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# Frida's Daughter

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THESIS

FRIDA'S DAUGHTER

Submitted by

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Department of English

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

University of Missouri –St. Louis

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of my creative writing is to highlight a group of U.S. citizens still woefully underrepresented in literature proper: the Latinx middle class. I'm keenly interested in exploring Puerto Rican and first- and second-generation Latinx immigrant stories. Even though some of the experiences from these groups have been elegantly visited by writers such as Giannina Braschi, Sandra Cisneros, Junot Diaz, Julia Alvarez, and others, there are nuances to the Latinx middle class experience that are yet to be uncovered. Being stuck in the cultural, linguistic, socio-economic, and political middles in a country that has recently taken a largely nationalist and authoritarian turn brings with it a multitude of complications. This further deepens my resolve to uncover the new challenges faced by the second-fastest growing American minority. For instance, I aim to use my essays to bring about a personalized alternative to the highly reflective bildungsroman. On the other hand, my poetry seeks to explore family trauma using Santería—an acculturated Afrocentric response to Catholic colonialism-- as a linguistic and imagistic vehicle. Lastly, my short stories and novels aspire to inform both new and versed readers about the complex dynamics of being “brown.” We write about we know, I suppose, and I've witnessed many an injustice and many a miracle. As a Puerto Rican who's lived in the mainland for over twenty years, my hope is that my words may become part of a larger narrative that represents the undeniable multitude of manifestations of the Latinx experience.

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## The Hardships of Growing Up With an Abundant Chestal Region (Essay)

by Myrta Vida

Allow me to learn you on how to properly wrap up and flatten your breasticles, in five (5) easy steps:

1. Cut off the sleeves of a soft t-shirt, preferably a monochromatic one. You want this to be breathable, stretchable fabric with no designs on it. This is to avoid scratches on your skin.

2. Use a ruler as you carefully trace lines with white chalk around the t-shirt. You'll use these lines as a guide when you cut up the t-shirt in the same pattern you would peel an orange. You want a perfect swirl, with proportions that are consistent and equidistant. This will ensure maximum coverage for not just some, but the top and bottom of each breasticle.

3. Grab the lower end of the now cut-up t-shirt. Place it under your right armpit with a light paperback book over it to keep the t-shirt level and the fabric taut. Slowly, gingerly, wrap the t-shirt around your breasticles using the right elbow to steady the paperback, while the left hand wraps the fabric around your entire torso.

4. Tighten the t-shirt around the back, *not* the front of your torso. As much as you may hate them, you still need to let the girls breathe a bit.

5. Once the t-shirt is taut, vertically affix five to seven small clothespins to keep the t-shirt in place. You want the clothespins to be small and discreet. That way, they don't tear the t-shirt apart. Plus, if one of the clothespins busts open, the pain will be minimal. The bleeding should also be barely visible, just like your breasticles.

Soooo, I've been a 38 DDD for quite sometime now. It's only recently I've come to accept that, perhaps even tolerate it. Even when I haven't been a member of the "200lb+ Club," my chestal region has pretty much always been in the D-range.

When I was about twelve *they* came in quite abruptly: a loud, rounded, and bouncy storm in the night. Before I knew what'd hit me, I woke up that day and prayed La Virgencita, --not really knowing why or for what-- just like Mami taught me. And then I saw the horror, the ah-bo-mi-na-tion in my chest.

I screamed. Mami and her husband rushed to the room.

"What's wrong?"

"I think an iguana laid eggs in my chest!"

The girls at school never paid much attention to me. I was queen tomboy, and my head was always in the clouds. That is, until *they* appeared. That's when those girls started whispering gossip fantastic about me. Apparently, I left the previous summer not to spend a vacation with my cousins in Nueva York, but to have a baby. A baby I readily gave up for adoption. To a German family.

Why German?

The boys I used to play with started to speak differently to me, their voices turned deeper, like the actors in telenovelas. We played less and less. I was no longer fair game or fair fight. An unnamed bubble surrounded me, making me fragile to them.

"You're a girl."

"I've always been a girl."

"Yeah, but it's different now."

“How?”

“...You know.”

One of the boys I'd beaten up several times --rightfully, he was a big ol' bully-- brought me a flower to school one day.

“Did someone die?”

“No it's just for you,” he admitted as he tripped away from me. I'd never seen a Puerto Rican boy blush in my life. Not until then.

I didn't understand why Mami started to make it a point to push my legs together when I sat down.

“Cross your legs! You're a señorita now and it is your responsibility to protect the treasure.”

“Treasure?”

“Yes. Protect your treasure.”

Argh? Avast ye mateys? I didn't understand how my having breasticles was somehow connected to this “treasure” between my legs.

“And why aren't you wearing a bra?”

“ 'Cause we're home...”

“I want you to wear one of the good ones when you go out and the other ones when you're here, even when you're sleeping. You have our family's curse. And you don't want to be called a puta, do you?”

“No... What's a puta?”

While confused about so much, I did learn I needed to cover my body. Even in Puerto Rico's hot, tropical, Caribbean, humid, balmy weather. I truly learned this one afternoon when Mami's husband picked me up from school because she had to work late. I knew he was staring at me. I could feel it, up and down, up and down.

"You're going to look really good when you're done growing up. I just complimented you, what do you say?"

"...Thank you, sir."

Up and down.

"She runs fast, la tetona."

I overheard a boy say this about me at a high school track meet. "Tetona" in Puerto Rico means big-titted. I was no longer known as

- My Mami's daughter, or
- The girl who always had a book, or a notebook, or both, or
- The demon who easily pissed off the sweaty, exhausted nuns who semi-successfully attempted to teach us about La Virgencita at school, or
- The girl who beat up bullies, or
- Anything else.

I became known not *by*, but *as* the orbs that decided to sprout on my chestal region.

So, one magical spring day, flummoxed and drained by all the weird attention, I came up with the genius idea to start wrapping them.

I hated bras then. Actually, still do now. (I guess I realized that t-shirts were soft and malleable though.) The idea sprang while I was praying to La Virgencita. I looked up to my opened closet and there it was: the answer.

There were some botched experiments, of course. Tons of casualties. So much cotton, lost lost lost to the cause. It's not always a good idea to mix scissors and not knowing what the hell you're doing.

Yet, just like people started to notice my breasticles, they also noticed their sudden absence. There was a change. Something that used to be there kinda wasn't anymore. I used to joke to myself that soon there would be an old picture of the front of my torso on the back of a milk carton. Even Mami's husband asked me one day while he unapologetically stared at my chestal region: "are you alright?"

I was never better! Running wasn't such a hassle, and I could hold twice as many books from the library in my arms. The girls at school stopped whispering extravagant things about me. The boys started to pretend I simply wasn't there. I was free. Freeee! Eeeeeeeeeee!

And then, one day, Mami caught me. I was getting ready for Sunday mass. I wasn't late, but Mami wanted to get to church early that day. I guess it had something to do with how she and her husband had been yelling at each other more than usual lately. She gave the door two quick knocks and walked in.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm just wrapping them up, I'll be ready in a minute."

Her eyes were opened wide, so wide she looked like a startled booby. She didn't move her hand from the doorknob, she didn't take her eyes off of me, for what felt like a 1,000 minutes.

“...Why are you wrapping them up?”

“You told me not look like a puta. And people were being weird...”

I've always thought of Mami as a woman made of magma (well, more often of lava). I'd seen her survive her life with the strength and grace of The Hulk. She had once gone into the turf of a drug dealer and proceeded to beat the living crap out of him for trying to sell whatever to my older half-brother. Legend has it that she did this while wearing heels. But when that woman caught me wrapping up my breasticles, she started to cry. At that point, the only time I'd ever seen her crying was when Abuelo died.

“No, hija mía, no. No no no...”

We were late, very late, to church that day.

I went through a period afterwards when I didn't wrap my breasticles. I got by, I suppose. But then, Mami had a stroke. This was before Obamacare, so money for her medical needs ran out fast. Out of necessity and trying to take care of Mami, I joined the Army. And almost immediately, t-shirts were once again eviscerated, chalk and scissors commissioned, clothespins gainfully employed. Trust me: It was the *only* way to survive as a woman in the military. Oh, the Army. I'm not saying that longingly or lovingly. It's a story for another time.

Even after I was honorably discharged, I still wrapped my breasticles from time to time, usually when I was anxious about something. But as time passed, it happened less

and less. I can't remember the last time I wrapped them, to be honest. Part of it is because I like the t-shirts I have now. Part of it is because I have a long line of tiny spider bites along the side of my torso from all those poor, unfortunate clothespins. And part of it is because feminism and blah body issue stuffs blah blah empowerment and blah blah blah. In other words: I shouldn't fucking have to.

## Only Daughter (Poem)

There is a shame  
that is birthed with womanhood

She was made to know this  
She was making me know this

So i begged Her,  
the only God i knew,  
not to shape me  
in Her image

i tried to scream at Her:  
Make a hunter out of me!

i begged Her  
not to turn me  
into a troubled  
shape-shifter

Please  
mold me  
into a Creature  
that lives without fear

Make Me a warrior!

I pawed at her insides  
to remind Her of  
Her own aching  
But I had no say

She ignored Me

My voice was too soft  
My shape too tender  
I was barely there  
i was barely there  
  
with nowhere to run

i turned hungry

my tiny mouth  
readied itself wide open  
and earnestly inhaled  
the bitter air of Her blood

*Myrta Vida*

## Yoruba Origin Story (Poem)

They knowingly answered gravity's call:  
The stars, they bombarded the motherland with gusto,  
powering the trains of genesis.  
As they cloned rock and fire,  
water was birthed, readied.  
The infinite substance, it was needed.

The first river burst through,  
challenging gravity and reason.  
Its unfurling began,  
inevitable and unexpected,  
bringing with it many miracles.

With life came the soulmatter,  
gifted child from the universe  
and its most extravagant ingredient:  
Aché.

The true essence of everything,  
of if all:  
Aché.

It too arrived with brio,  
not to be distilled:  
Aché.

It became blood and bone,  
string and web:  
Aché.

Fixed and fluid,  
fragile and resilient:  
Aché.

Soulmatter:  
Aché.

Aché  
Aché:

Orisha

*Myrta Vida*

A Daydream of You in Water, My Ancestor (Poem)

I had a daydream of you  
as you hiked on the first lands,  
across knotty savannas.  
You arrived at the perfect river  
given by the gods  
and blessed by Yemayá.  
You paid your tributes,  
with spirit strong like moringa.  
I saw your hands  
become porringers to drink.  
I thought of your face  
cheeks the shade of ripe mangó.  
You opened lovely guava lips  
wrapped around teeth  
as bright as Orula's wisdom.  
You danced with sun and water.  
You praised Olorún  
for the sacred and simple pleasures.  
Ancestor, you were lithe and limber  
and veiled in the flawless river.  
Radiant, impeccable,  
as you lifted your Orisha.

