice, and floor length tulle. She didn't notice when you picked out the ball gown, and she didn't see when you tried it on. "I just hope you can afford it," you tell her and you mean it.

You come out of the dressing room ready to go, and you extend your arm out to her. She gives you her hand. "No," you say. "My phone." She glares at you and asks you about the dress. You tell her you gave it to the lady who was helping you. She nods and hands you your phone. "Gracias," you tell her, and walk with her over to the counter where the woman awaits.

You are nervous for her, as she's getting ready to pay but it's not like you didn't tell her you didn't want this. "Save your money," you had told her many times. But she's the mom, and what do you know—you only just turned 15.

Estella. Even your name is Americanized. E-S-T-E-double L-A. If you had been born in Mexico it would have been a single L. But you were born in the land of the free and the home of the brave. You are American. And what's more American than having an American name.

They toyed around with the idea of naming you after one of your grandmothers or great-grandmothers but your dad thought that was too traditional. He thought you should have your own name, with its own expectations. That's why they named you Estella, after the character in the Charles Dickens novel. It was the last novel your dad read in high school before he felt obligated to drop out and work to help his family financially. He felt they couldn't wait for him to finish high school then college to then reap the rewards of his education. They needed him then.

Your dad never met his father. When you were younger some nights you would lie awake and wonder if this was the reason he walked out when he did. How could he be something he's never known? you thought. Eventually the love you had for him sort of vanished, it grew cold, and became nothing but a memory. When you started to forget what he looked like and what he sounded like you pulled out his picture to remind yourself that he was the man you had spent the first six years of your life with.

“¿Que sientes?” she asked. You were thirteen and you had been in your room sitting against the bed, deep in thought looking at a picture of your dad. When you heard her voice your first instinct was to hide the picture. You were embarrassed. “Mamita,” she said. “It's okay, es tu

Papa,” she told you and put out her hand. You handed her the picture and the moment you did, your eyes started to burn, so you hid your face.

She sat down next to you and you told her you didn't remember him. She turned the picture over to examine the back, that's when she saw what he had written for you. “Estella,” she read in a whisper, and placed the picture back in your hands.

The first time you became aware of the spelling of your name was in grade school in Mexico. Your grandmother was sick, and since your dad was the eldest he felt the need to be there. You were in Mexico almost three months. Those three months you were enrolled in one of the local schools. You wore a uniform like the rest of the kids, and a nametag with only your first name written on it.

The first name tag they had given you they spelled your name with only one L. You told the teacher that it was spelled incorrectly. Your name had two Ls. “E-S-T-E-double L-A,” you spelled out. Okay, she nodded and put her hand out. You placed the nametag in her hand and walked away. This happened on a Friday.

On Monday when you walked in your new nametag was sitting on your desk. A white little tag with big and bold black letters: ESTELLA. You picked it up and pinned it on your dress. The rest of the day went well and you walked around proudly, knowing that your nametag had been corrected. You didn't feel like an Estela, but Estella. You told your dad about this and he laughed a little. Then you thanked him for the extra L.

“What does he know about love?” your mom said interrupting your thoughts. “He left. I’m the one that’s still here,” she said and you wondered what she was talking about. Then you remembered the picture and the words he had written in the back of it. “Estella,” she began reciting from memory, almost mockingly, “I” she emphasized, and struggled to get the rest of the words out, “will always love you.” You stared at her. The tears that you had denied were now appearing in her eyes.

A few months after he left she started renting out one of the rooms. She didn't tell you it was because she was having trouble with money, you were six after all. But even as you got older, she didn't like talking to you about money.

"She doesn't have to know," you heard her tell your aunt. You had been playing in the yard and only came in for some water. Your aunt Vira was sitting at the table. Your mom was leaning against the counter, relaxed—taking a bite out of a red apple. They stopped talking when you came in the kitchen. Your aunt smiled at you. "Vete a jugar," your mom instructed. You told her you were thirsty. She nodded, and you walked to the fridge. You took a bottle of water and went to the living room and stood there for a minute.

Your aunt told your mom she needed to watch where she spent her money. "Water bottles" she told her. "That's such a waste of money." Your mom told her they were on sale. Your aunt laughed in disbelief and told her to be reasonable. Then she asked your mom about the expenses she needed help with this month. You heard your mom take a bite out of her apple, then silence. "Dime," your aunt pressed her. "Solo el agua," your mom told her and cleared her throat.

"Don't buy her so much," Vira told her. "I don't," your mom said. "Oh no?" Vira questioned her, and pointed out in the direction of your room. "All the shoes, the clothes, the jackets, the toys," she started listing. Your mom told her you hadn't asked for any of it, and that it was stuff that you needed. "You think buying her all of that is going to make her forget?" Vira asked. You heard your mom take another bite of the apple. "I know you want to give her the best," Vira said. "But right now you have to give her what's within reach—within means." Your mom didn't say

anything.

You heard Vira push her chair in. She had to get home. Her kids were waiting. You ran quietly to your room and made yourself busy. “Estella,” your mom called moments later. “Come say bye to your aunt.” You slowly made your way out to the porch. You gave your aunt a hug, and she kissed you goodbye. You stood next to your mom, her hand on your shoulder, and watched as your aunt drove away. You stood there a minute after Vira’s car was out of sight.

“Let’s walk to the park,” your mom said, and shut the door behind her.

“Do you ever feel small?” You asked her. “Miniature, tiny, dainty,” you listed. “And the trees look thousands of feet tall and the people around are giants and their houses are houses for giants. We walk amongst them reminding ourselves to look up, square up, stand tall and feign to be one of them.”

“No,” she tells you. And the way she looks at you—you know she's a giant. She's one of them. She lives in a giant house and sees the tops of trees. She looks down at you. “What's wrong,” she asks. “Qué te pasa?” You stand by the door letting the rainwater drip off you. It started raining last night and it hasn't stopped. She looks as the water pools on the floor. She's waiting for you to say something about it. Waiting to see if you'll clean it up or if you'll leave it for her, adding to her list of chores.

“Nada,” you tell her putting your backpack down by the door. Your hair is damp. You didn't bother to put your hood up. “It's just—” you say and brush your hair behind your ear. You begin feeling the almost too common sensation of your throat tightening and drying up. It's been happening a lot lately and you wish you knew why. You also wish you knew why it always seemed to rain when you walked home, why you hadn't grown like them, why you had remained small. But you don't ask these things. And you don't ask her. These things you keep to yourself and think of at night.

“You've never felt that way?” You ask her once more this time with a little more intrigue. You ask hoping that her answer will have changed. You're careful not to let her know that's how you feel today. You're treading lightly like La Llorona—the woman from the stories she told you

growing up. “No,” she says and asks if that's how you're feeling. You stand up straight and meet her eyes. You shake off the solemnness that's been resting on your shoulders and breathe in. “No,” you say and you smile as best you can, a smile so big you almost believe you have a reason to smile. “I was just wondering,” you tell her. Then you look down at your shoes. They're wet. Your socks are wet. Your jeans are wet. You bite your lip and wonder how long before she will say something about the puddle that you stand on—the one you brought in from outside.

“Eso pasa,” she says seconds later. Her hands are on her hips, “when you have too much time on your hands. “An idle mind is a bad thing, a sad thing,” you remember her saying. She stands in the middle of the living room, with toys in her hands. She's always cleaning. You look at the mess that he's made. There are train tracks scattered all over. “It's building material,” you remember your little brother say once.

She exhales and drops some of the toys in the blue bin. She reaches for the tracks. “I'll do it,” you tell her. She stands up straight and puts one hand on her back and thanks you. You kick your shoes off and peel off the layers of clothing. You walk over to take her place and continue picking up after him. You stop when you come across the little people figures. You place them in the toy bin and hope they don't get lost.

“He came by the other day when you were at work.” That’s what you told her when you said you saw your dad for the first time since he had left but that was a lie. You told your mom this because the truth was that you were the one that went to look for him and you didn’t want her to know.

You had saved the envelope from the first check he sent. You kept it under your mattress knowing it wouldn’t be safe in your room. Your mom would go in and clean when you were in school. So you hid it there. You looked at that thing so many times that you had memorized his address.

Your mom got tired of running to the bank to deposit checks, so she sent him your savings account number. And just like that he was out of your life again. He still deposited money, but you had no trace of him. You liked things the way things were before direct deposit.

You used to imagine him sitting at his table, thinking of you as he made out the check—his hand, your name. E-s-t-e-double l-a. The name he had given you. Now he only thinks of routing and account numbers.

You had gone out with Britt that day and had spent the day shopping and driving around town. She had her own car. Her parents got her one the day she turned 15. You remember she didn’t go to school on her birthday, instead she went to the DMV to get her permit.

Before she drove you home you asked her for a ride. “Sure,” she said. You pulled out the envelope and showed her the address.

You knocked twice and were about to knock a third time when the door opened.

When you were little you remember everyone being very tall, and when you grew older and taller yourself, you realized that they weren't as tall as you had imagined. You remember your mom being the tallest woman you knew—now at almost half her age, you're just as tall as she is. But him, you thought he would be taller.

“Hola,” he said, and you felt your underarms getting wet. You wondered if he recognized you. “Te puedo alludar?” You took a step back and tried hard to swallow. “It’s me—soy yo,” you said. “Estella.” You didn't know whether to speak English or Spanish. He rubbed his forehead. You stood there across from him, staring at his face, and the beads of perspiration appearing in his cheeks and nose.

“Estella,” he said in a whisper. “Mija,” he said scratching behind his ear with his index finger. “Wow! Que—que grande estas,” he wiped his face with his right hand. “You’re all grown up,” he said and you smiled. You turned around to see Britt. She was preoccupied with one of her shopping bags, when he invited you in. You told him you couldn't and pointed to the car. He saw your friend and understood. Then he told you he was glad you had stopped by, that he wondered if you ever would. You told him the same thing he told you, and he looked down at his

feet. You stood there thinking how he wasn't the man you had remembered, the same one from when you were six.

He said he still had your mom's number, that he would give you a call to make plans. You said okay, and then asked him for his. "Just so I have it," you told him. "Si, claro," he said. That was almost two years ago, and he didn't call.

“How many?” The waitress asked. “Just us two,” your mom replied. “Ok. Follow me,” the waitress would instruct. You and your mother would follow and be seated at a little table near a window with a nice view of the city.

“Just you two.” It was some time after your father left that this stopped being an insult and became more of a compliment. You smiled when you heard this. Your mom did all that was in her power to give you a normal childhood. You were fatherless, not an orphan. She would cusp your face with her hands. “Mi niña,” she would say, “te amo.”

She cleaned houses for a living. She started doing that after she quit the job at the bakery. She loved bread—but the smell of it was making her hate it, so one day she quit. At least that’s what she told you, but you suspected it had to do with the people at work. Your dad had helped get her that job. After the divorce they picked sides, and hers was not it.

“I’ll clean three to four houses a week,” she had told you. “Then we’ll be able to spend time together,” she said. “I’ll be home when you get back from school,” she explained. “It’ll all work out.” She was much more relaxed then—when she cleaned houses. “I know it’s not ideal but I like the work,” she explained one evening.