*Myrta Vida*

## Santería Lullaby (Poem)

It wasn't perfect, it really wasn't,  
but the earliest world was ablaze  
with danza and rima.

That is: until they brought their god with them.

The taken whispered  
ardent secrets to each other  
to keep the faiths and truths awake.

Hid them, as you do, when something's too good to be forgotten.

Dark sons worshipped while cutting caña  
Mixed daughters, fruit of rape, of course,  
danced and jittered in hot criollo kitchens

The lore of creation lay buried in songs about café.

Then, Oshún and Yemayá were born-again Mariás  
and Shangó became the baby Jesus.  
Shangó always had a good sense a humor though.

The true creators winked from behind 10,000 saints.

Mass evolved into an affair  
having less to do with lo católico,  
more to do with the old blaze.

Because magic --*that* type of magic-- it cannot be quartered.

*Myrta Vida*

The Violence Against Obbatalá's Creation (Poem)

Some thumbs were cut off.  
 señores didn't like propiedad to hold pencils  
 without permission

the skin too dark  
 to have proper-sized heads for learning  
 Good bodies to work though

Good bodies

Some women were despoiled.  
 Their Orisha hovered over the act as it happened  
 fighting back meant erasure

propiedad should know its place  
 the skin too dark to dissociate or retaliate  
 Good bodies for parturition though

Good bodies

The skin too dark always asked to let go  
 the torments but do not let go the righteous rage  
 Obbatalá conferred it as the fuel to exist.

Ancestor is vigilant and watches  
 the brutality she records it all in her body  
 to hand down as bitter gifts of knowledge

*Myrta Vida*

## Malanga's Light (Poem)

Ancestor fears for  
 and wonders about  
 the creature.  
 The skin might not turn out  
 the color of café  
 The hair might not own  
 the swirl of mamey  
 The heart might not  
 dance to djembe

*Oyá, protect the creature.*

Ancestor fears for  
 the creature.  
 señor will be pleased with  
 a malanga child's arrival  
 señor will give Ancestor gifts:  
 Literacy  
 a new hamaca  
 Less intrusion, but  
 only if the child  
 looks more like güiro and  
 behaves less like maraca.

*Oyá, help the creature glow.*

Ancestor fears for  
 the creature.  
 señor likes  
 his malanga children quiet

Or else  
he'll silence them  
himself.

*Oyá, protect the creature.*

Ancestor fears.  
Half his.  
The creature  
might never know  
where true brightness lies  
It will always be  
in the sights  
of troubled hunters.

*Oyá, protect the creature.*

Ancestor wonders.  
Half hers too.

*Oyá, help the creature glow.*

Ancestor wonders.

*Oyá, help the creature glow.*

*Myrta Vida*

## Unmoored/Iyaboraje (Poem)

I've yet to find my patakí  
I've yet to find that healing mantra  
that will ferry me to a safe place  
a sacred space scented with healing parcha  
a world where rage isn't my armor  
where Albizu Campos wasn't killed

I've yet to find a place of pure sunshine  
where a love and hate for los gringos  
can synchronize while  
warming their toes on white sand,  
sampling the salt from el Mar Caribe,  
singing its dormant volcanoes goodnight

Sometimes I miss Mama Guela  
I think of her dark, elegant hands  
sewing blessed wedding dresses,  
killing chickens for the omiero,  
making coffee for us children  
spiking it with ron blanco.

Sometimes I miss Mama Guela  
her hardness, her hate for life  
nadie sufre como el negro  
nadie sufre como el pobre  
stay away from the sun, mija,  
marry young and well

marry white, mija,  
marry a gringo, mija,

mejora la raza

I wonder if Mama Guela and I  
are the same thing  
much like Orisha and santo are now  
if I'm just a new expansion,  
a better articulation of her pain,  
proud carrier of her brand of rancor

I wonder if I'm just another fake trigueña  
filled to the brim with wanderlust  
for an invented country  
filled with a wish for any country  
to truly take me in  
while it spits in my eyes

I've yet to find my patakí  
no land can soothe this icy fever  
because nadie sufre como el negro  
nadie sufre como el pobre  
because nadie sufrió como ella  
y nadie ha sufrido como yo

*Myrta Vida*

## Zafra (Poem)

Listen: I need you to atone  
for what I'm about to do  
*hacha y machete*

I've to cut into the caña of me  
and let you and the world in  
*hacha y machete*

Just like with guarapo, I will let you  
suck out the marrow of my fear  
*hacha y machete*

I will load entangled pieces of me  
onto a carreta  
*hacha y machete*  
and let the rest of me simmer  
and burn under sol tropical  
*hacha y machete*

I will crack open my solemn shame  
I might even let you cut some of my caña with me  
*hacha y machete*

And maybe after,  
after we live through this  
*hacha y machete*  
maybe then  
can we really talk about Orishas and  
sacred rivers and  
Yoruba

Santeria  
the island  
Mama Guela  
Mami  
parcha  
el coquí  
the ocean I miss even when I'm there  
the diaspora  
my diaspora  
los negros  
los pobres  
all the white men who've made me hate them  
and the endless parade of rage and sad and wistful and lonesome and eager and bold  
and stubborn  
that Orunla put in my path.

Because a zafra is due  
and maybe, just maybe  
after you slash into me  
and cut into me  
dig into me  
split into me  
and sort  
reject  
embrace  
and kill  
and hurt me  
again  
all over again  
with the caña of me  
maybe the caña of me

will turn into something resembling sugar

So, what can I say about la zafra

that hasn't already been said

*hacha y machete*

We'll try to find out together

but only after *you* atone

*hacha y machete*

*Myrta Vida*

## Lil' Comforts (Short Story)

by Myrta Vida

It took her a second or two to realize the refrigerator-shaped man in front of her was Bryan: her super gay ex-husband. These past two? three? years had *not* been kind. Like, at all. He'd clearly gotten lost on his way to the gym and become as shapeless as a sack filled with a bunch of everything. He was probably still in denial and hiding his feelings or fears or whatever behind layers and layers of seal blubber.

She was conducting her newly acquired morning routine of biking for several miles, all to be followed by a couple of hand-rolled cigarettes. After all that hard work, this was a fitting reward for her lungs. She'd turned to exercise when the doctor said she needed to quit smoking or she'd end up like her Mami. Dios mío, the horror. She shouldn't have filled out that damn form at the doctor's office: now he was always harassing her about the smoking, the smoking, the fucking smoking.

She knew she had to make a compromise, but she sure as shit wasn't going to let go of the one thing that'd kept her sane these past few years. So exercise was it; plus it gave her a chance to go outside, leave her apartment/flat. Before taking up biking, she was always in such a hurry to get back inside her place from running whatever errand, she'd forgotten how good it smelled here in her new country. Once, she wrote down on her journal that this country smelled like cold water that'd been freshly splashed by a fishing line. That it smelled like polite roses. But she scratched it out and all over it soon after, thinking herself just so fucking stupid.

Well, the morning she saw her super gay ex-husband was brisk and damp, as it usually was in that part of Ireland. She was walking and guiding her bike with one hand,

while holding a second? third? delicious and malignant treat in the other. She'd had a particularly good ride that morning and was feeling strong and malleable, her limbs flushed with all the blood and whatever happy hormones she had left in her. She was savoring, soaking, marinating in the cigarette smoke, when she saw a tank-of-a-man coming straight at her. It wasn't until she saw his eyes, green as the land he'd brought her to all them years ago, that she realized it was Bryan's dumbass.

“Rosita...”

His voice sounded tired and dry from talking too much. It's hard to let go of those bits of knowledge about another person when you were married to him for so damn long.

“Bryan.” She hoped the brief acknowledgment would be the end of that.

She would have kept walking without bothering to find out more, but his wideness blocked her path. His body, a mountain's backside, seemed unmovable. The Irish sidewalks in the west of Ireland--and especially there in Galway-- were so narrow they force pedestrians to engage in a constant negotiation of space and time. The sheer physics of it, all that moving and nodding and eye contact, were kinda bullshit.

She sighed as if trying to squeeze out more cigarette smoke from her lungs. He lightly pointed a long finger across the street, to a bistro she went to from time to time to pick up sandwiches for the weekend. She shook her head, vigorously. She really liked that place, not just because it was seconds away from the university, but because it was painted a shade of aqua similar to the Caribbean Sea at high noon. She didn't want to engage with this nebulous-looking motherfucker there, not in that place.

“What.”

“Can we talk, please,” he sighed the same sigh white cops back in the States give you when they think *you’re* the one being uncooperative.

She rolled her eyes and shrugged her shoulders. He quickly scanned the area and found them a corner past a tiny iron and stone bridge, across a nearby intersection by the centuries-old university where she now taught. They walked the few steps in silence, passing narrow, two-story houses covered in vines. She noticed these were as green and shiny as his eyes.

She rested her bike against a tall iron gate made from metal that was older than America. She took a profound drag from her cigarette, making it disappear, then she immediately lit up another one.

She looked away as she smoked. She couldn’t bear the sight of him, the now human cotton ball. He was wearing a blue button-down shirt and khaki pants he probably had to order online from some store back in the States. Giants R’ Us? The top of his brown hair looked like a seagull’s nest and his skin was an anemic shade of beige. What a hot, puffy mess. She smoothed over her ponytail while she smoked, then stopped herself halfway through straightening out her favorite biking jacket. She didn’t need to fix herself for this man: She looked just fine, goddammit.

They stood in silence for a minute, she smoking and anxiously tapping her foot against her bike, he trying to breathe quietly.

She wondered, of course, what this was all about. After she divorced his ass, didn’t he transfer to some other old-ass Irish town now turned into a techie hub? Had he been back to his hometown in Connecticut, a place she’d hated since her mother brought her there? Had he let people see him like this, after this jaundiced transformation?

Rosita just didn't get Connecticut. Seriously, who actually enjoyed the changing of the seasons? Too many damn clothes and shoes to have and rotate through, too many damn things to think about. At least here, in Ireland, was either damp and sunny, or damp and *not* sunny. Layer up and either bring an umbrella or don't, motherfucker: simple as that.

She remembered Puerto Rico from when she was little, and how it was nice and simple like that too: it was either damp and hot, or just hot. She remembered that damn day her Mami took her from the island. It was a Saturday. Rosita was 10? 11? and the sun was hot and bright. The air was humid and it smelled like it always did: the perfect mixture of brine and clean rain. It really was a perfect day, a beautiful day, like it always is when you are that little.

Her Mami took her to the beach that morning to "celebrate" the fact that they were finally done with all the packing up. It was weeks of packing, all that packing. Her Mami was just too damn excited. She was so ready to leave the island and "live a better life." That woman. That night, on the flight away from the island and into what her Mami called their "new lives," Rosita cried and cried. She felt in her young heart that they would not be going back, probably ever. She was already missing the few things she knew about her birthplace, like how every house in their neighborhood had hibiscus or flor de marta bushes seeping through their front gates. How everyone seemed to smoke the same cigarettes and drink every night because they knew they lived in paradise. How everyone knew each other not by the way they looked, but by whom they were related to or the things they did. Rosita was known as the girl who kicked people. She was so little.

After about a half-hour? hour? of her crying non-stop during that flight, her Mami got tired of patting her daughter's back. She put on the misshapen headphones they handed out in the plane to keep people tame and quiet. While her then only daughter cried her tiny and broken heart out, her Mami just sat there, listening to whatever was being transmitted from the tiny hole in her armrest. Rosita remembered.

She could feel Bryan watching her. His eyes were definitely on her face. She just knew it. He was probably examining where some of the youth remained and where it had slipped away. He was probably noticing the ever-present frown marks, sunk in like fault lines now, and the lack of laugh lines on her thin, brown face. She'd never been one to laugh out loud and that instinct deepened after their divorce.

She knew she was about to run out of cigarettes and would be lost without having something to hold onto while they talked: "Ooo-k?"

"My mother died."

Shit.

"...I'm sorry to hear that... Evelyn was a nice lady, a very nice lady."

And indeed she was. Evelyn was a lithe and tall thing of a woman, something she passed down to her sons. She had an easy laugh and a knack for taking on lost causes, something she'd also passed on down. She was quick to give people a hug; in fact, she was one of the few people Rosita didn't mind hugging. Sometimes, Evelyn would lightly pat her arm while they talked, laughing and shaking her head at Rosita's jokes.

"I should not be laughing at that!" she'd say in post-laughter tears.

Rosita remembered that Evelyn had even started calling her daughter, well before Bryan had proposed.

As he explained what happened to his mother, his voice became a shapeless wind that came from the middle of nowhere. Rosita nodded slowly, glancing into the distance - -as much as she could in this narrow street-- out over houses that were too cute and way too close to one another, their front gates hosting thick rose bushes of ambitious red, affable pink, and chummy yellow. She watched the few pale and lovely people left over from the bistro's morning rush. Some were reading their newspapers and sipping on their teas. Others were just packing up, getting ready to take part in whatever lay ahead.

Rosita listened to Bryan as he narrated Evelyn's tragic and untimely end, but didn't cry. She couldn't let him see her cry. Evelyn was a fairly pleasant but now distant memory, one known about 10,000 lifetimes before. Rosita did feel like she could only breathe out of one lung though. She patted the pocket in her biking jacket with the scattering of cigarettes in it. She wondered how many she could fit in her mouth at once and if all of their smoke would choke her. Or if maybe they would somehow make her grow a third, miraculous lung.

"Is that why you're here, to personally deliver the news." Her voice was dripping with cynicism.

"So, I'm here because I want you to come back home with me to the funeral."

"Huh?"

"I would pay for everything, of course. Uh, first class? Everything, everything."

Wow. He'd forgotten, utterly and completely, how to ask her for things.

When he asked her to marry him millennia ago, they went to her favorite seafood restaurant back in New Haven, the only one that served authentic shrimp mofongo. He'd asked *juuuust* the right way. He waited for her to have had a good day, which had always

been so rare for her. He wore the green shirt she'd bought him for his birthday, the one with a discrete pattern of ocean waves on it. It looked nice on a sinewy chest that was about half the size of what it is now. He let her eat and drink and asked her *twice* to talk about her day. She told him, she remembered, about how she tried once again to have a normal conversation with her sister Reina, but all she did was ask Rosita if she'd lost weight. That dumbass.

Rosita remembered. She remembered everything she said that evening, and how hard she tried to be funny through it all, because she knew she was a pain in the ass. She remembered how much his laughter at her mean banter and playful brand of cruelty always assuaged her innate rage. And after she was done with her latest concept on how to kill off all manner of stupid people in order to finally fix the world, Bryan moved from his seat across the table and sat right next to her. He'd taken both her hands in his --such lovely fingers-- and asked her to marry him.

"Mm-hmm!" she said. She remembered. She nodded a lot, eyes wide open. She smiled.

Now, she finally stared at him, a human manatee standing under a tall rose bush that wrapped itself across the iron fence of a stranger's house. A miniscule tide of nausea crept up for a second, of course. Rosita held onto her almost finished cigarette for dear life. Fuck this corpulent asshole, coming back out of nowhere, asking for shit, and not even doing it right.

But just as she remembered his mannerisms, the way his voice sounded when it was tired, that he blinked slowly when he was trying to formulate a witty comeback, he clearly also remembered hers. As crassly stoic as she was trying to be, she could tell that

her body language was giving her away. For a nanosecond, she had started to slouch into herself like a mangrove. Her non-cigarette hand was taking turns between holding onto and upright rubbing her stomach. He saw a window, so he pleaded.

“Rosita. What can I do to make you come home with me for this. What can I do.”

This mother. *Fucker.*

“Rosita. What do you want from me.”

She wanted to spit in his face. He’d taken away years from her live. He’d taken her away from “home.” Before him, she was doing just fine being another of the many ‘Ricans who’d been forced to take over New Haven. Well, she’d had no choice but to get used to it, of course.

“...How’s your family.” Bryan’s voice was just as warped as the fat on his body.

“Huh?”

“Your mother, your sister. How are they.”

Her Mami had ripped her away from Puerto Rico soon after she married Alonso, aka The Shiny Turd. Rosita guessed her Mami saw the size of that turd’s wallet and ensnared him with a pregnancy, like some villainess from a telenovela.

The resulting offspring, her younger half-sister Reina, never understood why Rosita was angry at so much, all the time. Reina had been born there, in Connecticut, with her first name and frizzy hair being the only legacy she had from the tropics. Everything else about Reina was gringa, from her annoying hyper-punctuality to her self-imposed anorexia. She didn’t even know how to speak Spanish. Dumbass. Rosita was clearly a child of the Caribbean, most notably in her overall stubbornness.

“What the fuck do you care how my family’s doing.”

If they hadn't left Puerto Rico, Alonso would have never been her "stepfather." And Rosita would have never, ever met Bryan. At least they didn't have a huge wedding ceremony like her Mami did when she got married to Alonso. Rosita knew and liked that it irked her Mami, that her oldest daughter was engaged to someone who wasn't rich as shit, at least not back then. That his last name was Smith –Smith! of all the unglamorous gringo last names!

It didn't really matter though, none of it did, because in the end her Mami wasn't even invited to the tiny ceremony in Evelyn's tiny backyard. By that point, Rosita's Mami made her choice, and that was to "disown" her. To be a "good wife."

Bryan kept shifting his weight, his eyes never leaving her, patiently waiting for a new opening. Rosita could feel the patience flowing through him. She went for another cigarette, grateful that her lighter worked on the first try.

"You look good, Rosita."

"Spare me the bullshit. You look and *smell* like a fat albacore."

"You haven't changed." He smiled at this, kindly, just as kindly as his mother Evelyn would have, showing the perfect white squares that were his teeth.

Rosita rolled her eyes because her insult didn't hurt him. He probably missed her verbal malice, perhaps even found some strange comfort in it.

Rosita remembered and found deep comfort that her Mami never liked Bryan. Then, she just plain hated him after he beat the shit out of Alonso. What a beating, epic! Bryan had no mercy.

After he and Rosita went out for drinks one night, she had unleashed her vitriol on an already nervous waitress who got their order wrong. Rosita had even made the poor

girl cry when she asked to speak to the manager. As he drove her home, a tipsy Bryan pulled over near her dorm and had stood up to Rosita for the one and only time.

“That was just not cool, babe. Not cool... Why are you like this?”

By then, Rosita couldn't deny to herself how she felt about him. The disappointment in his voice coiled itself around her like hot copper. Her constant anger was replaced by fear, true fear. Just like he needed to know, she needed the forgiveness of his laughter, the plush touch of his voice, the attention of his eyes. She was certain about these things.

She begrudgingly ambled towards the answers, edged on by his somewhat drunken questions, as she consumed a full pack of cigarettes. The smoke lingered in the car, making a slow and tepid escape through half-opened windows. Bryan patiently pressed her to the point of no return, even though it'd all happened light years before. Sure, parts of her felt better after she unloaded the most common of secrets on him. Parts of her felt nothing.

He finally dropped her off that night after holding her and kissing her and telling her she was safe, he would protect her, he loved her, really loved her and her adorably mean heart. He then barged into her Mami's and Alonso's house.

Her sister Reina, her high school ass still living at home, was the only one who told Rosita what Bryan did. She quietly showed her the furtive pictures she took of Alonso's cuts and bruises afterwards. Rosita's "stepfather" and the skin on his stupid face and limbs were covered in a random pattern of grotesque paisleys: shades of yellow and pink on the edges, darkened blue and burnt blood on the inside. It was the only time

Rosita felt her half-sister was actually useful. It was the only time Reina ever even acknowledged what she had witnessed.

Rosita's Mami wanted to press charges against the "Smith boy" after the beating, but of course "her stepfather" wasn't going to follow through on that one for obvious reasons. It would have been disgraceful, the possible rumors as to why. ¡Escándalo! Better to stick to the story that he was mugged.

By the time Bryan asked Rosita to marry him, his hands had completely healed up.

She now looked down at his hands, one wiping sweat from his forehead into his frazzled mess of a haircut, the other hanging onto the iron gate, gingerly and expertly avoiding the rose bush's thorns.

Soon after the wedding, his company offered him a "chance of lifetime" to work here in Galway. The Celtic Tiger was in full swing. Ireland didn't have enough people to fill up the jobs it made up. By then, Rosita knew something was wrong with them, with him. She felt it in her cigarette smoke-filled gut. He was too ready to leave the States, to get away from Connecticut and from aaaaaaall the people that he knew and that knew them. Still, she packed them up, just like her Mami did when she was little. And so they moved, because it was the least she could do as a thank you for believing her, for being the only one who did believe her, and for actually doing the right thing about it. Rosita just dropped everything and followed him here, to this far away land of mythical castles and leprechaun tales and endless verdant fields and dark beer and clean rain and polite roses.

Now, Bryan was an unexpected, bulging, meaty thing spilling out all over. He smoothed his cheeks with his hands, waiting for her as she sorted his thoughts. Rosita hated how this reminded her of her Mami, how she'd used both her hands to slap her, hard, back when Rosita finally tried to tell her what Alonso had done.

"You must have done something to provoke him" her Mami countered. Her voice was as sharp as her frantic slaps on her daughter's face.

Bryan saw the frown in Rosita's face soften, her face looking suddenly tired.

"Rosita, you know my mother really liked you. She loved you."

He never called her Rose, or Rosie, or Rosa. He'd never tried. He somehow knew that the name to be used was the one she introduced herself by.

"And I loved her. But I really don't understand what you're trying to accomplish by coming here, today, and talking to me like you don't know me." A new cigarette emerged.

"State your terms, I'll make sure you're comfortable and that no one bothers you, especially not me."