You had worked out a routine together. After school you would sit at the kitchen table and do your homework. She would sit with you and help you. And even if you didn't need help she would sit with you. "What are you working on?" she would ask every now and then. You would explain the assignment to her. "It helps to talk it out," she would say when she noticed you getting frustrated. "OK," you would say, and begin to explain to her the problem and before you knew it you had found your mistakes and a solution.

The smile on her face during some of those after school study sessions was one that you hadn't seen often. Her eyes lit up and illuminated her whole face. You could see—almost trace the lines around her mouth and her eyes. They were so fine and soft like one swift brush stroke. You had not noticed these before then. Even with the fine lines on her face she was beautiful, her eyes being her best feature. They were a shade of brown that, no matter how hard you tried, you could never replicate with your watercolors. When you would tell her that you wanted her eyes she would say "No mamita."

You had inherited your eye color from your dad's side of the family. They were rich like charcoal. Someone had described them as water pearls once. "They're beautiful," they had told you.

"Mi muñequita," she would call you especially when she put you in bed. You would smile knowing that when you woke it would be just you two again. Then one day the answer to the

question that you had learned to love, changed—out of the blue, and you didn't know what you had done to bring on that change.

“Just you two?” the waitress asked. “No,” your mother said, and your smile vanished. “I have someone I want you to meet,” she said looking at you then smiled at the man that had walked in through the doors. She waved at him. “I'll go set up a table for three,” the waitress said. “Thank you,” you mumbled. You saw as they greeted each other, then as he held out his hand to you. It took you a second, but you shook it. “Estella,” your mom said. “El es Tony.” Tony makes three you thought. You've never been good at math, but you know that three is an integer number—a whole number, but not an even number, which is what you had been promised.

The first time you went to the casino was with Sam. You were 18 and everyone you knew was in Mexico, Vegas, or Florida for spring break. It was a Friday night and you were watching TV in the living room when you received a message from Sam saying, “I’m outside.” You replied by calling him a liar. “Did you even look?” he replied. You hadn’t. So you looked out the window and were surprised to see him parked outside the house.

You got up, and grabbed your coat. “I’ll be back,” you notified your mom who was at the kitchen table reading. “¿A donde vas?” she asked. “Out,” you told her. “I’ll be back,” you said and shut the door behind you.

After 25 minutes in the car you with Sam and a three other guys that you had met once long ago you had to ask, “Where are we going?” Sam shook his head. “Ya vas a ver,” he said. “We’re almost there,” and three freeway exits later you were there, in the parking lot of a casino. “Sam,” you said. “¿Se te olvido?” you asked. “I don’t have a job. I have no money,” you told him. “I’m in college,” you reminded and he laughed a little. “That’s why we’re here to make you some.” He pulled out his wallet and handed you a fifty-dollar bill. “Thanks,” you said. “¿Y si pierdo?” You asked. “You worry too much,” he told you. “Just pick a table and play.”

He walked away and you went looking for a table with an open spot. You found one at a Baccarat table. They explained the rules, but what it ultimately came down to was following your gut feeling—betting on Bank or betting on Player.

You had been playing for almost an hour when he sat down on the chair to your right. He was older, maybe 30. Had a trimmed beard and short hair that was side swept. Up until that point you were relying on instinct when placing bets but his arrival changed that. Your gut was no longer to be trusted. You didn't know if the feeling you got was about the bet or simply nerves. Water. You decided you needed water. So raised your hand and waved one of the servers over. "Water," you said and she handed you one, and quickly walked away. So you sat and drank your water and settled your nerves. You wondered why you were nervous if you didn't even know him. So you continued playing paying no attention to the man.

You had won three bets in a row and were contemplating making a fourth bet when you heard him say, "you should follow it." You turned to see his face. "Till it dies out," he suggested. So you heeded his advice, followed the pattern and won. You thanked him and he nodded. "What else have you played?" you asked. "First table," he said as he pushed a little stack of green chips to the spot marked Player. Bank won. "Sorry," you mouthed. He shook his head and got up. You thought he would leave, but instead he pulled out a cash envelope. He leafed through the bills, pulled out a few and tossed them on the table. "Black," he said.

The dealer called it in, and he was given his black chips. "So where are you from?" he asked. "Portland," you said. You asked him where he was from, "Beaverton," he told you and asked who you had come with. You told him you came with friends. He counted some chips and placed them on Bank. You flinched. "I would bet on Player," you said surprised at how calm you were. He looked at you. Fine, you thought. "I'll bet on Player," you told him and followed your own advice. You slid two chips on Player. He slid two of his black chips to you. "You're staying on

Bank?" you asked. He shook his head. Player won. "Wow," he said. You slid 4 black chips back to him. "Guess we just have to bet against each other," you told him. "Or," he said, "I could follow your lead."

By the end of the night you had gotten a few chuckles out of him. When your friends came around your table to see if you were ready to head home he was a lot more open. "She's funny," he told them. They agreed.

"Did you get Money Bag's number?" one of the guys asked as you walked back to the car. "Yeah, did you?" another asked. "He was loaded," another said. You laughed. "Nope," you told them, and you wondered why. "He didn't even carry a wallet," you told the guys. "Why?" you asked hoping they would have an answer. You knew so little of him, and you wanted more.

You had wanted him to look at you. When he did look in your direction he did it not to look at you, but at the person behind you. That hurt more than any monetary loss and you couldn't explain why at the time.

That night you understood the saying, "Penny for your thought." There was something about Money Bags that attracted you to him, that reeled you in. It wasn't the gold pinky ring, or the large amounts of cash he carried in his pocket. It was something else—something that you couldn't explain. You thought about the moments he was silent and you had nothing to comment. You wanted him to say something, anything, but he said nothing. It was as if opening his mouth to speak was too much of an effort and he didn't bother to try.

“You should have gotten his phone number,” Sam said when he dropped you off, “Why?” you asked. “Nomás,” he said. “You’re were really quiet,” he pointed out. “Did you lose?” he asked. You shook your head. You told him you had won and pulled the cash from your back pocket. “I have your money,” you said and put the bill in the cup holder. “And....” you said and held up a one hundred dollar bill up for him to see. “Nice,” he said.

“See what happens when you take a little risk,” one of the guys said and patted you on the shoulder. Yeah, you thought as you got out of the car.

You were 14 when your mom brought him home. Which came as a surprise because she had always sworn to you that she would never do that. You even remember her saying, “what kind of woman brings a stranger into her home, and introduces him to her daughter?”

She would always tell you about her friends that did just that—that didn't wait long before introducing their boyfriends to their children. She told you about how bad that looked, and how shameful it was for the kids. She was always worrying about things like that, worried about what people would say, and about keeping up appearances. That was her—that was your mom.

“He’s such a nice man,” she would tell you. “He’s so attentive and detailed,” she would pepper in whenever she could, trying to butter you up to the idea of this man that had captured her attention.

You wouldn't say much, knowing that your opinion would not matter. Ultimately it was she who had the final choice. It was her life. You were just baggage.

The night that you finally asked about him while she was making mac-n-cheese. She was standing by the stove. She hated cooking, yet there she was, doing it for you. She was stirring in macaroni, carefully watching so that the water didn't boil over. She hated that. It left the stove all sticky, and the cleaner that she used she would say “hule a rayos,” and wrinkle her nose as if she had just smelled a bad odor. But she was right. It did smell awful.

“What’s he like?” you asked. You were careful not to sound too interested. She stopped stirring, turned off the burner, and set the pot in the sink. Thinking of what you had asked and how to respond she moved slowly and grabbed the colander she had placed on the counter.

“He’s—” she paused. “He’s got everything,” she sighed and walked to the sink. She poured the macaroni in the colander and you watched as she drained the last drop of water out of it.

You sat up and poured the cheese powder in a large bowl. She had poured the 1/4-cup of milk in it already. You stirred, and watched as the milk, which went from a white to a yellow #5, swallowed the powdered cheese.

She brought the drained macaroni and poured them in your mixture. She watched as you pensively looked at the bowl and as you wondered if she remembered the time she taught you about heterogeneous and homogeneous mixtures, and if she would remember.

She stabbed the bowl with a wooden spoon. You wrapped your fingers around it and mixed some more. She took the fork you had been mixing with before and set it aside.

As you mixed and watched the macaroni change colors you finally forced yourself to ask her more questions about him. And you did it with a smile. “Is he nice?” you asked. “Does he have a good sense of humor? How old is he? Where is he from? Does he have a job?” And finally, “Does he have kids?”

All of these questions she answered elaborately. Even giving you more than the simple answers that you had wanted, and taking forever to get to the final and most important one you had asked.

She told you he was very nice, polite, and well mannered. That he laughed at her jokes. And how he was two years older than her. He was Mexican. What else, he had his own construction business—he was just starting off. His clients were loyal, but few. That’s actually where they met. She would tell you all about it, but you didn’t want to hear that, the question that mattered and that you wanted answered was “does he have kids?” that is what you really wanted to know.

“No,” she told you. He hadn’t fathered any children. He loved kids, but had none of his own. That was his dream. He had told her that he had always wanted to have a family of his own. To live in a nice house, nice neighborhood, and take care of his family. Your mom admired that. And you think that’s what made her like him more. She wanted you to have a family, the mother and father that you were promised on the day that you were born. She thought that was the right thing, the logical thing, and that’s what she went for.

You looked at the bowl of macaroni and cheese. It was bright and beautiful in contrast to the bowl. She took the wooden spoon and served you two spoonfuls. You looked up at her. How could she do that, you thought, disrupt something so beautiful without first taking it in.

You were in the backroom—the room where you had gotten ready earlier that day. Your back was to the door. You were kneeling in front of the window sticking your head out when your mom came in. You turned around and saw her with her hands clasped the way they always were when she was nervous and had something to tell you.

You turned back to the window, and watched as the people below walked to various places, and you wished you were one of them. Going to places, seeing things, doing things that you wanted to do. But you weren't them. You were you, and you were in a gown, the color of your flushed face, that weighed more than any of your winter coats, with a room full of people that with the exception of your family, you had seen once—maybe twice in your life, were waiting for you to dazzle them with one last dance.

“I have a surprise for you,” she told you. You turned once more to face her and you remained this way. You remembered your father's words, and looked her in the eyes.

“Another one?” you asked voicing your displeasure. “Estella,” you heard your cousin say under her breath. “What?” you responded, in a tone that you instantly regretted. “Tone,” she warned. “That’s your mom you're talking to,” she commented. You took a deep breath and cleared your throat. “Sorry,” you said looking at your mom.

She walked toward you and hesitated to speak. “The dance—“ she said. “The father daughter dance,” she continued to say before you interrupted. “Yeah?” you questioned because for once you had no idea where this was going, and not because you interrupted before she could finish speaking, but because the look on her face was one you had not seen since your dad left.

“Me and Tony were talking and I thought—he’s going to be a part of your life too,” she said. “We talked about this,” you reminded her. “Tony is part of your personal life. Not mine,” you said. “I have a dad,” you told her then paused realizing your mistake. “I had one,” you corrected. She walked toward you. Reached around and she closed the window. “No quiero que te enfermes,” she said. She had good intentions. You were horrible at being sick. When she sat and reached for your hand, that’s when you saw it there on her left hand, cradled between her pinky and her middle finger—the sun on her finger. You felt it radiating heat right away. Your hands were sweaty and hot.