"No."

"Rosita, please, listen. I-"

"I guess being gay and fat aint enough, now you're deaf too. I said no..." She let the words and their poison drip out, as if from a deadly canticle. She wasn't sure if she regretted saying them.

She snorted and looked behind her towards the bistro. She couldn't believe this conversation might have actually taken place there. She loved that space: the walls inside were painted aqua too but were also covered in hand-painted roses, some with thorns

bigger than the flowers themselves. Rosita remembered why --despite knowing that their marriage would somehow be doomed after they moved here-- she still liked Ireland so much. There were flowers, roses everywhere. Everywhere.

Bryan looked at his hands again, and brought them up to his temples, just as he had back so many times when they were married. Rosita knew a part of her would always hate him for the years, so many years of wondering if it was her, if she was the problem, if the meanness had finally gotten to him and he just didn't want to touch her because of it. If maybe what Alonso did to her had damaged her for marriage, for marriage to this man who'd listened to her and who'd believed her. Who'd defended her.

“Rosita...”

She held her hand up, and he shut the fuck up. She wanted silence, especially because she knew it'd be a small agony for him. She'd somehow sucked the insides of the cigarette she'd just lit, and reached again for the pocket in her biking jacket. Only one cigarette left. Such a fucking hole, burning in her pocket. She stared towards the bistro again, its aqua façade soothing her. Then she watched all the pale and lovely people walking by, a few could even be some of her faceless students headed to the university library to fuck off. She glanced at the houses that were just too close to one another, and much too precious to have actual human adults living in them. She looked out, at this new, green country of hers, all covered in fragrant and prickly roses.

## Name (Short Story)

by Myrta Vida

Let me tell you about the weekend I became a woman, sometime back at the tail end of '70s. It's nothing sordid: I'd already started my cycle, sorta slept with a boy, and already been at the Universidad de Puerto Rico for about a year. It all had to do with a gorgon bred in Hell's coop named Marjorie.

You see, my name is Alondra, pronounced Ah-lohn-drrah, but gringos never seem to get it right. I've been called Adele, Adriana, Aileen, Alba, Alejandra, Alfonsa, Alicia, Alma, Almira, Alonza, Amanda, Andrea, and my personal favorite: Alomar. Yes, like the baseball player. There's also the occasional racist slip-up of María, since clearly all Puerto Rican girls are named after the Holy Mother. Hm.

These slip-ups never helped with my disdain for gringos. I was always annoyed with los turistas, especially their lack of appreciation for authenticity. The ones that came to Don Lemuel's restaurant were the worst. I guess there's an appeal to having a young local girl serving obscene amounts of "exotic" food and booze. I guess it's even better when she also knows how to explain that octopus salad is not disgusting, no, not at all, it kind of tastes like chicken caesar. Or that pure rum is not meant to be sweet simply because it came from sugarcane. Or that us locals didn't live in huts made out of mud and palm leaves or walked for miles and miles and miles to get to where we were going. Los turistas wanted you to explain these things clearly and concisely in their language, even though the questions were always fucking stupid.

Their proud ignorance was –and still is-- the most annoying for me. Like when Don Lemuel and I talked about how they couldn't say my name, even though it was

clearly written on my nameplate in big, golden letters. He saw the rage brewing in me, stubborn like moringa.

“Birdie, why don’t we change it to “Ali”, he suggested. He said I would get better tips that way.

And I’ll be damned if he wasn’t right. I made a killing that night. Apparently, los turistas didn’t want to engage with the locals’ true selves; they just wanted a manufactured vacation experience. Ali, instead of Alondra, was more palatable to them. It was “safer.” Don Lemuel, that Santa Claus-looking shrew, knew his business. Mami picked me up and saw the brand new nameplate on my shirt.

“Gringos?”

I could only nod. Pinning the nameplate on made me tired in a new way that day.

“Well, I guess you’ll make better tips now.”

The ride was mostly quiet after that, as usual. Mami was not the chatty type, but even more so after work. She managed one of the newly built gringo-owned hotels on the beachfront, and dealing with them always wiped her out. So we both just let the soft murmur of salsa clásica coming from the radio, and the sea-tinted wind seeping in through the open windows, to keep us company.

I remember, during that time in my life, how Mami made it a point to keep reminding me, over and over again, that I still needed to do the things that women were always supposed to do.

“Are you done with your homework?” Mami’d ask.

“Mhm, I just need to-”

“Well, you may be going to the university and goodforyou, but you still need to do the dishes and sweep and mop the kitchen floor. I shouldn’t have to say this twice,” she would say.

Her arguments never made sense. Her anger never made sense to me. I always did as I was told; there was no real reason for me not to help her clean her house. It didn’t matter how well I behaved though, how consistently well I performed in pretty much everything. She always repeated herself in the same cadence. It was like she wanted, perhaps even needed, to have something to be mad about.

I would, in turn, always sigh at her litany. Sometimes I tried to fight back with reason: “I have a job too.”

“So do I and you don’t have kids.”

“I’m an only child.” I’d smile at her. This never worked. She always just looked away.

“Stop giving me that and do the damn dishes. The world may be changing, but things still need to be done around the house.”

I sighed and rolled my eyes and did the damn dishes. How I hated doing the damn dishes; I still do. I treated doing the dishes like Mami seemed to be treating my going to college: a burden.

“Stop slamming my pots around!”

The following night, on a Saturday, was when Marjorie happened.

All was running well at the restaurant, until a woman at one of my tables asked:

“Are you Poor-toh-ree-kuns half-black and half white? What exactly are you?”

I didn't know what to say. Even to this day, when I get asked bullshit like that, it takes me a second to recognize what just happened. I sucked air through my teeth, wanting the restaurant's smell of fried plantains and spit roasted pork to cleanse my mouth from the nausea.

This lady was thin, blonde, with the characteristic shade of pink that comes from underestimating the island heat. She was sporting every shade of blue on her floral dress, her bracelets, even her shoes.

One of the other ladies seated with her chuckled: "Marjorie..."

"What? I'm just trying to figure out their look." Marjorie dismissively waved her thin hand as she said this, like she was trying to shake off dust in the air.

Slowly, steadily, a smile I didn't know I had in me made its way to my lips: "We have a Spaniard, African, and native Taíno heritage, Miss."

"Native what?"

"Indians from the Caribbean, Miss."

"Huh, but then the Africans were slaves right?"

"Yes, Miss."

"Oh ok. I was just trying to figure you guys out. You guys are all so cute!"

Marjorie waved her hand at the imaginary dust again. Her bracelets clanged and clacked together like hungry chickens. She didn't make eye contact with me the entire time she talked, her eyes focused on some unexplained distance to her right.

I continued my shift, but I made sure Marjorie's table got five-star service. I didn't know why, but I just made sure of it. Even though the cooks always wiped down the edges of the plates before they go out, I wiped them down again and put extra

garnishes on them. I asked the bartender to make their piña coladas good and strong. And when Marjorie dropped her fork from her dismissive hand, I was right there to make sure she had an entire new set of silverware. Those were all things I'd do for any table, but I was deliberately expeditious about Marjorie's.

I delivered their check with my newly found smile.

"Is Ali short for something?" Marjorie's friend asked.

"No, Miss. It's just Ali."

"That's nice."

"Thank you, Miss."

They gave me a \$100 tip on a \$74 bill. Why were these people fucking with *me*?

As soon as I noticed, I ran back to their table: "Miss, I believe this bill was stuck to the rest?"

"Oh no, uh. Sweetie, keep it, keep it." Marjorie's friend had a strange brand of politeness. Her bell-bottoms shook from the constant tapping of her foot. Marjorie, on the other hand, just pursed her lip at her friend, still staring off into her own horizon.

"Thank you very much, Miss. Enjoy the rest of your stay."

Elena, another waitress whose nameplate had been Anglicized to display "Helen" on it, saw the bill as I was straightening out my cash for payout. Her ironed out hair was curling at the ends by that time of night. I remember her being genuinely happy for me.

"That's a good night, right there!" She had a broad smile.

She told Don Lemuel, who asked what I did to get that kind of money.

"I gave them a lesson in our culture," was the answer I chose to give him.

“You should work for the Tourism Board, Birdie!” He patted his generous beer and bread belly and laughed, loudly, at his own comment. Elena and I couldn’t help but sorta laugh with him too.

When Mami picked me up from the restaurant that night, I said nothing about the incident or the money. I caught her staring at me a few times, more than usual.

“Hm. You have my profile,” she said.

Back then, I had no idea what she meant by it. Since then though, I realized that she’d say crazy shit like that, out of the blue, when she’d had some form of interaction with Papi.

Once home, I put all my earnings except for the \$100 bill in the jar Mami kept in the kitchen. Apparently, I was old enough to work, but not to decide how to spend my own money.

That night, I sat on my bed and stared at the bill. It was crisp, new. I traced it with my finger, its green silky smoothness feeling light to the touch. I thought of how this could have made Mami happy, especially with the gas prices at the time. I thought of how maybe she would let me go to the Fania concert. I could invite Elena to come along with me, maybe even help her pay for her ticket. Or we could stretch it out. Maybe buy a couple of new books next semester, instead of the used ones Mami insisted on to “keep me humble.”

I held the bill with both hands. It’s a tiny fortune. A boon, even. I didn’t know what to do with it. But I didn’t want to put it in the jar. I didn’t want it joining the folded stacks of lesser bills stuffed in there.

That night I had violent dreams. I dreamt of Marjorie and her friends, all dressed in blue and taking the compulsory tourist circuit. I saw their delight as they tripped and painfully rolled down El Yunque's rainforest trail. I was witness to the thrill they got from being trapped for days inside the Camuy caverns. I shared their excitement as they nearly drowned while snorkeling near Icacó Island. I watched as Marjorie sat at Don Lemuel's restaurant and vigorously vomited out chunks of \$100 bills, each of different sizes, each coming out more forcefully than the last.

I awoke with a stomachache and the hundred firmly held in my hand. It was still dark outside. I just sat on my bed, smoothing the bill out, staring at it like a riddle written in Chinese.

Sunday morning meant getting ready to go to church. Mami had set apart her good shoes, even though none of her footwear was ever scratched, torn, or dirty.

"Remember to wear black, we have to pray for your cousin."

"Hm?" I was having a hard time shaking the sleep from my face even after my morning shower.

"Cito. It's the anniversary of his death. How do you not remember these things?"

"You couldn't stand him when he was alive."

"That's not funny. Now hurry up so we can go and pray for that dead kid."

Cito was one of the few who actually volunteered for the war the gringos had just lost. He was a good baseball player, but Mami thought that he talked too much and that his jokes were stupid. He was Aunt Gloria's oldest son. When he was killed, Aunt Gloria

had what they called a “mental breakdown” back then. She’d almost lost her job because of it.