She saw where your eyes were drawn. “Estella,” she said with a trembling voice. “He asked me to marry him.” You didn't say anything. You just stared. “I didn't say anything because it was your birthday,” she said. “No. I get it,” you told her. You got your hand out from under hers. “I get it,” you repeated. “I'm not enough.”

“No se vale,” she said. You got up and walked toward the door. “Thank you,” you told her. “For not telling me on my birthday,” you explained. “It only made today much, much more special,” you said as you made your way to the ballroom where her guests were waiting for you.

The last dance was not what you had planned. You planned on it being a mother-daughter dance. She was the one who raised you, and taught you to drive. She taught you how to change a tire. She took you on your first road trip. Most importantly she was there for you when he had failed to be. But Tradition said no, and your mother-daughter dance was reverted to a father-daughter dance. “The way it should be,” she said to you right before she handed you off to Tony. “Right,” you told her.

“So that's it,” you said when the song ended. In their eyes you were now a mujercita. You danced away your innocence. You were 15 and this was your Quinceñera.

By 10pm when the cake had been cut and your “Thank Yous” had been said, you retreated to the backroom where you had gotten ready earlier that day. Your mom and Tony remained in the ballroom. You took with you to the backroom a flan and a half bottle of champagne, which you planned to eat and drink all by yourself. When you got there, you opened the window back up, and pushed a small sofa in front of the window.

People watch. You wanted nothing but to people watch and disappear with them, and through them. You took the bottle of champagne in your hand and took a swig. “Then there were three,” you said looking down at the picture on your phone. It was a picture of you, Tony and your mother. You looked back and saw the room full of gifts and cash filled envelopes on the side table. It's not so bad, you thought and ate a spoonful of flan. I'll be gone in three years, you thought. You put the bottle aside, and leaned out the window. It is not good for man to be alone you told yourself. Just then a chorus of voices were singing your name outside your door. “Estella! Estelita! Stella!” they sang.

You opened the door and stood there with arms wide open, inviting them in. As they marched in you instructed them not to touch your cake, your presents, or your cards, and the crowd laughed. “Wow!” you heard a voice say. You looked at the door and saw her standing there. “Britt!” you said. “You made it!” you were genuinely happy to see her. “I know!” she said. “And you're wearing pink!” You looked down at the gown, not entirely embarrassed—it was a nice dress. “Stella!” a voice interrupted. “Where's the booze?” it asked. You yelled back to look in the blue bag by the sink. You pulled Brittany in and shut the door behind her. Someone had already started playing music, and dimmed the lights. You sat with her by the window when you remembered that she didn't drink. “Wait here,” you told her. “I'll go grab us some water.”

You left the room unnoticed by the others. In the ballroom your mom was saying goodbye to the last of the guests. She smiled at the sight of you and you returned the smile. “I'm OK with it,” you told her, not that you needed to be, but it would make her feel better. She hugged you

tightly. “Ma—that's enough,” you told her and she let go of you but held you at arm's length.

She was tearing up. You told her not to cry. “Yo soy la mama,” she said. “I tell you what to do,”

she joked. You told her your friends were waiting and she let you go.

“Estella,” she had called, her voice cold and immediate. “Ya voy,” you responded. “Ya,” she demanded. “Hoy por favor.”

She always hated when you told her you were coming when in fact you hadn't moved an inch. She wanted you to move at the sound of her command, to drop everything and go. But that was not you. It never was.

“Estella!” she called again this time much louder than the last. “What!” you responded. “Te dije que vengas. ¿Que no escuchas?” she reprimanded. You had heard her and you did plan on going, but just not right away.

You hated when she did that and you had told her this before. “I’m not a dog,” you complained to her as you walked to her room. She was in standing in front of the mirror. “Ven,” she said. “¿Que?” you asked. She would turn and stop at different angles, observing her reflection. “What are you doing?” you asked looking at the faint stretch marks on her stomach. She had told you about these, and that she got them because no one had told her not to scratch her growing belly when she was pregnant with you. They didn't warn her that it would scar.

“I’m bloated,” she said. “Me siento empajada.” “Really?” you asked her. You were annoyed that she had called you all the way here just to tell you that. “What do you want?” you asked. She was pensive. “Ma,” you said. “What do you want?”

She exhaled and let her stomach out. “Ma, stop,” you told her and cringed. She was always going on about how you should take care of your body because she didn't want you to make it to her age and be disappointed with the way you looked. She had been going to Zumba classes twice a week, which is when her schedule allowed. She was disappointed though, she wanted a taut stomach—like the one she had before she had you.

“What do you want?” you repeated. “Necesito que vallas a la tienda,” she said. “¿A cual?” you asked. “Just right here,” she said, “to the corner.” She pulled her shirt down—covering her stomach.

“¿A La farmacia?” you asked, that was the only store you could think of. “¿A que?” you questioned her. She was sitting on her bed, looking at her phone when she told you what she wanted.

That was the first pregnancy test you bought in your life, it was for your mom. You never imagined that you would buy one again after that, not for yourself.

She was sitting on your reading chair when you came in—the yellow one from Ikea, the one he bought you to keep quiet. This was before she knew of the affair. Before she knew what you had seen—what you had kept quiet. To see her sitting there, it stirred something in you. “Don't sit there,” you wanted to tell her. “Don't sit there,” you wanted to say—but you didn't.

She was tired. You could see it in her eyes. She hadn't been sleeping much these days, and that was partly your fault, partly hers. “I can't sleep when you're not home,” she said to you in a message. You knew this, but you still went out, and you failed to reply every time because you hated that she did that. You hated that she sent you messages that made you feel guilty for not being there, for not doing enough. There were days when this was all that she did, just as there were days when you would get no messages from her at all, only silence.

The days you received messages from her were usually the days that she was missing your dad. Something about this pregnancy made her feel alone, sad, and scared. Days when she and her new husband would argue over little things, meaningless things, those days she would tell you she loved you—that she cared. Other days she would look at you the way she would look at your dad those final days, with a look of longing and pity and you hated that. “Stop looking at me like that,” you wanted to tell her. “I'm not him—I'm not dad.”

And tonight as she sat there, with one hand on her stomach and the other sustaining her heavy head, and as you stood there, you knew exactly how your dad felt: ignored, invisible, and transparent. Those days you understood that he couldn't carry the weight of her look, so he left.

“I'm home,” you announced waking her from the trance she seemed to be in. “You can go now,” you told her. “Sleep.” But sleep was not what she had in mind. She wanted to talk.

“Estella,” she said. “Why are you behaving this way?” she asked. “Why are you shutting me out of your life?” And you think maybe she forgot the conversation from 3 weeks ago. The one where she pointed out that you are living under her roof, and the least you could do is show a little more respect to her home and to the man she is married to—that you could start doing this by obeying the rules of the house.

Respect, you thought, if only she knew. And for once you considered telling her about Tony and the affair because maybe then she would understand you. Only then would she understand why you couldn't be home all the time pretending that everything was okay when it was not.

“Ma,” you said. “¿Que estoy haciendo?” you asked. She says you've been ignoring her, ignoring her calls. And she says that you've been distant. You don't deny any of it. She's right, but you don't tell her this. You just stand there holding the door to your room wide-open, eyes to the floor. You tell her that you're tired, that you'd like to sleep. “Estella, talk to me.”

“You wanted me home. I’m here,” you tell her. And as you walk to get in bed you tell her to turn the light off on her way out. “Eres mala con migo,” she tells you as she walks out. You go to sleep thinking maybe you are mean, but she has made you this way.

“I like this one,” you told her and handed her your phone. You were showing her a picture of a little green Jetta you wanted. She shook her head and made a face. “No, este no,” she said handing you your phone back. You dropped your arms, “¿Por que no?” you asked. “Por que no, it’s not good enough,” she explained and continued walking down the store aisle.

“Ma,” you called after her. “I like it,” you said to her but she wouldn't stop walking. She turned to the left toward the kids' clothing and you followed.

She was standing in front of a boys' clothing rack. When you reached her you told her that with the money that you had been saving up, and with the money that your dad sent that you would be able to pay for it cash. “Ma, please,” you said. She showed you a blue button down shirt for your brother and asked you if you liked it. You nodded and pulled the picture back up for her to see.

“Estella,” she said. “Please,” she moved your hand away from her face. She picked another shirt from the rack and held it up for inspection and with the other hand she rubbed her temple. “Ya te dije,” she said. “We're not investing in a used car.” You reminded her that she wouldn't be investing, you would. “Oh no?” she asked. “When it breaks down, and you need money for the tow-truck, o quien sabe que otra cosa,” she said. “Who do you think will be helping you pay?” You told her that wouldn't happen. “Por favor,” she scoffed.

You told her you would help pay for insurance, that you would be careful. You would take a driver's education class if it helped lower the insurance rate, and you told her you'd pay for it yourself. “Please,” you begged. “I really want this,” you kept on repeating. “Oh, and you're not

touching that money,” she informed you. She was talking about the checks your dad sent every month. The ones that started coming in without a reason or a note.

The first check that he sent was for 298 dollars. You later learned it was his first paycheck.

You had gotten home from school one day and your mom was on the phone talking to your aunt. You came in asking for the mail. Your mom had bought you a subscription to some doll magazine, and you were waiting for that to come in. “En la mesa,” she told you. You sorted through the mail she had set on the table, and spread it all out. Your magazine hadn't come in. There were only fast food coupons, store advertisements, bills, and envelope addressed to you. You picked up the letter and walked to your mom. You held it up for her and pointed to your name, she nodded—it was okay for you to open it.

There was nothing but a check inside. The check was made out to your mom, but down in the note section was your name, Estella.

You handed it to your mom. She held the phone away from her, and asked you where you had gotten it. You gave her the envelope. She put the phone back to her ear, “una mierda de cheque,” she complained and told your aunt all about it while you stood there and listened.

“That’s my money,” you told her. She looked at you, wide eyed, “¿Que?” she said. You repeated your words. “I know that’s your money,” she said and threw a shirt in the shopping cart. “Pero soy yo la que decide como se gasta,” she said and she reminded you that it was she that put that

money away in a savings account for you. "I know," you said, and reminded her that you knew she didn't need his shitty checks. "¿A donde vas?" she asked. You were walking in the opposite direction. "To get milk," you told her. "We're all out," you told her. "OK," she said and continued walking.

Money Bags has a name and it's Robert. He also has deep pockets but you already knew that.

What you didn't know was that he would not remember you. You didn't blame him though. It had been many months since you had seen and spoken to him. And for not being someone worth remembering you blamed only yourself.

You didn't see him when he walked in but you saw him when he walked up to the table with his buddy. You thought it might be him. It has to be him, you said to yourself. Something about his face—he wore on it the same look that drew you in the first time. It was a look of sorrow or emptiness. His eyes spoke and you wanted to hear. Eyes like those, you thought, they know a thing or two about regret. You kept on playing, not paying attention to the man. And you tried hard to remember what he looked like months before. You stared at him every chance you got, but it was once you heard him speak that your suspicions had been confirmed. It was Money Bags.

He walked up to the Baccarat table, and stood behind the chair. He pulled out the contents of his pocket with one hand and plucked out a few hundred-dollar bills that were mixed in with cards, ID's, and receipts. And just like the last time he threw the money on the table with no regard for the dealer and sat down. While the dealer spread out the cash, called it in and counted his chips he read the screen. He was ready to place a bet. He bet three hundred on Bank and he lost. He bet another three hundred on Bank after and this time he won. He looked back to his friend who was clearly not amused and ready to go home. Then he shook his head in disapproval.

You couldn't talk to him because he was sitting too many seats away, but the urge was there and the need was great. He was one of those people that others are attracted to. He was like the fruit you were the fly.

Sam complimented him on his Rolex and Money Bags welcomed the compliment. "Saving for a new one," he told him as he placed another bet. You just watched and hoped he would look your way. "Hey," you wanted him to say. "I remember you," but he didn't say that, not to you at least—but to the man behind you.

Sam and the other guys watched you place a few bets. "Baccarat takes time," they said before going to other tables. "I know," you told them. "That's why I like it," you told them. Nothing should come easily. When things do come easily they're usually unappreciated. At least that's what you had learned—your family for instance. Everything was so easy and perfect at the start, and when things are like that something is fundamentally wrong. Now it's different. It's work and there's progress.

You played the whole night at that table wondering when he would say something. To the woman that sat next to him and helped him play he said good night and wished her the best of luck. He wrote down his number for her on a piece of paper. Unable to read his writing she asked him what his name was. "Robert," he replied. "Send me a message when you come," he said and walked away. Then the woman looked at you. You were gathering your chips. "One more," she

said. You hesitated. “Ok,” you said and bet it all on Player. You took a step back ready for another disappointment.

You wanted to lose. You wanted to think about the money you had lost and not the man that had forgotten about you because that hurt less. “Look, look,” the woman said reaching back and tugging at your arm. Your money had doubled. You needed to smile.

You thanked the woman, grabbed your coat from the chair, and picked up your chips with one hand and headed to the cashiers window. When you got there you saw him standing there. “Hi,” he said.

“Don't worry,” you tell her. “I won't look so disappointed when I get there and see he has a new family,” you told her after seeing the look on her face. You were packing your bag when she came in the room and you told her that you were going to visit your dad in the morning. She didn't want you to go. She voiced her opinions nightly before going to bed, hoping that her words would make you change your mind. But they didn't, they seldom did.

“It's not like you didn't form a new family,” you told her. “I'll be fine,” you said. And maybe that's what bothered her. She wanted you to forget and see this family as your only family. But you couldn't do that. He was your dad. You might not have shared as many memories with him as you did with your mom and Tony, but you wanted to change that.

“Does he know?” she asked. “Yeah,” you told her. “I talked to him last week,” you said. She sat down at the edge of your bed, “Oh,” she said. “¿Y que te dijo?” she asked trying to be more understanding, but at the same time to learn more about your father. She hadn't spoken to him in years and in those years her curiosity had only grown. It grew even more when she got the personal checks in the mail. She didn't know where he worked or where the money had come from, and it was killing her. And though she brushed the checks to the side, feigning indifference, you knew that she still cared.

“Nada,” you said, knowing what she wanted. You knew that if you told her the things he had said that she would overanalyze and twist his words. “He was glad that I called,” you told her. She looked disappointed. She wanted more than you were giving her.

You told her you would leave in the morning and be there only the weekend. “¿Y tu ya no pides permiso?” she asked. You told her you didn't need to ask permission to go visit your father. Then you threw the bag in the corner. Upset and annoyed you walked out to the living room where you sat on the couch across from Tony. He was watching soccer re-runs and opening mail.

“Mija,” he said. “Don’t worry about your mom,” he told you. “You know how she is,” he continued to say. You nodded. You did know how she was, but it still bothered you. Days like these you reminded yourself that she was the one who stayed and that because of that you owed her your allegiance. You tried to push out of your mind the fact that she pushed him away, because maybe, just maybe, she gave him the push that he had needed.

“¿Que tienes?” she asked. “You haven't been eating—and you didn't go to class yesterday,” she reminded you.

You're not in high school anymore, but it's as if you were. Nothing has changed. All the accountability that they warned you about in high school, the no late work policy, no excuses, it was all lies. Everything is the same.

“Nada,” you tell her. “I'm not hungry,” you say and push yourself away from the table. The chair screeches beneath you. You stop immediately. “Sorry,” you say. “Siempre ‘sorry’,” she says. “You always do that and say the same thing. Change,” she tells you. “I want to see change, not hear ‘sorry’,” she says.

She reaches for your plate of food. “Te lo comes alrato,” she says and places the plate in the microwave. You know you wont eat it later but you don't tell her this. You begin to get up from your chair when she tells you to sit back down. “Todavía no,” she says. “We're not done talking.” It doesn't matter that you don't have anything to say to her because as long as she does you have to sit and listen.

“¿Porque no fuiste aller?” she asks once more. She had never cared about your classes—she didn't even know what days your classes were on, or what time they started and ended. The only reason she was bringing this up was because she heard Tony say something to you about it. She was pretending to show the same concern.

“Aver, dime,” she said. You took a deep breath in through your nose and exhaled. Okay, you thought, and so you told her you were waiting for a call.

She threw the rag on the table and you lifted your head. “¿Y no pudiste hacerlo de la escuela?” she wanted to know. You tell her you couldn’t. “¿Que querias que hiciera?” you asked her. “Go to class, then what? Walk out to take a phone call? ¿Es lo que querias?”

She pulled a bottle of 409 from under the sink and started spraying the table. You got up and pulled out a clean cloth from a drawer and began cleaning the table. “You need Windex for this,” you told her as you wiped the glass with the rag. She didn't say anything.

“Whose call were you waiting for?” she asked. She was looking beneath the sink for some Windex. She didn’t find any so she checked the pantry next and found it by the door. She grabbed the bottle and handed it to you. You took it and began spraying the glass. You could feel her eyes on you. You met them. Her eyebrows were raised—she was waiting for an answer.

“From someone,” you said wiping in circular motions. “Obvio que de alguien,” she said. “¿Llamada de quien?” she wanted to know. “¿Quien te llamo?” she asked once more. You sprayed more Windex and watched mist fall on the tabletop. “No one,” you mumbled and took a step back. “They didn't call,” you said under your breath and stood there with the rag in your hand.

She frowned at the sound of your disappointment. “Ay mamita,” she said as she walked to you and kissed your forehead. When you didn't move or say anything she took the rag from your hand and shooed you out of the kitchen. “Go,” she said. “Yo termino esto.”

“I’m going to lose it,” you announced. “Lose what?” she asked. You stared at her in disbelief. “C’mon,” you glared at her. “You know I’m a prude don’t make me say it. I’m having a hard time as it is admitting this to you,” you told her. “Just say it,” she taunted. With eyes wide open she stared at you waiting for your mouth to open and for those words to come out.

You were sitting in the theater room waiting for a movie to start. This was the first time you had hung out with her since the day at the restaurant. The day she asked, and you told her you were a virgin. She handed you the popcorn and you handed her the gummy bears. You shook your head, refusing to say the words. “Say it! Say it! Say it!” she cheered. You told her that you couldn’t, you really couldn’t. “Fine!” she said and laughed. “I can’t believe you won’t say it though. It’s unbelievable,” she said and took a drink of soda. “Un-Fucking believable,” she enunciated. “You really are a prude,” she said while you ate a fistful of popcorn. “It hurts my modesty,” you said with your mouthful. She leaned over and whispered, “Oh it’ll hurt. Trust me. But not your modesty.” You choked a little. “Oh god,” you said as you took the drink from her hand and drank.

“Mmm,” she said pointing to the screen. “That looks good,” she said of the preview. You winced. It was one of those “guy gets girl, guy loses girl, guy wins girl back,” type of movies. “I’m not watching that,” you told her. Those were the movies you avoided watching because of their unrealistic portrayal of relationships and love. “Happy endings are imaginariums,” you said. “They don’t exist.”

“Hey Prudence, so who's it gonna be?” she asked. “Who you gonna lose it to?” she wanted to know. You confessed to her that this was the same question that had been on your mind and that you didn't know. She looked back at you confused. “I don't get it,” she said. “You just said you're gonna lose it.” You told her you were, but that you hadn't found a guy yet. She dropped her hands on her lap.

You told her you wanted something casual, no strings attached. “What the hell are you talking about?” she said. “Casual?” she repeated, “You're not the ‘casual’ type of person. You're—quaint,” she said. You laughed, and told her to shut up. “I'm gonna do it,” you told her, “I'm gonna do it.”

“Tell me you're joking,” she said looking at you. You looked back at her, and told her you weren't, that it was no big deal—just sex. “Alright,” she said. “Let me find you a stranger,” she joked. You told her that as long as you were attracted to him, you didn't see what the problem was. She scoffed at this.

The main credits were starting to play but this didn't matter anymore, not to her. She was telling you about the importance of virginity. “Trust me,” she told you. “Your first time matters.” The older woman in the row in front of you turned around to shush you both. Britt glared at her. “Why are you doing this?” she leaned over and whispered. “Is it because of what I said that day?” she asked. You told her it had nothing to do with what she said that night at the restaurant.

This was something you wanted to do, that this was about living a little. She leaned back in her chair but kept her eyes on you. You directed her attention to the screen. The main titles had finished rolling. The movie was starting.

While she watched the movie you thought about the conversation you had with her at the restaurant. How it ended with her telling you it was okay, that despite you being a lonely 19 year old virgin she would still be around because “she's a friend, and that's what friends do.” Half way through the movie she seemed to have forgotten she was upset with you because she grabbed your arm and squealed to you about how hot the male protagonist was, that she'd bang him in a heartbeat. But she hadn't forgotten because after the movie was over she stayed in her seat. You sat there too watching with her as the people walked out. You waited for her to say something.

She looked at you curiously. “I don't get it,” she said throwing her hands in the air. You shrugged. You didn't know what to tell her other because you didn't fully understand either, you just knew it was what you wanted to do.

You never imagined that seeing your dad would be awkward, but it was. You had called him after he had failed to call you. You said hello and he gave you excuses, which you happily accepted.

You made plans with him every weekend, and every weekend something came up. Sometimes it was him that cancelled, other times it was you that cancelled, but whoever it was that cancelled would be sure to reschedule only to have the plans be canceled again. “Mija,” he would say. “Me vas a tener que perdonar, pero no boy a poder,” you would forgive him, and tell him not to worry.

Those weekends that he cancelled, he would deposit a little more in your account. It was those nights that the sound of his voice calling you “mija,” would resound in your brain. You thought it odd that he would call you that. He never called you that when you were little. It was always Estella, or Ella with him. You wondered why he couldn't say your name anymore.

He never spoke of his life after you or your mom. He always asked about you, about how you were doing. And unless you asked him, he wouldn't say anything about himself. Only once he told you about his job and your grandmother in Mexico, and how she had found your old nametag. You laughed at this and then it got silent.