Mami took time off from her management job at the hotel and paid to have Aunt Gloria flown down from Nueva York. One of the few things I knew for certain about Mami is that she never took time off unless it was a religious holiday. She and Aunt Gloria spent that week going to the beach during the day. At night, they’d sit on the balcony, drinking Cuba Libres while having quiet conversations. It’s one of the few times I’ve seen Mami slow down some, especially after her and Papi’s divorce. It’s also the only time I’ve seen her smoke, just like Aunt Gloria’s old ass still does.

As I was getting ready for church, Mami was rushing me as usual. Even though I’m much taller than her, she’s still treating me like I was a 12-year-old. After I slipped into my mourning dress, I went to the drawer where I’d hidden the \$100. I placed it in my purse. Maybe I’d be moved to donate it to the church.

I hated going to church, still do. To me, mass is nothing more than a set of directions to sit down, get up, kneel, pray, kneel, get up, and sit down again. That Sunday I couldn’t remember the words to the prayers, even though I’d recited them millions of times by then. The priest spoke for an hour, and people laughed politely at the right places, I think. My mind was blank. My heart was sad about something, I didn’t know what then.

After 1,000 hours of service went by, the basket for the offering was passed around. I reached into my purse, a birthday gift from the other waitresses. I remember when I first showed it to Mami, she only nodded as acknowledgement. My fingers dug for the \$100, the smooth surface had started to wrinkle I looked up and saw the porcelain

statue of La Virgen de la Candelaria. Her robes were a simple blue with gold trim that fell in luxurious folds over her outstretched arms. She was white and lithe, with a flat chest and bright blue eyes and thin, pink lips. She looked nothing like me. She looked nothing like any of the devoted families at the church, our skin heavily favored by the sun, our clothes every bright color on the Glidden wheel.

My hand turned into a fist around the \$100. I dug with my other hand for loose change and dropped that in the basket instead when it finally got to me. I decided not to give the \$100 to God.

After mass, Mami let me drive the car back home. I drove under the speed limit, even slower that day. I was not in the mood for her moods.

“So your father’s picking you up for an early dinner and he’s going to drop you off at work.”

“Is he ok?”

“Yes, he just has to tell you something.”

I nodded. We rode in silence towards our house. The sound of salsa music whispered its way out of the radio, just like it always did, the routine rarely changing. Maybe that’s why Mami liked going to mass so much.

Ever since I’d turn 18 and he wasn’t obligated by the court to make time for me, Papi really hadn’t. I was angry about this, of course. But still, I missed him. Who doesn’t miss their father, even when you never really, truly know who he is? I did know better than to complain though. He was paying for my tuition and usually slipped me some secret moneys when we met.

That afternoon Papi was punctual, as always, and didn't leave his pristine Chrysler Cordoba or honk the horn. He just waited, patiently, for me to come out of the house.

I ran out, looking back and seeing that Mami was no longer by the window. I jumped in the car and Papi held my face in his hands. After staring at me for a nanosecond, he'd kiss my forehead. I always felt I could forgive him and the world for everything when he did this.

As he drove us into Viejo San Juan, he'd ask about the usual things: my college professor who refused to wear a bra, the neighbor's son who kept asking me out, how some European tourists were terrible tippers. I didn't tell him about the \$100. He had the Latin jazz station on, its non-threatening music accompanying our non-threatening conversations.

He took me to yet another fancy restaurant, one of the gringo-owned places they'd just opened a block away from the beachfront. Back then, those new places looked about the same: black-lacquered furniture and giant, fake seashells surrounded by lines of blue neon lights on the walls. It was about to be the dawn of the 80's; black-and-neon-anything was considered stylish, groovy. Nothing about those establishments said San Juan or even Puerto Rico to me. They all smelled like brand new cars on this inside. If anything, they screamed "we really want you to think of us as a cheaper Miami!"

The place was near empty that early in the afternoon. Papi and I sat across each other on a black and blue booth near the bar. We both made it a point to order grilled items off the menu and he let me order a drink. I asked for a martini, because that's what the classier customers at Don Lemuel's restaurant tended to order. I then tasted the

martini. It was awful. If broccoli was the devil's dung, then olive juice had to be his piss. I kept sipping though because I was a classy lady in-training, of course.

"How's Angel," I asked.

On instinct, Papi discreetly looked around him before he answered: "Angel and I aren't together anymore."

"What did you do?"

"Why did I have to be the one who did something wrong?"

I stared at him and pursed my lip.

"Alondra, you're going to college, but you're still too young to understand certain things."

"I'm old enough to understand why you wanted me to tell Mami that you had 'Angelis' in your life and not 'Angel.' "

Papi grew quiet at this. He looked around him again, then down at his perfectly clean hands. He drummed his fingers on the lacquered table. Those hands had never known a day of hard labor. That's what Mami used to say anyway.

"You're going to make an excellent lawyer" is all he finally sighed in response. He smiled with the lips and teeth he'd given me, his eyes scrunching like mine did when they were amused.

"I'm my father's daughter." I remember my voice sounding just like Mami's when I said this.

Papi and I both picked at our food for a bit, not really eager to eat. I was sipping some more from the devil's drink when he gave me the news.

"I'm thinking about moving to Nueva York."

I choked on my drink a little and knew that I could never, ever order it again. Papi handed me some napkins. They were the kind made especially for that restaurant, all black with a blue seashell over the top fold.

I managed to cough out a “When?”

“Well, you know, I’m waiting on a couple of offers. If all goes well, I might be leaving next month.”

“So you’re not ‘thinking’ about it then. You’re actually leaving. Is it because he left you?”

“...Sure.”

He grabbed my martini and started sipping from it. We both picked at our food some more. I wanted to whisper-yell at him, just like Mami had for the entire year before they finally got divorced. I rarely saw him now and he lived a few towns over, what did he think was going to happen now with him moving to the mainland? I wanted to remind him about the strange cancer that was affecting the homosexual men over there; I felt it wasn’t safe even though I barely understood what “being careful” meant when it came to those things. I wanted to tell him that I didn’t know him, and I knew so little about Mami, no matter how much attention I paid to what little actually came out of their mouths.

Even before he left Mami’s house, right when I turned twelve, he’d never really talked to me. He was what Mami called a “strong, silent type,” always gone for work. But with him out of the house, a deeper, thicker silence grew inside it. I wanted to ask --beg, even-- for him to put down that awful drink and the glossy wall that kept us apart, and just talk to me. I needed him to tell me why he didn’t like spending time with me, why he

voted pro-statehood, why he listened to jazz all the time, why he was gay, why Angel left him.

“Can I come visit?” was all I could ask.

“Of course! I’ll fly you first class.” I remember him double-winking at this, his eyelids folding just the way mine did.

“Well, you should take me to work now, I’d like to start my shift early.” I never wanted to start my shift early.

That night, at Don Lemuel’s, I accidentally spilled an entire glass of ice water on a German tourist’s torso. I could not control the tears. My face was hot, so hot, and apologetic.

“Sveet gihl, it’s only wateh!” Thankfully, he was one of the polite ones.

After making sure the German’s table was dry and he was covered in napkins and apologies, I retreated to the bathroom. I rolled a wad of toilet paper around my hand and cried into it, hard. What a stupid girl I was, crying over spilled water.

After a few minutes, I got myself together. I could hear Mami’s voice saying something about how she “always worked, even when sick.” So I had a shift to finish. I washed my face and rinsed all the bits of toilet paper out of my mouth. I looked at myself in the mirror. I saw then what I see to this day: my mother’s brown face and nose, and my father’s brown eyes and mouth and ears, all quietly staring back at me. I reapplied the pink lipstick Angel bought me for my birthday and fought the urge to start crying again.

Don Lemuel pulled me aside before the shift ended.

“You alright, Birdie?”

“Yes, Don Lemuel, I’m just worried about mid-terms. I’m really sorry about the water.”

“You’re a good student and a good Birdie: you always fly in a straight line,” he reassured me as he patted my shoulder.

What a nice man he was, Don Lemuel, but I never liked that saying about the bird that flew in a straight line. But that’s what I was back then, just another bird flapping its wings obediently, flying to who knew where and for what reason.

Mami picked me up after the shift. The radio was off.

“So your father’s moving to Nueva York.”

“Yeah. He said he’s waiting on some offers.” I tried my best to hide my sadness. Yes, that’s what it was, sadness.

“...Did Bonita leave him?”

“Angelis, and yeah, I think so. He wouldn’t say what happened.”

“What did she look like again?”

“...A little like you, actually.” In a strange way, it was true.

She stared at me, sharply.

“Mami, the road.”

She turned her attention back to the highway, almost missing the exit that took us to our neighborhood. Her breathing had become deliberate. I stared out the passenger side window as we passed streetlights interspersed with palm trees and flamboyanes. There were no reminders of anything needing to be done, or how, yes, I was college student, but I needed to stay humble and clean this and that when we got home.

Home. The \$100. It was still hiding in my sock drawer and I still didn't know what to do with it. I had dreamt about Marjorie every night since she asked me what I was, but she probably didn't give me a second thought after she left the restaurant. The name on my plate meant nothing to her. Her friend's payoff for her behavior was now probably a quiet story in their friendship's history.

Once home, I went into my bedroom and pulled the \$100 out, moving onto the bathroom and locking the door behind me. I stared at the bill, its initial elegance and promise now wrinkled, corrugated. I started to slowly tear at a corner. The tiny piece was shapeless and felt absurd, foreign in my hand. I then tore another piece, a bit faster that time.

As the two pieces rested on my fingertips, the urge to wash my hands became a commandment. I hadn't realized I'd torn the bill into dozens of other pieces until after I heard the toilet flush. I watched the tiny fortune, now reduced to tiny strips, drown in a strange dance. I didn't cry. I didn't really feel anything, just a slight pressure being taken off my chest. I was watching the last bits of the bill disappear into the water when a strong knock on the door brought me back to land.

"Did you eat fried food at the restaurant again? You should know better, you know what that does to your stomach."

I didn't answer her and just opened the door.

"Well?"

"I'm fine... I had to flush something."

Mami stared at me for a beat. "...Was that the \$100?"

Don Lemuel or Elena probably told her while she was waiting for me in the car that night. No point in lying now.

“Yes.”

“Why’d you do that.”

I told her why. I told her about Marjorie, and Marjorie’s blue everything, and Marjorie’s hand, and Marjorie’s friend. I told Mami how I made it a point to give them great service. How I didn’t want to mix the bill with the other tips I’d earned that week. I told her, simply and plainly. Talking about it tired me out, the same way that putting a nameplate with a name that wasn’t my own did.

“Hm.” Was all she said after I was done. She stared at me for a beat and then walked into the kitchen.

I stayed in the bathroom, not knowing what brand of punishment would come next.

“Come here,” she called from the kitchen.

I sighed and obeyed. *What now.*

On the kitchen counter were two highball glasses, each filled with Coca Cola and garnished with a lime. She handed me one.

“Let’s go to the front porch.”

I followed her. We sat on the rocking chairs abuela had given her as a wedding present. I held my glass with both hands. I’m sure there were streams of pure bewilderment on my face.

She finally spoke: “You’re a woman now.”

She prompted me to toast with her, which I did. I sipped from my glass and realized it wasn't just soda, but a Cuba Libre. The flavor of the dark Puerto Rican rum was fluid, serene. The carbonation from the soda contrasted nicely with the rum. It gave my throat a tickling burn. This was all coated with a light shade of citrus from the lime. It all made my taste buds beam. I really liked this drink. I liked it very much. To this day, it's my drink of choice.

I sipped from my drink whenever Mami did. The neighbors were playing the new record by El Gran Combo. We listened, in silence. That night, I also started to learn about how there are different types of silences. We rocked our chairs at the same pace, just like she and Aunt Gloria had after cousin Cito died.

## Frida's Daughter (Short Story)

by Myrta Vida

As Magdalena picks up the phone, she wishes her mother would die a horrible, terrible death. She thinks of ways this could happen and what she comes up with right now is an accidental fire that makes her mother choke on smoke as she slowly and painfully roasts to death. Then Magdalena fantasized about her mother sitting on the same bus with Frida Kahlo right before the trolley hit them.

Magdalena wishes her mother would have been sitting near the painter and had just happened to be in the way to break Frida's fall. Then her mother would be deader than dead after a bus cruncher that would have split all of her bones into two, even her skull and femur. Her mother would not have been able to cross North across the border and have Magdalena years later.

Magdalena hangs up the phone after asking for her mother's blessing. The least she can do to pretend to be a good Catholic girl is behave as such (and good Catholic girls ask their mothers for their blessing after a conversation). Magdalena stares at the phone, thinking about how much it would cost to replace it if she were to break it right now. She rubs her stomach, gently, and realizes her mother is just not worth another broken appliance.

Magdalena starts to look for things to do and gets ready for the next day: she slowly packs her books and lays out her clothes and one of her uniforms on the back of the love seat. It's one of the few pieces of furniture she's been able to afford thanks to the rent-to-own place. She thinks about how if she had a cat her pants would be covered in fur and dander. Magdalena doesn't have a cat. She can't afford one and they scare her

anyway. She would like a dog though. She misses having one around, but she'd need a house for it, or live in one of those fancy apartment complexes that allow pets.

Magdalena knows better, and dreaming that way gets old when you are poor. Magdalena then remembers she needs to make change so she can go to the laundromat soon. She also needs her mother to just drop dead.

After a late night shower, Magdalena brushes out her long, wet hair and sits on the corner of her love seat to watch PBS. There was a slow-paced and comforting documentary about black music on. Magdalena doesn't know much about black music and wants to learn. Maybe this will give her something else to talk about with Shawn.

Magdalena likes Shawn for a lot of reasons. It all started when he started complimenting her on her hair.

"That's some Indian hair you got, girl," Shawn usually tells her with a smile and a wink.

Magdalena can never think of how to respond and just smiles and looks down when he talks to her. Shawn also likes to sing when he's working. As she watches PBS, Magdalena thinks of Shawn's voice --how he sometimes hums tunes she doesn't recognize-- and she falls asleep on her love seat with the TV on.

Magdalena wakes up too early and her back hurts. The TV is playing local morning news. The black music is gone and has been replaced with happy white people dressed in suits. They are sitting in front of a picture of the Gateway Arch and Magdalena doesn't know their names. She goes to the kitchenette, takes her folic acid and a handful of other vitamins, and heats up some leftover nopalitos soup and dips in a couple of uncooked corn tortillas to soak up the broth. Magdalena likes nopales and tortillas. She

also likes enchiladas and flautas and tamales and chimichangas and chorizo-stuffed peppers, all with lots of queso blanco and salsa picante on top. Magdalena doesn't care for dessert though, but she's grateful to her ancestors and their cooking. In Magdalena's opinion, they clearly knew what they were doing. After she feels full and warm, she turns off the TV, rinses out her mouth, and goes into her tiny bedroom to lay down in her tiny bed for a tiny nap.

Magdalena showers again in the late morning, her hair up and hidden in a cap she took from one of the hotels where she's worked. After she neatly braids her hair into a fishtail, she puts on her clothes and packs up her uniform and a small cooler with food for the day. Magdalena takes the MetroLink while carrying her backpack, a bag of clothes, and the cooler. She does this every weekday, and on weekends her load is lighter because she only has to worry about changing from one uniform into the other.

Magdalena arrives at her stop and waits for an older lady who has as many bags as she does to limp off to the stop. A girl wearing giant braids piled on her young head walks over to the old lady.

“Hey, Momma Dee.”

“Hey, babygirl, how ya doing?”

Babygirl kisses Momma Dee on the cheek as her reply and they walk slowly and without stopping. Babygirl grabs two of Momma Dee's bags and swings them over her shoulder. They keep walking silently and Magdalena watches while she follows them at their same pace. She trails them until they have to turn left and Magdalena has to turn right to get to where she's going.

Magdalena likes nice people. Her mother is not nice. She's the opposite of nice and Magdalena hasn't missed her in a long, long time.

Magdalena wonders why her mother can't just fall off a cliff. Or better yet, *roll* down a hill on some skiing accident. Magdalena doesn't know why she's thinking about skiing, something her mother would never try, but still likes the idea of her falling down along the side of a steep and rocky mountain covered with cold, cold snow. Every bone in her mother's body would break and she'd still be conscious through most of it. Her mother could then fall into a cave in the middle of the mountain and she wouldn't be found until years and years later, dead and frozen. Magdalena doesn't like the cold and knows her mother doesn't like it either. Magdalena thinks this would be a fair way for her mother to die.

Magdalena walks up to the university. She's been going to school for about nine years now. Once Magdalena was able to start alternating between her two cleaning jobs, she was able to take two, sometimes three classes at a time instead of just one. That's when Magdalena really started to like school, even though doing homework always tires her out. Mr. Coleman, a really nice black teacher who always looked exhausted, told her that she needed to take at least two classes at a time and get some loans or something, or she'd be going to school for 30 years. Magdalena didn't want to go to school for 30 years, so she got some loans and has been working really hard on her homework. If all goes well, Magdalena will finally graduate in a couple of months.

After class, Magdalena changes into her uniform at school and goes to work. She stares down the hall at Shawn. He has a back brace just like she used to; he is swift and thorough when he moves. Magdalena's back aches more than usual tonight. She winces

every time she has to reach to pick up a tiny trashcan to empty its contents into a larger one. After each reach, she slowly moves her long braid from her shoulder to her back. It used to bother Magdalena when her braid crept up like that on her, but not anymore. Not since Shawn complimented her on it.

Tonight Shawn doesn't talk to her. Magdalena finds out from Lejla and Trinisha that he had to leave early because something happened to one of his sons. Shawn has pictures of his sons on his keychain. One of them, Ty, is Magdalena's age, but she doesn't care. Magdalena worries about Shawn and wonders which one of his sons, Ty or Lil' Shawn, is sick or in trouble. Magdalena wishes she knew more about Shawn. Sometimes she wishes for this more than for her mother's death.

Magdalena is in a sour mood when she gets home. She likes the sound of Shawn's voice and his easy laugh. She misses him and wishes he'd ask her out again for a beer. Magdalena doesn't usually drink because it's a reminder of when her mother would get drunk. Magdalena can't really be drinking now anyway. In class, she learned all about birth defects and disorders and a bunch of other nasty and sad things. Still, she'd like to have a beer with Shawn again and listen to him say nice things and talk about his sons. She smiles at this and her phone rings. Magdalena's smile disappears.

"Hola Madre, how are you?"

"You didn't send me the amount we talked about. You work like a man, so you're making man-money."

Magdalena looks down at her belly after she hears this.

"So? Where's the rest?"

“Madre, that’s all I could send, they cut back my hours.” Magdalena lies to her mother. She’s been lying to her for some time now and doesn’t feel bad about it.

“...Are you still fat?” her mother sighs.

“Just as fat as I was last week.” This time, Magdalena isn’t lying.

“You’re wasting my time.”

“You called *me*, Madre.”

“You know it’s a sin to talk back.”

“Bendición, Madre.” Magdalena hangs up after her mother gives her the customary blessing.

Magdalena wishes her mother would go on a camping trip. She knows that there are bear attacks over there, back in Virginia. Magdalena knows that if you curl up in a ball, black bears won’t attack you. But grizzly bears don’t care. She learned that from watching PBS. Grizzly bears will eat half of you as soon as they find you and save the rest as a snack for later. Magdalena wishes a grizzly bear would smash the tent her mother would be camping in and eat her arms and save the rest for later. If the grizzly bear was a girl, she could give the rest of Magdalena’s mother to her cubs. That would be a noble thing.

Magdalena turns away from the phone and looks at *The Two Fridas* poster she has on the wall behind her love seat. She bought it around the same time she started school. Magdalena steps closer to the poster and traces her finger along the artery that connects the heart from the Frida on the left to the Frida on the right. Magdalena stares at both Fridas’ eyebrows and wonders how a woman with so much facial hair could be so very pretty.

Magdalena turns on the TV and flips from channel to channel. She is not really in the mood to watch anything; she just wants to hear other people's voices. As she flips through the channels, she catches a re-run of *Simplemente Maria*. It's one of Magdalena's favorite telenovelas.

Magdalena remembers wanting to watch the telenovelas growing up, but her mother wouldn't let her. Magdalena would steal glances when she could, and she could see that there was art all over the walls of the rich people's mansions, some of it by Frida. One time her mother caught her peeking from her bedroom door at the TV and hit her harder than usual over the head. Then she accidentally broke Magdalena's arm, to teach her a lesson.

"Telenovelas are for girls. You're *not* a girl!" her mother would say.

Magdalena just wanted to see the tiny, pretty people living in their huge, pretty houses. As she remembers this, Magdalena pumps some coconut lotion from a giant bottle she bought with the help of some coupons, lifts her top, and slowly rubs her stomach and underbelly. She stares at the pretty people on the TV, speaking a language she remembers in threadbare strips.

Magdalena sees Shawn at work the next day. He catches her staring at him and she immediately looks away. As quickly as her back pain will allow her, she ducks into an office she's already cleaned and waits for a minute. When she walks out, Shawn's by the door, taking quick peeks around and behind him. He then gives Magdalena a good look up and down. She's startled and her brown face turns deep red.

"Oh-lah, Magda-girl, how ya doin' baby."

"Fine, thank you... And you?"

“Doin’ good, doin’ good. Doin’ my thin’, ya know?”

Magdalena nods in return.

“So how’s school comin’ along?” Shawn is so nice.

“Good... A lot of reading.”

“You still studying nursing?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Magda, baby, just call me Shawn.” He smiles.

Magdalena’s face turns magenta. Shawn’s the only one who doesn’t call her by her full name. “...I transferred from the community college to the university.”

“I know, I remember.”