It was during these silences that you wondered about his life and his new family. Your mom had remade her life. He must have done the same. In these long silences you constructed the questions that you would never ask.

Then one day the silence was cut short with an invitation. He was going to Tahoe for a few days and wondered if you might come. It would be a good opportunity to meet his wife and his daughter. You agreed to go.

The day of the trip you drove to his house, your bags in the trunk of your car, you were all set to go. But you got there and saw him standing there holding her hand. She looked about the same age that you were when he left. You decided then that you couldn't go anymore. You mumbled some lame excuse and drove everywhere but home.

You knew he had a family, a wife and a daughter.

It bothered you that you would never know him the way you knew Tony. It bothered you that you wouldn't know your sister the way you knew your brother. It bothered you that things were this way because he had wanted them to be. And it bothered you that he didn't consider you now the way he did then.

“I’m getting married in October,” he said while you just sat there listening. “Do you want to continue to see me?” he asked. Silence. He leaned in toward you. You didn’t move. “You’re not going to answer me?” he asked. You told him you were, that you were thinking.

When you met him at the casino you didn’t think he was single. But you never imagined that he was this committed to someone else. And so you thought about her—the woman Robert was going to marry. She must know he cheats on her, you thought, she must suspect something, or just not care.

When Tony was cheating on your Mom, she noticed things but she never said anything. She was too busy dealing with her family problems in Mexico so she never bothered to ask any questions, but she knew something was not right. She must’ve thought that if she ignored things that they would go away. But then she found out she was pregnant and things changed.

You placed your hands on the table and exhaled. “If I say yes, will that change the way you think of me?” you asked. You wanted to know if that made you a bad person because you didn’t feel like a bad person, and that’s what troubled you. “Why would I think that of you?” he asked. “Just tell me—do you still want to see me?” he asked and you shook your head yes. “Sweetheart, I need to hear you say it,” he reached for your hand. You told him yes, and when he asked if you were sure you told him yes once more.

He didn’t say anything about the woman—his fiancé, and you didn’t bring her up. He changed the subject, and you welcomed the change in conversation. He didn’t tell you anything about

himself. He asked about you mostly and your family. What kind of people they were, and how you got along. So you told him about them and he listened.

You told him about your grandma and how she was super religious. And about how you were scared to get in the car with her because you knew that once she got in the stories of her past and of her love for Christ would not stop pouring out from her mouth. You told him how just last week you programmed a station in the car just for her. You found a Spanish radio station that played nothing but religious hymns and you put it on for her every time she got in. You hated it, but it bought you five to ten minutes of silence. You told him how every now and then a song played that reminded her of the town she lived in when she was young—before she left Mexico. “You love her though,” he says and you nod to confirm you do. You love her.

Then you told him of your little brother, and how every time you looked at him you saw a little stranger, a little person that you had yet to know. You told him that when he was born you refused to hold him because something within you prevented you from showing him any affection, and for this you still felt guilt. You didn't hold him in your arms until he was two months old. He had been in his crib crying at the top of his lungs. He had just woken up and your mom was in the kitchen cooking. You were walking by and stepped into the room. You picked him up and held him, not close to you—but you held him, and the crying stopped. Your mom came in and you handed him off to her right away. She was changing his diaper and you stood leaning against the crib when she asked you why you hated him. You didn't hate him though, you told her this. If anything you envied him for having the family that you had always wanted. If

you weren't too old to resent him you probably would. But hate—that's different, that's strong, you told him.

You told him about your mom. And how your relationship with her had evolved. How when she met Tony she became vested in him, and you became a nuisance to her. You told him that she was one of those people to throw herself into her work, that she was a one project at a time, one person at a time type of person.

Then you told him about your dad, the things you remembered of him. And of how your mom drove him away. You tell him about the checks that he sent every month and of your plan to give them all back one day. And how though you don't really know him—your dad, that you'd still like to love him.

It wasn't the cold or the nerves that made you say it. Maybe it was a combination of boredom and curiosity—but anyway, whatever it was you said it and meant it. You were just 18, a girl. He was 34, a man far more experienced than you were.

You stood outside his apartment door. He hadn't invited you in, and even if he had you wouldn't have gone in. You would have refused him. You had gone to see him for one stupid reason or another.

“I want to be with you,” you told him. “Just like in your dream,” you said. He dropped his arms to his side. “Note what you say,” he warned. “You have to be very sure of what you're saying,” he told you. You took a deep breath and a step back.

“I am,” you said sternly. “Why do you act so surprised?” He put his hands in his pockets and took a step toward you. You leaned against the railing keeping him at an arm's length. He accepted this. “I don't know,” he confessed. “You leave me without words,” he told you. And you told him that little by little he would get to know you.

You looked down at your shoes. Tan moccasins, worn and discolored. You were looking at them when you noticed the old lady who had stepped out of the duplex next door. Number fourteen. She stood at your door a moment. She looked at you then at him and then walked away silently.

“I’m starting to see that,” he said to you and nodded in agreement. He took his hands out of his pockets and rubbed his eyes with one hand. It was getting late. You should go home. You stood up straight, getting ready to leave.

You looked down to where your car was parked. “Whose dog is that?” you asked, and pointed to the little white dog, but he didn’t hear you. His mind was still on something else. “If it happens,” he said right before you started walking away. “I want it to be something unforgettable—for the both of us,” he said. You looked blankly at him.

“It will be,” you told him. “I want to be yours,” you said. And as you turned and walked away you scorned yourself under your breath for saying something so ridiculous and cheesy as that.

“Hey!” you heard as you were putting the car on drive. He had run after you. You lowered the window and put the car in park. He leaned down to see your face. He smiled and ran across to the other side. You unlocked the door and he got in. You turned off the ignition.

“What’s wrong?” you asked keeping your hands on the wheel. “Nothing,” he said and brought your arms down to your lap and just smiled. You studied his face. “What?” you asked him and leaned against your door. He inched closer to you. “What?” you repeated and stared at him with eyes wide open. He had a curious look on his face.

“Can I tell you something?” he asked you. “But don’t get mad,” he said. “Okay, yeah,” you responded. “What is it?” you asked. “I want you to be mine,” he told you. “Tonight. Only mine,” he said and waited for you response.

You turned the ignition on. He nodded accepting your answer. “Not tonight,” you said as he opened the door and got out. You lowered the passenger side window. “We’ll talk later, okay?” you called behind him. “Yeah, ok,” he responded and continued walking. You put your seatbelt on and drove aimlessly around the city.

“How do you imagine our first time to be?” he had asked one night over a text message. In a bed you joked. “Obviously,” he replied. “But how, what do you imagine?” You told him you didn't know. It was true, you didn't. You'd never had sex before. You'd had dreams about it and in your dreams it was always like it was in movies, breathtaking and rushed.

“What do you imagine?” you asked. “I want to get lost in your body, let passion mandate our actions,” he told you and you were glad it was through a text message, because you laughed.

You sat at the table across from him—moving the scraps of food with your fork from one side of the plate to the other. You heard him put his fork down and that sound of the ice cubes clinking as he moved his glass around before he brought it to his mouth and took a drink. He did this every time.

You took a drink of your water and set the glass down. “What’s wrong?” he asked. “You’re acting strange,” he said. You looked up, sitting up straight as you did this, and you smiled. “Nothing,” you said. “Just thinking.”

“About?” he asked. “Lots of things,” you told him. You picked up your glass, and wiped your lip print from the rim before taking a drink. Then you reached for his drink, he watched as you did this. You could smell the whiskey even before you brought it to your lips. You took a small sip and made a face. “I don’t know how you drink this,” you commented. He laughed and shook his head, and took his drink back.

The server came by and you asked for a coke then waved her away.

“I’m going to Chicago next week,” he told you. The server came back with your soda. You smiled and mouthed a ‘thank you.’ “How long?” you asked. “A few days,” he said, and you felt relieved. He saw this. “What?” he asked, and you told him how for a second you thought he was leaving you. He reassured you that it was nothing like that. Then you asked him what was in Chicago.

You set your fork down and slid the plate to the edge of the table. “Wedding arrangements,” he said, his fiancé had changed her mind about some things. “The venue,” he told you. “She found one she likes better,” he said. You nodded and he looked down at his watch. “I have to go sign the papers and give my approval.” When was done with his food he threw the napkin over the plate and relaxed in his chair saying nothing. “And the rest of the preparations?” you asked. “Are those going well?”

“They’re not,” he said, and scratched his chin. “It’s a pain in the neck,” he confessed. And he told you he didn’t understand why his fiancé didn’t have things under control. “She wants this wedding,” he said annoyed. “I told her to do what she wants. I’m okay with whatever she decides.” He signaled for the server and asked for the check. The server took the plates.

“You’re getting married,” you said. He sat up and leaned in toward you. “We talked about this, Sweetheart,” he said, “I want to be with you.” You hunched down in your chair thinking about Right and Wrong. “We can still be together—even after I’m married,” he said.

“Yeah,” you responded thoughtlessly, not knowing if that’s what you wanted anymore. A lot can change. Then you thought of your mom, your poor mom.

“What does the map say?” she kept on asking, even after you told her what it said. This was the first road trip that you took with her, just the two of you, since your dad’s departure. She was taking you to the beach. She had always wanted to take you there. She thought you might enjoy it.

You didn’t tell her that you didn’t like the way the sand felt beneath your feet. Not since the night your dad took you camping last summer and you saw the sand fleas at night. Now every time that you think of the beach you think of sand, and when you think of sand you think of sand fleas and when you think of sand fleas you think of your dad.

You also don’t tell her that you don’t like the ocean and how it seems to howl something into your ear but it’s never clear enough—it leaves you wondering, and you hate that. You hate not knowing.

You don’t tell her about the fear that the waves evoke in you. How they come so close to you only to go back. Or how when they do reach you they touch your toes and run. They taunt you, and you don’t understand why. You don’t understand how something so vast could be so selfish as to leave you wandering, and wanting when it is clear it has so much to give.

“We’re going to play in the waves, and make castles out of sand,” she explained before asking you to read the map to her once more, and you did. You wondered what she planned to use to make the castles. She hadn’t packed anything but the towels and an extra change of clothes. She didn’t plan well. She just decided it’s what she wanted to do, what she would do.

“Estella,” she shook you awake. “Wake up Mamita,” she said. “We’re almost there.” She had been driving for almost an hour when you fell asleep. She hated to wake you, but what she hated even more than that was to be alone, to be surrounded by silence, to see the thoughts she had been suppressing raise up and roar in her ear like waves. “Mmm,” you moaned. “¿Que Mami?” you asked. “Mira,” she pointed to the shore. “¿Ves? Can you see it?” You sat up and let your feet drop down. “The beach,” you said hoping she didn’t hear your tone. “La playa.”

You did it. You told her. She hasn't said anything. And quite frankly she doesn't have to. Words can't say what her eyes tell you with one look, but if they could, they might ask, "¿Estela, que pendejada hiciste?"

I don't know, you want to say, I don't know. But instead you sit in silence.

No matter how many times you rehearsed this conversation in your head you could not piece it together. If my father was still in the picture, you think, this conversation would never have happened. Things would be different—I would be different, that's what you like to think.

But how else could you to tell your mother that you were with a married man, one that you hardly knew. How, you asked yourself, after knowing what she had been through.

She places her hands on her heavy head and sighs. "Ay Estelita," she says. "¿Porque?" she doesn't really expect an answer, but you attempt to give her one. You tell her about him, how you met, and what he meant to you. She shakes her head. "No, no, no," her body trembles in agreement. "No, no, no. Mmm-mmm, no," she grunts. She doesn't want to hear it. She covers her face with her hands and you sit there with one hand on your lap and the other gripping the check in your pocket, the one you had come prepared to give her.

"For you," you want to say. "I can take care of you," you want to tell her. "I can take care of us," you want to say but you don't.

She cries softly and you feel your own face getting warm. You feel your own tears preparing to flow.

You look at the case of Corona in front of you. And you're reminded of the first time you got drunk. It was at a friend's house, where you had fell asleep and woken up to the smell of marijuana, and the feeling of some guy's arm around your shoulder. You got up and walked home. Your mom didn't yell or ground you. She told you the hangover in the morning would be punishment enough. Only you woke up without one.

Inside the house you hear your little brother. "Mami! Mami!" he cries. "Where are you?" Your tia Vira tries to console him. "Mami is coming" she tells him. "She's talking to someone," she says. But Mami is not talking. She is silent, silently crying. And the blame is on you.

When she's ready, she looks up. And for the first time in your life you can't meet her eyes. So, you look at her mouth and wait for words. You notice the difficulty she's having parting her lips.

In Sunday school lectures you endured as a kid, Moses easily parted the sea. You wish for his rod and staff. How helpful they might be right now.

Yesterday, you confided in a friend, telling her what you did. Today, you don't feel so proud, so empowered. Today you don't feel bold or defiant. Today you've got nothing to prove. You feel ashamed. Ashamed because for you she had high expectations, expectations that she doesn't have for your brother. And what did you do? You took those expectations the day you set your

morality aside and wiped your ass with them. The day you didn't think of them and thought of only yourself.

Onto the porch comes your aunt. The way she looks at you, she can't know what you've done. "¿Que paso?" She mouths. You shake your head—nada, but then you lift your head and say that you messed up. You get up and place a hand on your moms shoulder. She's still sitting. "Métete Vira," she tells your aunt. "Ya voy."

You tell your tia good bye, and peek behind her as she walks through the door and then you see him. You see the little boy, your brother—the one you'll never know. Not because she will prevent you from doing it, but because looking at him makes you feel hopeless. Nothing looks the same anymore. So, without saying anything you get up and walk to your car.

Driving you think about the conversation you had with her. And you think about how you couldn't tell her anywhere else. It had to be there, you think. It had to be on that porch, the same one where the conversations regarding your future plans and dreams had been. That's where you gave those dreams life and that was where you needed to kill them.

Mami tells you that when she was little she would play with whatever she could find. She was not like you. She did not have actual toys and dolls. She had to make do with what grandma could provide.

She slips a pink sandal on your foot and smiles. She is reminded of something and she tells you. She tells you that when she was your age she had a pair just like these. It was her first pair of brand-new shoes. She doesn't remember what happened to them, but she tells you that she loved those sandals. She would clean them everyday.

You stand up and walk around. They look nice, but they don't feel nice. They hurt. So you sit back down and she tells you that you're too picky. "But it's not your fault," she tells you. "It's mine."

You walk over to a different shoe rack and pick out a different style. You grab some ballet flats. By the look on her face you can tell she doesn't like them, yet she waves you over. "Bring them," she says. Compromise. Life is all about compromise. She picked out the dress, so now you pick out the shoes.

He doesn't know Spanish. He doesn't know you. But then again you don't know yourself. And that bothers you. He says—they all say that they know you and you wonder how that is.

“I know you don't drink like this,” he said. “I know you. You're not like this,” he told you and that made you mad. “This,” you wanted to say poking him in the chest, “this is why I drink.”

You wanted to signal him as the cause of your torment, but you didn't. You didn't say anything. You bottled it up and stayed quiet. “All is good,” he said as if you had asked for his forgiveness, for his approval. Nothing is good, yet you stick around looking for a sense of place, for clarity.

You had tuned nineteen and he hadn't called. Yet there you were. “Is your birthday Thursday or Friday?” he had asked. “Friday,” you told him. “Ok,” he said. And then came Friday and he was silent all day. It bothered you more than you wanted it to. “Screw him,” you told Britt. She laughed at you knowing that you didn't mean what you had said, but since that is what you wanted she would help you forget.

She was dating the bartender of this hole in the wall bar and had gotten you in. “It's your birthday,” she said. “Let's go celebrate.” Five shots and a few beers later and you were at his front door. “I can't go home like this,” you told Britt and begged for a ride. You had refused to sleep at her place. “I need to see him,” you told her. “Please,” you begged. She reminded you that the point of tonight was to forget and not to go back but you persisted and she gave in.

“Hey,” he said when he opened the door. “What's going on?” he asked. “You're not going to invite me in?” He stepped aside and opened the door. The lights were off. The living room was

illuminated from the light of the TV. You asked him what he was watching. “Nothing,” he said. He told you there was nothing good.

“I thought you didn't drink,” he said as he sat down across from you. You told him you didn't, but it was your birthday. He leaned back, remote in hand and flipped through the channels.

“Happy birthday, Sweetheart,” he said and asked about the party. You told him it was great, that a lot of your friends came out to celebrate. “It was memorable,” you told him. “Wow,” he said. “That's great,” and directed his attention back to the TV screen.

Then you laughed a little. You couldn't believe that you had let the man in front of you ruin your night. He could care less about what you were saying and about you. “I don't get you,” you blurted out. This caught his attention. By now you had learned that he was selective about the things he responded to. “Why don't you understand me?” he asked and set the remote down on the table in front of him. “Honestly, what do you want out of this?” you asked. He took the remote in his hand once more and watched TV. You got up to leave.

“Estella,” he called after you. You didn't say anything. You didn't want to talk anymore.

“I'm coming,” he said and caught up to you. “Take some Advil in the morning and drink lots of water,” he advised you as he stood by the door. He didn't have his shoes on. He would not follow. You looked at him standing there and were thankful for his silence.

“Why didn’t you tell me, Estella?” she asked. You were sitting at the table eating cereal when she came in questioning you. You looked up at her and put down your spoon.

Tony cheated on her when she was pregnant, before he even knew she was pregnant. This was over two years ago when you were sixteen. You saw him and you didn't tell your mother—that's what this was about. It was about the fact that when it happened you didn't confront him.

You didn't look at the woman he was with. You simply paid the cashier at the window and she handed you a paper bag in return. You drove home and hoped that she had given you enough napkins and remembered your plastic utensils—you didn't feel like washing dishes that day.

Your mom was in Mexico at her uncle's burial. Tony had stayed behind. He had to work and keep an eye on you even though you were sixteen and could take care of yourself. You didn't see him around much during the time your mom was in Mexico. He gave you food and gas money the day after she left. It was with that money he had given you that you went to that fast food place that day—the day you saw him with his mistress through the drive through window.

Normally you would get down and eat in but since no one was home you thought you'd order to go and watch a movie while you ate. When you drove up to the window to pay you saw him standing in line with his arm around a woman that was not your mother. When he saw you his arm dropped to his side. The way he looked, you thought he might vomit.

You were sitting on the couch watching TV when he got home. He looked at the clock on the wall and asked if you were hungry. You had eaten over four hours ago. You shook your head. “Have you seen this before?” you asked. You told him what the show was about as he made his way to the couch and sat down. You could tell he was waiting for you to say something about the woman, but you didn’t.

When he found out about the pregnancy he came clean, and she came to you with tears and explanations even though you didn’t want them.

She told you they were going to work it out. “Por el bebe,” she said and reminded you that she raised you alone. She said she was not doing that again. “I’m thirty-six,” she told you. “Ya estoy vieja.” You told her you would help her out as much as you could but she didn’t listen. “You know better than anyone what it’s like to grow up fatherless,” she said. You could hear her anguish in her voice. “Un niño,” she said. “Necesita de padre y madre.” And for the first time you admitted to her what you had only admitted to yourself before.

You told her that being fatherless wasn’t the worst thing in the world. She didn’t say anything. She gave you a smile that belittled you, and then stroked your face. That’s when you told her that she had other options. She looked at you coldly. “What?” you complained. “You said it yourself—you’re too old,” you told her. Debilitated by your words she sat down and placed one hand on her womb. “A life is a life,” she said and asked how you could even suggest something

so cruel and heartless. “Its father has no scruples,” you reminded her. “Is that what you want for it?” you said pointing to her stomach.

So there you were sitting across from her with a bowl full of cereal, and confusion. “Tell you what?” you asked, you knew what she wanted but you wanted to hear her say it. “That you saw him with that woman!” she exploded. She wanted to know why you didn’t tell her that you saw them together. She wanted to know why you let her hear it from him when he wanted. She wanted to know why you pretended like you didn’t know—why you let her tell you something that you already knew.

She sat down on the chair across from you and dropped her purse on the floor. And she looked at you. And even though an explanation and answers is what she wanted, you could tell that it was too late.

You have a recurring dream in which you find yourself on the porch with your mom. You're talking, laughing, and having a nice time.

In the dream, you know that she knows what you have done and yet nothing has changed. "What did he look like?" she asks and you see yourself blushing. You start talking and tell her about him as if he were any other guy.

You describe his full head of hair and his blue-green eyes. You tell her how in the light they shone bright, and how indoors his eyes looked like the bottom of a pool—opaque and obscure.

As the dream carries on, with the conversation being audible to inaudible, you see yourself showing your mother the things he gifted you, and finally you show her a picture of him. She looks at you blankly, suddenly understanding everything.

A look of disgust comes over her, and you sit there in shame realizing she knew of a man, but not that it was Robert.

“Why don’t you talk to me?” she asks. Her hands are on the table they are searching for yours. You don’t say anything. You hold your peace and your head with both hands. You watch as the drops fall down your face and on to the table. There is one for every minute that you’ve been sitting there.

Out of one hand a tissue peeks out. It’s the one that she plucked out of the tissue box just for you. You don’t give it the use for which she had given it to you. Instead you cradle it in your palm and let it absorb the moisture from your hand.

Tony sits beside her with one hand on her arm and the other around her. All three of you at the table like one big happy family—coming together in a time of need.

You used to hear your friends complain about family meetings. And when they would ask if you had those you would reply, “No, we’re Mexican.”

You read the instructions once more and felt nauseous just waiting. You looked at the timer on your phone, two more minutes of waiting, three to be sure.

While you waited you grabbed the Rosary—the one your grandmother had gifted you, and for the first time in a long time you prayed the way she had shown you.

You didn't remember all the words to the prayer, but you repeated them as best you could. She had taught you to pray in Spanish outside the delivery room the day your brother was born. You repeated the prayer over and over gain, remembering it more clearly each time. Then you added your own words at the end. You asked that He give you a negative, but what He gave you was a positive.