“...So-uh, is your son, um, ok?”

Shawn’s smile fades and turns into an expression Magdalena can’t quite read.

“Well. You know how kids are.”

Magdalena nods even though she doesn’t know what he means yet. Shawn looks at her again, searching, probably finding something. Magdalena’s convinced her face has now gone from magenta to purple.

“So-uh, what were you just singing to?” She looks up to see his face and is able to hold Shawn’s gaze for a few seconds. He stares back for a minute, waiting for her to say something else.

“Well, anythin’ an’ everythin’. I like the old stuff, the good stuff, you know?”

Magdalena nods. “...You know, I-uh don’t really know.”

Shawn laughs. “Well, that one was Bobby Bland.”

Magdalena nods again. “Bobby Bland.”

“Yeah girl, Bobby “Blue” Bland. His stuff just *speaks* to you.”

Magdalena is happy when she gets home from work that night. She wishes her apartment would smell like Shawn again, that smell of a hard-working, nice man and his cologne. Magdalena really hates that Shawn’s wife decided to go back home. That was an awkward conversation, especially since Magdalena was about to give Shawn the good news. Now she can’t find the right time to tell him, even though she really wants to and could use a little help with the clinic’s bills.

Magdalena picks up the Ray Charles cd she bought right after the first time Shawn spent the night. After the music starts to play in her tiny boom box, she shimmies to the remote, turns on the TV, and mutes it. She heats up a couple of leftover flautas. They are soggy and the queso blanco she’s poured on top makes them soggier. She stabs her soggy food with a fork and wonders why her mother hasn’t been stabbed yet. After all, she lives in one of the worst parts of Richmond.

Magdalena doesn’t miss Virginia. She left as soon as she could, mostly because she didn’t really have a reason to stay. She only had one nice foster family out of all the houses the state made her move to and from. The Muszynskis, Mr. John and Miss Maggie, were so very nice and they had a Basset Hound, Mr. Bob-Bob. Magdalena would let Mr. Bob-Bob into her bedroom at night. She lift him onto her bed because Mr. Bob-Bob was heavy and clumsy. Magdalena would then hug him and he’d sleep by her feet. The other foster kids didn’t care much for Mr. Bob-Bob because they didn’t want to clean up after him, but Magdalena didn’t mind doing those things.

The Muszynskis were the sixth and last family Magdalena had lived with after the state had taken her from her mother. Back then, Magdalena didn’t really understand why

she had to start wearing girl clothes and pick a new name until Miss Maggie actually explained it all to her. All Magdalena remembers is that she didn't like the smell in the boys' bathroom, but liked that she could dress like them and play with them. Playing with dolls always seemed pointless to Magdalena because they all had blond hair with a curl at the ends and pink cheeks, and Magdalena didn't look like any of them.

One of the third grade teachers, Miss Bauer, accidentally spilled some red watercolor paint on Magdalena's favorite overalls, the green ones, and took her to the boys' room. Miss Bauer had scrubbed the green overalls and was squeezing them dry when she stared below Magdalena's waist.

“Diego, sweetie... d-do you go pee standing up?”

Miss Bauer was blinking very hard when she asked. Her eyes opened wide when Magdalena told her that she'd grow a manstick and be able to pee standing up soon. Magdalena was very calm when she said these things, because that's what her mother had told her.

“Where is my son? Is he ok?”, Magdalena's mother asked when she'd finally arrived at the school later that day. Magdalena noticed a lady she hadn't seen before at her school, Miss Thompson, and how she and a police officer went into the principal's office after Magdalena's mother. Magdalena had to wait outside the principal's office while the school nurse, Miss Rodríguez, rubbed her back and kept telling her that it was going to be ok, it was going to be ok. Miss Rodríguez couldn't stop shaking her head though. Magdalena heard her mother crying, loudly, in the principal's office. Then, Miss Thompson came out of the room and took Magdalena away.

Later, Magdalena had been told: “Guess what? You get to pick a new name, a girl’s name!”

“Why? I like my name.”

Magdalena listens to Ray Charles sing about the nighttime being the right time. She remembers that time Shawn told her she wasn’t ugly. They were lying on her tiny bed after he’d let out his deep sigh. She was resting her head on his arm and playing with the graying hair on his chest, the curls tiny and tight. He was slowly running his hand up and down her hair, reaching down and kissing her head from time to time.

“Girl, you sure got a pretty face” he said as he started to fall asleep.

“...Thank you. I think you’re very handsome.”

He laughed and smelled her hair.

“Magda, baby, let me ask you something. Why are you always looking down?”

“I-uh don’t know.”

Shawn had been quiet for a long time after her answer. Magdalena was startled when he spoke again, because she thought he’d fallen asleep.

“Girl, you don’t have no reason to feel pity for yourself. So what if you big. Like, half the people in this damn country is big.”

Magdalena tried to breathe slowly. She wanted to let Shawn’s scent linger in her memory.

“Listen: You a pretty brown girl, you work hard, and you know just what to do with a man. Pity’s for fools, you hear me.”

“Yes, sir.”

Shawn laughed again and trailed off. Magdalena looked up to watch his mouth snuffle.

Magdalena smiles, thinking about Shawn. Then the phone rings. She gets up from the love seat and turns off Ray Charles's voice. She doesn't want his music to be tainted by the memory of a conversation with her mother.

"Hola Madre, how-"

"You know I need more money and lying to your mother is a sin."

Magdalena sighs. Magdalena listens to her mother complain about how broke and sick and tired she is. Everything is Magdalena's fault: the cruelty of the world, being brown, being a woman, the doctor snipping her without her permission after giving birth to her one and only child, that child being a girl, and that girl being Magdalena.

"Madre, did you just call to yell at me?"

"Estúpida, do you have any idea what I had to go through to make sure you were born in this country?"

Magdalena sighs again. She really hates this woman. Magdalena gets it: it's not the right thing to feel and her mother's sick. She's just so sick and sad in the head. Magdalena read all about it in school. But she just really, truly loathes her mother. Magdalena regrets the day she finally found her and started talking to her again. She just had to have answers about her time as Diego. Her mother would always change the subject, admonishing her for made up sins. Magdalena feels like a fool.

"Madre... Madre! I'm hanging up now."

Magdalena hangs up without asking for her mother's blessing. The phone rings again several times and Magdalena gets up from the love seat and takes the cord out of

the wall. She stares at the phone, wanting to pretend that it's her mother's head and just smash it. Smash it! Or put it in the microwave, hit the popcorn setting and see what happens.

Magdalena rubs her belly with one hand and puts the toneless phone back on its hook with the other. She needs to keep saving every penny she can get her hands on. If she's going to pay for something it better be something she really needs, or that at least makes her happy.

Magdalena wakes up the next day tired, again. Thankfully, it's one of the rare Saturdays she has off from work. She can go to the mall for a few hours to look at the pretty things. She takes a long, long shower and washes her long, long hair gently. She brushes it out slowly and decides to leave it down.

She takes the MetroLink and slowly walks from her stop to the Galleria. She likes this mall because it looks like the church the Muszynskis used to go to. Magdalena walks slowly, wishing she could just sit down already, but Dr. Washington, the lady doctor at the clinic, told her she needed to exercise.

Magdalena keeps walking, the pain on her back keeps her from looking up to try and stare at the people hurrying past her. Then she sees the bookstore. She goes to the Art section and walks over to browse through the Frida Kahlo books, even the ones she already owns. She finds one of those comfortable chairs that make a noise like plastic wrap when you sit on them and lowers herself slowly. She likes how the books smell when she opens them. She flips through the pages slowly, her mouth half open as she breathes through it. She decides to buy a new Frida book.

Magdalena waits in line to pay and sees that the woman in front of her has a pile of children's books in her arms. Magdalena tries to recognize if some of the books are the same as the ones the Muszynskis would read to her and the other foster kids. Before Magdalena can see them clearly, the lady's called to a newly opened register. Her hair is in a high ponytail tied up with a bright red ribbon. What a nice lady, her children must be nice too.

When it's her turn to pay, Magdalena pays cash. Walking out, her back hurts again. She moves slowly, as usual, back to the MetroLink station. She sits on a bench to wait for her train and takes the Frida book out of the plastic bag. Magdalena stares at Frida's eyes and the eyes stare back at Magdalena. She traces the curve of Frida's thick eyebrows with her finger, back and forth, back and forth.

## Implosion at Siete Pecados Bridge (Novel)

by Myrta Vida

### Misa de las Ánimas

Saturnino had just shot his late afternoon savory juice into his arm when he saw the Siete Pecados Bridge collapse. Half a dozen cars went with it into the eponymous river. He thought he was having a bad trip, a really bad one, until he saw the news the next day on his neighbor's TV. Well, ain't that the luck: now he'd have to go find another quiet, unbothered corner to shoot happy juice into his arm, at least until the mess at the bridge was sorted out. Saturnino was pissed. Pissed! Man, fuck those people, didn't they know better than to take that old ass bridge to begin with?

The Siete Pecados Bridge had been built in the 50's with gringo money as a gesture of good faith towards the newly acquired Puerto Ricans. After the Jones Act had passed, the tiny island was still technically, unofficially, sort of, but not quite, part of Gringoland. These conquering heroes, of course, took issue. As we all know, capitalists don't like not owning things.

After the Jones Act gave the 'Rican U.S. citizenship, all the way back to 1917, '52 came and it was a good year for the gringos. The islanders chose to be a part of the great empire in exchange for tourism money. Guess the locals figured their island should run with the gringos, who had the good manners to pretend they were part of a democracy, or else: being stuck like the nearby islands with a Batista, or a Trujillo, or whoever was running the mess that was becoming Haiti. Whatever the reasons, Puerto Rico was locked in as the great empire's mistress and the Siete Pecados Bridge was one of many fake diamond bracelets given to soothe the sexy, ignorant locals.

The bridge was initially built with shitty wood slabs, even shittier steel, and cement that could have benefitted from a better milling process. It wasn't that the locals didn't care about their cement: you need a good, strong house when you get slammed with half a dozen tropical storms and hurricanes a year. But the gringos wanted to cut costs and corners: anything that would get in the way of meeting the bottom line. So the bridge was built on a semi-decent well foundation, with a superstructure that only passed inspection due to some half-hearted palm-greasing.

The structure was suspended about twenty or so feet from the river. That was about the standard for most unnavigable bridges. It spanned the length of about seven to nine cars, with one lane on each side divided by yellow lines that only got repainted during election years. Massive chunks of the girder had already been quietly resting at the bottom of the Siete Pecados River for years, never to be dredged up, or repurposed, or properly disposed of. The water was inexplicably cold as well, too cold for a fat stream in a tropical island. It was part of the reason why the river, once a worship site for the original inhabitants --the Taínos-- had turned as murky as the Thames.