You dropped the beads, lifted the lid, and opened your mouth once more. No words came out—it was a different kind of offering this time, one that you knew was welcome here.

You paced to your room and shut the door behind you. You clutched your things, holding them close to your heart. You were lying down in silence, staring at the stars painted on the ceiling, when she walked in.

“Mija, Estella,” she said, curiosity ringing in her voice. You didn’t flinch. You focused on your breathing. “Si,” you said. “¿Que paso?” you asked.

She moved the clothes that were piled on your chair and set them at the foot of your bed. Then she sat down. You hoped she would move the chair away from you but she left it where it had been—next to you, to your right.

“Mija,” she said once more, you could feel her weight on the bed. She had placed her elbows on the mattress, and was tapping you with one hand. “Toma,” she said. You turned your head to look at her. She was handing you the Rosary. The one you had cleaved to while praying earlier in the bathroom while you waited.

You must have dropped it when you hunched over to vomit. Your stomach had barely settled and the sight of the beads brought it all back. You held it in and swallowed.

You took the beads. “Abue,” you said sheepishly. “Tengo mucho sueño,” you told her. She placed the Rosary in your hands, and patted them. You heard her get up, but she didn’t leave. She placed a small blanket over you and sat back down. “Cierra tus ojos,” she told you. “Daja y te cuento una historia,” she said. You don’t have the energy to protest so you listened.

She took your hand in hers and began stroking it gently. Her skin was soft and silky. You didn't want to be rude but you turned your back to her and faced the wall. You threw your leg over a pillow and closed your eyes. Your right hand remained in hers.

She told you of a young girl she once knew. This was years ago long before you and your mother had been born. The girl's name was Juana, just like the poet. Her parents were middle class people, her father an officer and her mother a schoolteacher. She was their only daughter and their youngest child. She was small town beautiful, but very quiet, she kept to herself, and never went out—except with her parents or her brothers. She was never alone, and rarely with friends.

She was a good girl, studious, and ambitious, una niña de casa. She seemed happy, which is why everyone was surprised when she was found dead. No one understood why she had done it, why she had taken her father's gun and shot herself.

“Why did she do it?” you asked your grandmother. She let go of your hand and shifted in her seat. “Ah,” she lets out. “Deja te cuento.”

“Juanita,” she tells you. “Let a boy whisper sweet nothings in her ear.” Her parents never knew until it was too late. He was her secret.

“Dating is not what it is now,” she told you. Girls didn't offer themselves wholly right away. There was more respect for the girls and for the girls' parents. Boys asked for the parent's permission to take their daughters out. Everyone was more attentive then than they are now.

Juanita, because she was from a good family and the youngest of four, was always looked after. She had the innocence of a child. And this boy, the one she let in, only ruined her. “Le destroso la vida,” she told you, and she let him. He was her first and her only heartbreak.

He would show up at her college and walk her home. He would sneak around the places she frequented and slipped her notes. He was cunning. He would find every excuse to run into her. Juana welcomed the compliments, the notes, and the attention. She allowed herself to believe that the illusion he was selling her could be a reality. She fell in love with the idea of this boy. Then he left her.

“Dime,” she said. “Para que comprar la vaca si te regalan la leche?” she asked. This was her favorite saying. A way of saying nicely that a man will not marry a woman when he is already getting what he wants from her and without the commitment of marriage.

She tells you that everyone thought Juana died of love, but what she died of was shame. Juanita was pregnant and the boy refused to be with her.

Then she tells you that getting pregnant out of wedlock was and is the worst kind of shame one could bring to ones family but you already knew that. You’ve been hearing it all of your life.

“Mija,” she says. “Te conozco.” She puts her hand on your head. Then she asked you about the clinics she had heard about in the news, and about the procedures they carried out. You felt your heart beating faster, and your breathing getting slower and deeper. She told you not to worry,

that she wouldn't tell your mother. Then she got up and said she was going to make you tea. The kind they made in Mexico to remedy these kinds of situations. It's after she said this that you saw how alike her and your mom were. You saw the trouble they would go through to keep their good name.

She didn't shut the door behind her. You could hear her move around in the kitchen. She would always forget to shut off the faucet. You could hear her filling something with water, and the cabinets opening and closing.

You sat up a bit, and bit your tongue while in the kitchen the kettle hissed and whistled. She let it do this for another minute before she removed it from the burner.

She came back with a mug and rag. You were holding on to your cell phone. Not knowing what to do or who to call. You remembered the pregnancy test instructions you hid under your pillow. You watched her as she carefully stepped toward you with her hands very still so the tea wouldn't spill.

You didn't recognize her. You saw she was not the spiritual Catholic she had claimed to be. She was just religious—with a capital r.

She stretched out her arms and offered you the tea. You didn't reach for it. You just looked at it, then at her. "Abue," you told her. "Yo no soy Juana," you said. "Soy su nieta, Estella."

“Mi nieta,” she scoffed as she made her way to your desk and placed the tea on the edge. She took the rag with her when she left your room. Then you got up as if nothing had happened and opened the window to let out the smell of the tea, but you didn’t touch it. You left it there, and that’s where your mom found it—that’s how she knew.

“Estella,” she had complained. You had been sitting on the couch wallowing, and you had been now for a week, with different venues everyday. “Quita esa cara por el amor de Dios,” she pleaded.

She had been sitting at the kitchen table looking at something on the phone while she waited for the dryer to be done. Monday nights were laundry nights. The garage door was open just enough to hear the dryer buzz. You could hear the sound the button on a pair of jeans made as they tumbled round and round.

Clink... Clink... Clack.

Clink... Clink... Clack.

You were staring at the TV screen. Lost in thought—listening to the jeans metronome when she interrupted the tempo, telling you to go sulk somewhere else. “I don’t want to see that face,” she told you, “It puts me in a bad mood.” You had heard this before.

She asked you what the boy had done. That was her guess, it was always her guess because in her world at the root of all problems was a boy. When you told her it wasn’t about a boy she didn’t believe you.

“I did this to myself,” you told her. You felt her gaze move from her phone screen to you. She was listening. She set the phone down to prove it. “Aver,” she said. “¿Que paso?”

You held your legs close to your chest, hugging them. “Me ilusione,” you told her. You had illusioned yourself with the idea of this person, and when you saw how far from reality it was you didn’t know what to do.

Don’t cry, you commanded yourself, don’t cry. But what you should have done was ordered yourself not to cry because the command did nothing. Your eyes burned, so you closed them and that was it. The tears flowed from your eyes like water down a stream.

You heard her footsteps then felt her weight as she sat on the couch next to you. With eyes still closed you leaned against her and felt her arm around you. Her hair was in your face, brushing against your cheek, your nose, your eye. You wiggled your nose trying to ignore the itch.

Your eyelashes were heavy and damp from the tears. When you opened your eyes and saw her she was pursing her lips. She was holding back the, “I told you so,” she had been reserving for a moment just like this. She had been waiting for sometime now and now that the moment was here she didn’t know how to proceed.

“Mija,” she said stroking the back of your head, feeling the length of your hair. “This is what I was talking about,” she sighed and held you closer, more tightly. “Esto te queria evitar,” she said and took a deep breath. “I don’t know what to tell you,” she confessed. You peeled her off of you and cleared your throat, “Ya se,” you told her.

“Pero te digo y que haces,” she complained. “You don’t listen.”

You stood in the middle of the living room, scratching your head. “No,” you corrected. “You don't listen.” You looked at her walked toward the hall. She sat there silently. And you stood in the hallway by your door waiting for her to say something—to call after you, but what you heard was a sigh, and the sound of the TV being powered on. Not long after that you heard the last Clink... Clink... Clack...of the pants in the dryer, then a buzzer, then silence.

She muted the TV. She knew where you stood, and you knew she sat listening. Both you and her too proud to make a move, so you suffered together in silence.

You've been sitting in the same position for the past hour. Hunched over, staring at the picture you hold in your hands. It is a picture of you as an infant. You weren't even a year old when the picture was taken. You don't smile in the picture. You are sitting up against a red backdrop. You wear a white bib with a cow embroidered on it. You're staring right at the camera with a blank look on your face. It's the same look you wear most days.

You don't know why, you're not a sentimental person—never have been, but as you stare at the picture of yourself you feel your chest getting tighter and your eyes getting warmer, and you wonder how that child got from point A to point Z. You know what happened, but you don't know how it happened or how to justify it or the things you are yet to do.

You think of the high hopes and expectations that you have carried with you since the day this picture was taken. Unaware, yet there were things that were already expected of you. You wonder how many of those expectations you have shattered, and how many you've fulfilled.

You think about how you weren't given a chance to flourish, to discover yourself before the people around you started telling you who you should be. And now that you're older than you were in the picture you can admit it—you resent them for doing this. You resent them for weighing the little girl in the picture down before she could even walk.

When you were 4 years old you would sit at the table with a pencil and notebook that were too big for your hand, and you would spell out the only two words you knew: OSO and MAMA. “Is this how you spell it?” you would ask her, and show her a paper with the letters O-S-O but she wouldn't bother to look. “Si,” she would say from where she stood. “You didn't look,” you would complain and only then would she would turn around to look at your paper and smile. “Yes, like that,” she would say and gently push you toward your dolls.

She had no patience with you. You learned to sit and wait for your dad to come home from another unsuccessful day of job seeking, because you knew he would help you. He would sit on the porch and you would help him undo his laces, because you loved him, because your dad was everything to you until the day you stopped being everything to him. You used to blame your mother for this, for his change of heart, and for your change of heart toward him.

As you got older they stopped being secretive about the things that were wrong in their marriage. Your mom would call him lazy and irresponsible in front of you. She would say that you two did nothing all day, that it was forgivable of you because you were a child, but unforgivable of him because he was the adult.

You saw on his face the marks that the years left behind. You saw a new look in his eyes. In them you saw helplessness and resignation. You saw that you no longer were a cause for joy, and that you were the cause of his anxiety. He would look at you and see a child in need of a father.

And he would look at himself and see an unfit parent, a father with no means. You were the burden he could not carry so one day he put you down and you walked away.

Your mom would say that it was for the best. She didn't make enough to support the three of you, but she swore she would take care of you. And she did, she provided all things material, but what you wanted was her time, and that she could not give you. When you would bring this up she would get upset. She would remind you that your father had no job, so, of course he had time to spend with you. That's the only thing he had in abundance.

She resented him for not giving her the life she was promised when they got married. And for the bond you had shared with him she resented him too.

“¿Que tienes?” she asked, as you lay in bed silently. “Hablame,” she said. She walked closer to you and brushed your hair back and out of your face. She did this with one hand and with the other she held some towels. You flinched at her touch. “¿Que tienes?” she asked, her voice almost a whisper.

You pulled a pillow from above your head and brought it between your legs and held it tightly until it felt like a thin sheet between your arms and legs. You could feel it against your stomach, like a shield protecting the void. “Estella,” she said, and asked you what was wrong. You shook your head nothing. But she knew that nothing was always something and persisted.

She placed the towels at the foot of your bed and awkwardly climbed in bed next to you to hold you. You reached with one arm for her hand and held it. Her fingers locked with yours. You thought about how you would never be able to comfort someone the way that she was doing with you. Not anymore, yesterday maybe, but not today. Today you were empty and much more than before.

You think of him and you can't find a reason to be with him. Not one. And if you're honest with yourself you don't think that you had one before. What happened, or what could have happened would not have been a reason— it would have been a pretext, an excuse.

“What if you and I had a baby?” he had asked you not long ago, before you knew and before he had known. You had spent that day with him watching TV and talking. He had his arm around you when he asked you. You searched for your phone and when you found it you looked at the

time. Time was scarce. “What would you do?” he asked. You fixed his arm and wondered if he knew it was heavy. “I don't know,” you exhaled. “I don't know.”

“Apago la TV?” your mom asked pulling you back from remembrance. You shook your head no but she turned it off anyway. You sat up a little, keeping your eyes on the wall. You couldn't look at her. She walked back to bed and sat down next to you once more. The silence was loud.

She put her arm around you, supporting your head and it's weight. You looked at the towels at the foot of your bed. You had washed them the night before and left them in the dryer. They were snow white from all of the bleach. “I forgot to put Downy,” you told her still looking at them. She stirred in her spot. “¿Mande?” she said. “The towels,” you pointed gently to them with your big toe. “Se me olvido,” you said. “I forgot,” you told her and she nodded.

You swallowed hard. Your throat was dry and sore. You loosened her grip, and wiggled beneath her arm and adjusted yourself. You had been sitting with her for five minutes without saying much. She had the patience that you lacked.

You found out when you were three weeks along, then before the ninth week was up the illusion had died.

“Ya no quiero que lo mires,” she told you. You wanted to tell her that there were a lot of things you didn't want either, but not seeing him was not one of them.

You heard her sit on the chair. You were sitting on the damp lawn—crisscross, and looking through a few strands of hair for split ends. In the other hand was a pair of scissors ready to cut.

“¿Me escuchas?” she asked. You nodded. “Yes what?” she asked. “Yes, you're going to stop? Or yes, you hear me?” You heard her shuffle in her chair. She was waiting for your answer. You rolled your eyes and pursed your lips, and were thankful that your back was to her.

“Aver, dime,” she said. “Okay,” you complained hoping that the OK would satiate her need for an answer. “Estella,” she said brashly. “What?” You responded in her same tone and grabbed a new strand of hair. You found a split end and cut it off. “Ya no lo voy a ver,” you offered and she exhaled with relief. “Es por tu propio bien,” she said, as if that would be comfort to you. “For my own good?” you retorted. “How?” you asked bitterly. “¿Aver, tell me?”

You threw the scissors on the grass in front of you. Your little brother ran and picked them up. “Stella,” he said. “You dropped your scissors,” and handed them back to you. You smiled and swallowed hard. “Thanks, baby,” you told him. “I'm not a baby,” he complained. “I'm three,” he reminded you and walked away with his hands behind his back.

“Y aver si tienes mas cuidado,” she said coldly. “Now what?” you asked. “The scissors?” you asked and explained that you had thrown them right in front of you, not across the lawn or up in the air.

“Por favor Estella, solo as caso,” she told you. “Okay,” you let out and got up. You brushed off your pants off and started walking to the door. “Where are you going?” she asked. You were telling her you were putting the scissors away when you heard your brother calling you.

“Look! Look!” he yelled. He was jumping up and down excitedly—pointing at the little white dog. It was rolling around in the grass. “Did you name him yet?” you asked him. “Umm—no,” he said. “Not yet.”

Your mom told you to move aside a little. She couldn't see. You suggested she move her chair but you quickly regretted it and moved. You walked over to your brother and the dog and when she asked you where you had gotten the dog you ignored her. “Come on,” you said to your brother. “Think of names.”

He knelt down by the dog. “Stella,” he said shyly. “Yeah, Baby,” you said, waiting for him to correct you once more but he didn't. He let it slip this time. “Umm, is it a girl dog or a boy dog?” he asked. “Boy dog,” you told him and he started laughing. “What's so funny?” you asked. “I can see his wee-wee,” he giggled. And you laughed too. “Yeah, that's his pipi,” you said and he laughed some more. “His name is Gordon,” he told you. “Gordon has a pipi!” he giggled and ran to your mother. He told her about Gordon, and the story of his name.

When you told her you were going back to school she asked you if you were sure. She thought it might do you good to stay at home to think and to make a plan. She had been walking around your room picking up the pieces of paper you had scattered on the floor when she noticed the ultrasound picture by the trashcan.

With sorrow in her voice she asked you why you hadn't show it to her before. You shrugged your shoulders. You didn't know. As she leaned against your desk she reminded you that everything in life happened for a reason, to put your trust in God.

You wanted to tell her that the sorrow in her voice caused by you. You wanted to tell her that while she was getting used to the idea of being a grandmother you were passing up the opportunity to be a mother. You wanted to tell her that within 48 hours of that ultrasound picture being printed you took the second dose of what Dr. Gallagher had prescribed, pills whose name you couldn't pronounce, and that four and a half hours later you had the worse cramps of your life. You wanted to tell her that when she left her warm bed to find you kneeling on the cold bathroom floor prostrated before the toilet, bent over in pain, that it wasn't natural, but you don't.

Instead you walk over to her and take the picture from her hands. She studies your face as you throw away the picture for a second time. When you turn your back to her you know she picks it up and you let her. You don't say anything to her, not even that the reason things happened the way they did was because you had decided them to be that way, that the only thing natural about that miscarriage was your decision to induce it.

What you do tell her is that you pleaded with God, and that he didn't want to hear your pleas or supplications. You tell her that he didn't answer your prayers. She doesn't respond to this. These days she doesn't argue with you. She just listens.

“No quiero estar de ociosa,” you tell her. You had heard her say that word many times, and never quite understood it until now. That's what you had been, you had been idle, but you didn't want to waste any more time. You tell her you need to do something with your life. She tells you that that is great, but she wants to know how you plan doing something when you don't have a plan.

You don't want to tell her that you do, that you have a plan because you have already failed to meet her expectations once. You killed her hopes and dreams in one day and you saw what that did to her, and you don't want to do it again.

You hadn't planned on visiting this month either, but this morning as you turned and lay in bed looking directly at the rock on your desk you acted on an urge, and before you could overanalyze you packed a bag and drove.

Much like the drive, the walk to the porch was long and filled with doubt. With each step that you took the door seemed to get farther and farther away. It was like walking on a treadmill, taking steps but never progressing.

When you reached the door you didn't bother looking for the key. The front door was always unlocked, that never changed. There was almost always someone home. You turned the knob and walked through.

He was standing in the kitchen, and looking directly at you. "Hi baby," you said, stepping away from the door and toward him. You paused when he opened his mouth. "I'm not a baby," he scolded. "I'm four." He looked down at his hand and began positioning his fingers. When he was ready he lifted his hand to show you his ring, middle, index fingers and thumb up for you to see. With the left hand he held down the pinky of his right hand. You wanted to tell him that it'd be easier to just hold down his thumb, but you didn't. Instead you threw your arms up and apologized. "I don't know what I was thinking," you said, and before you could say more you could feel the big boy hanging from your leg. You hunched down and hugged him.

When you looked up you saw her standing where he had stood before. She was hugging a basket of folded laundry. You squinted your eyes. "It's not Monday," you said looking at her then at

the basket. She shook her head. “I know,” she exhaled, and told you she had no clean underwear. You laughed. She laughed too—it was a hard laugh, one that made her ponytail bob up and down. He must have seen this too because he started laughing. “Mami! Mami!” he said. “Your hair looks funny!” he told her. He was right. She never wore her hair up. She didn’t see the point in having long hair if it was going to be kept tied up.

When he stood on his two feet again he took your hand in his and tugged at you. “Where did you go?” he asked drawing your attention back to him. “Where were you, Stella?” You told him you had been away at school. He told you he went to school too and you smiled proudly. He pulled you over to the couch and sat next to you. He told you of his friends. He told you of Brooklyn, and how she’s a girl, and Ava, and Axle, and Paul. He told you of Bubba, who threw bark chips at him, and of Sophie, who didn’t cry when she took medicine.

She emerged from the hallway, with a basket on her hip. You got up to follow her to the garage. “Where are you going?” he asked. “I’ll be back,” you told him.

You walked into the garage. “Y Tony?” you asked. “Working,” she said. “Ya mero llega,” she told you. You handed her three drying sheets. She threw them in the dryer with the damp clothes and shut the door but not before adding one more drying sheet. “Ma, que tienes?” She shook off her worried look. “Nada,” she told you and threw more clothes in the washer. “Ma,” you said. “Come on,” you nudged her. “¿Que quieres Estella?” she said. “Tell me what’s wrong,” you said holding up and examining what was supposed to be a little white sock. “Doesn’t he have

slippers?” you asked her. She told you he didn’t like to wear them. “Oh,” you said, remembering how she forced you to wear yours despite your many protests.

She poured some bleach in the washer, not bothering to measure. She never did. You tried this—to do as she did, but you poured a bit too much and your sheets turned a shade of yellow and reeked of bleach for three days.

“Estella!” your little brother yelled. “Come, look!” You threw the sock in the washer and walked to him, leaving her behind to finish the loading the machine. “Where are you?” you called. He was hiding in the corner of the living room beside the couch with his head poking up. “Oh-oh!” you said dramatically. “Ma! Your son is missing!” you yelled. Then “He-he-he!” he squealed as he jumped up laughing. “Estella” he sang. “I’m right here!” You put your hand on your heart and sighed with relief.

“Come,” you said, opening your arms. He accepted the invitation and rushed in. “Lets go find Mami,” you told him. You walked down the hall with him in your arms and opened every door and calling for her. You did this until you made it to her room where she was putting clothes away. “So, since when do you do laundry on Thursdays?” you asked. “Yeah, when?” he said, just to ask something.

You threw him gently on the bed, and followed. “No, no, no, no, no,” she said rapidly. “Go play somewhere else,” you ignored her, and tickled him. He kicked his legs and laughed. “Stop!” he

yelled. "I have an idea!" he exclaimed. "Lets have a snuggle party!" he said making his way under the covers. "Awesome idea," you told him and kicked off your shoes.

"Mami!" he yelled. "You too!" You could hear her moving about the room, drawers opening and shutting. "Mami!" you helped him yell. "Estoy ocupada," she said. "Ma," you said, sticking your head out from under the blanket. "Don't deprive him of this."

"Snuggle party! Snuggle party!" he began to chant. "Louder" you whispered in his ear.

"Louder." He obeyed, and chanted until she gave in. Eventually he fell asleep and you laid there afraid that if you moved he would wake. She told you that he wouldn't, but still you stayed.

When she was shifting to get out you reached across the little body and took her hand. "¿Que tienes?" You asked hoping that this time she would tell you and she did. She told you of a dream she had the night before. She dreamt she had lost you amongst a crowd of people. She told you that, despite knowing it was a dream, she couldn't shake off the feeling, because maybe it was true, maybe she was losing you. "Ma," you squeezed her hand. "I'm here, I'm home."