Because of this, uh, problematic infrastructure, parts of the bridge had collapsed twice already. The victims' families and some of the survivors sued the Puerto Rican government, which pointed fingers to the gringos, but --as per usual-- not much came of it. A few thousand dollars were quietly handed out to the quieter survivors. Oh, and some attractive girl, the middle daughter of a man who had been crushed by a fruit truck that fell directly on him as he tried to crawl out of his semi-submerged car, was given a job at a local channel as a weathergirl. Weather woman. Weather person. Whatever.

Sometime in the '60s, the bridge had been rebuilt and remodeled, sort of. This happened after a rich kid had been elected mayor of one of the towns it connected. After that, the governing bodies for those towns didn't really pay much attention to it because there had been no more collapses, so why even bother. That and the gringo tourists knew better than to drive across it.

Only locals who were running late for work or school or church or the club or their booty call were ballsy enough to take it. It did, after all, save a good fifteen minutes' worth of driving and you didn't have to take the always-congested highway around the Siete Pecados River's source. This trippy and tricky decade, the '70s, proved no different for anyone in a rush. In fact, most people welcomed any available shortcuts to pretty much anything.

In his drug-induced smog, Saturnino wasn't sure which car had fallen with the bridge and into the river first. He did see an athletic-looking girl climb out of a white car and walk herself on top of some of the other vehicles until a dark hand grabbed her ankle, almost making her fall into the water. The athletic girl steadied herself, knelt and grabbed a tiny hand that had appeared out of nowhere under the car's top. The tiny hand was also dark and, slowly, a child, a boy, emerged.

Then the car gave birth to another child, a girl, and the athletic girl held onto both kids until a woman, a dark-skinned amazon, emerged from the vehicle. The woman grabbed the boy from the athletic girl and together the women, each with a child holding on tightly to their chests, navigated the tops of the cars until they had to jump into the water and swim onto the side of the shore that was closest to Saturnino.

He also saw a blonde woman get cut real bad on some glass she hadn't been able to clear out of the way, and a man that looked like a turtle trying desperately and unsuccessfully to hang onto something, anything, after he'd been able to wiggle his way out of his car. Saturnino was even more confused when he saw that no one emerged out of the only truck that was part of the mess.

Saturnino also saw the last car that had fallen in. It was a Cadillac Eldorado, a nice-looking one. The man inside it had been driving with his windows down, probably to save money on gas. Lord knows if you drove one of them guzzlers by a gas station their gas tank would start screaming for a refill, like babies without a tit to suck on. The guy crawled out of his window, carefully, because he had a briefcase and what looked like a suit jacket in his hand.

That man's car wasn't really part of the fuckery that fell in the water. His falling in was more of an afterthought on the bridge's part. He was able to climb on top of his now not-so-nice looking Eldorado, briefcase in hand, and strongly swim to the river's muddy shore. He sat down, staring out into the river and the mess that was taking place. He was shaking, rocking back and forth, and holding onto the briefcase like it was the baby Jesus himself. Saturnino was riding the warmth from his tangy juice as he stared at the man and his nice clothes, now wet and covered in mud and muck from the river.

*Eh, he... He doesn't look like a bad guy.*

Saturnino was right: Sebastián was not a bad man. He was just gay.

## Lujuria (Chapter 1)

Yeah, yeah, Sebastián cared about his wife and his daughter and all that, but now he longed for a certain man's touch. That was a problem in then 1970's Puerto Rico.

Sebastián was running late for a work meeting that Tuesday afternoon. Running late was unacceptable, not just to Sebastián, but to the gringos he worked with. The law firm was equal parts high-strung gringos and high-strung locals who had graduated from Stanford or Harvard or some fancy schmancy school in Mexico or Argentina. Being high-strung, even in that career field, made no sense: they were all living in an island. In the Caribbean. Sebastián was no exception though, and it'd gotten worse after William, not Bill, called him into his office.

William, not Bill, was not a remarkable-looking man. It's probably why no one questioned why he hadn't settled down with some local gold digger yet. He wasn't that tall and the balding pattern that was taking place made his head look like a fuzzy, chestnut-colored stadium. He was fit from the daily runs he took. Good for him. But, apart from his somewhat cut physique and his meticulously kept wardrobe, the man was just not much to look at.

Some months before the Siete Pecados Bridge collapsed, William, not Bill, took notice of Sebastián. It was at a partners' meeting. William, not Bill, noticed the way Sebastián sat on his chair, the way he took notes, the way he nodded, the way he drank his coffee, the way he laughed at some other partner's sexist ass joke. Sebastián, it seemed, was wearing some invention's skin. He was pretending to be someone else. And

that's when William, not Bill, knew that Sebastián was keeping the same little secret. It takes one to know one?

Anyway, William, not Bill, had a carefully crafted excuse to call Sebastián into his office late on a Friday. William, not Bill, closed and locked the door behind him, stood on his tippy toes, put his hands on Sebastián's face, and kissed him with the same passion that Saint Agnes had for chastity. Sebastián froze. This behavior was irrational. Chaotic. Forbidden.

William, not Bill, stepped back. He didn't stop kissing Sebastián though: he just slowed down. He started to touch as much as he could of Sebastián through his clothes. He drank in the scent of Sebastián's workday, equal parts paperwork and ink, all mixed with a couple of swigs from the vodka everyone kept in the bottom drawer of their desks. He stared at Sebastián, who hadn't blinked the entire time he was being touched.

William, not Bill, leaned in for another kiss. Sebastián started to shake. The thick trunk of the tree he'd been sustaining all these years was being tugged at by a power he didn't understand and suddenly couldn't control. William, not Bill, opened Sebastián's mouth with his again, this time more gently. The tree started to rock, back and forth, some force of nature now determined to yank it by its roots. Slowly, Sebastián started to kiss William, not Bill, back. He started to move his hands, mimicking the way William, not Bill, was touching him. Then Sebastián closed his eyes and lightning struck that carefully tended tree down, splitting it in half, burning it all the way down to its roots.

Both of their suits were on the floor. Then they were both on the floor, with William, not Bill, on top. Sebastián moved clumsily, but eagerly. He acquiesced to

William, not Bill. On that office floor, Sebastián understood. He knew simply and profoundly, between the pain and the pleasure, why some men are afraid to die.

He was also finally able to articulate to himself, while kissing William, not Bill, why he could only bring himself to touch his wife once, maybe twice a month, especially after more swigs from the vodka he kept in the bottom drawer of the desk in his home office. Ain't that funny, how those who are smartest about the world can be so estupe when it comes to their damn selves.

After that Friday meeting, Sebastián needed more, more, more of William, not Bill: the strength of his legs, the smell of his aftershave, the fuzzy stadium of hair that covered his average-looking head. Sebastián started to make up excuses at home about having to work during the weekend. Some big case, he said. He started to miss his daughter's volleyball games on Saturday mornings, church with the family on Sundays, dinners on weeknights.

His wife Antonia, ever the pragmatist, just stopped preparing an extra plate of food for dinner altogether. What could she do? He said he was working. She wanted to know what was really going on, of course. She wanted to know, but asking would have upset the order of things and Antonia could live like this for a while. If this "case" was consuming him so, the "work" with the "case" was likely to burn out. Those types of "work situations" always did.

Like many marriages, Sebastián's relationship with his wife was one built on their shared solitudes. They liked each other well enough, agreed on most things, and had similar goals for their lives. They met at Antonia's senior prom, where Sebastián's most grotesque cousin had brought him as her date. Antonia, along with half the girls on the

gym floor, immediately noticed Sebastián: he was tall, classically handsome, and very well dressed. The fact that he had allowed himself to be seen in public –and even dance-- with his intensely unattractive cousin made him a candidate for sainthood right there and then.

Antonia, who had shown up alone and was wearing a modest forest green dress she had made herself, made it a point to make eye contact with Sebastián several times that night. But did not smile at him and did not approach him. Sebastián instantly liked that about her. He liked serious girls. He liked serious people, period. It's why he was so fond of gringos, they didn't have time to flirt or engage with island nonsense.

As prom night was coming to a close, Sebastián went to the restroom to escape the stares from the horny girls and jealous guys. He also needed a break from pretending to have a good time and from staring at his cousin's face. That poor girl: her face was a half-cooked ham omelet, with an upper lip that was way fatter than the lower one. One of her shoulders was smaller and droopier than the other and her potbelly stuck out further than her tits. I mean, what the fuck? Who looks like that?

Anyway, Sebastián's pockets were about to overflow from napkins and strips of paper with names and phone numbers written on them. He had no idea how half of them had even gotten there.

Sebastián walked out of the restroom and caught a glimpse of Antonia's serious face. He decided to walk up to her. As she saw him approach, she stood her ground. Both made eye contact the entire time Sebastián walked over to her. It could be described as a romantic moment, if only either of them actually believed in romantic love. That stuff

was for tortured souls and poor people. Ain't nobody got time for that, especially not those two.

Sebastián decided he liked Antonia's face. Her forehead, her eyes, her nose, and her lips were all placed exactly where they were supposed to go. Her hair was long and straight, probably from having been ironed out in an effort to dissuade unwanted curls from jumping back into place. Her small chest and sylphlike hips were partnered with a simple waistline. Her skin was clean and clear and the color of Goya honey. It was her best feature. There simply was nothing fussy about this woman. She was made for no nonsense.

"I'm Sebastián."

"I'm Antonia."

"Want to dance?"

"What about your date?"

"She'll be fine."

"Okay, one song."

And so it started, their relationship. They talked on the phone everyday after that night, not for long, mind you. Their conversations were maybe 20 minutes long each. They agreed on the movies they would go see, the restaurants they would try afterwards, the things they were in the mood to order. They talked about the importance of hard work and saving money. And then they would quickly, without sentiment, hang up the phone.

Then, naturally, they started to see each other more and more. They talked about how important it was to own a home by age 30 and how cars should be bought new to help the economy. They talked about how marriage was a partnership between two

people, not some meeting of two souls. They talked about how God probably wasn't too bad of a guy and how it was important to go to church and raise kids in the church, too.

The first time Sebastián kissed Antonia, he placed his hands on the small of her back and leaned in slowly towards her. That's how the telenovelas showed it was done. She placed her arms on his shoulders and kissed him back. There were no chills or butterflies or little chupacabras jumping around in their stomachs. Yeah, it felt nice. A mutual kiss always does. Afterwards they looked at each other, smiled dryly, and kissed again. That's what people did after the first kiss, right? Even kissing was an uncomplicated affair for them.

Sometime after their wedding, a simple but elegant ceremony held in the Catedral de San Juan, Sebastián walked into Antonia's sewing room. He asked her, plainly, if they needed to do it all the time, like all the salsa songs were crooning about lately. Sebastián was getting sick of it, hearing about men wanting to bury themselves into the tiny waists of nameless women who were oh so fine. Damn, were they fine. These women just needed to take their clothes off, wherever they were: in the park, the museum, the airport, right then and there, just drop those clothes off those hot little bodies and let the lead singers bite their belly buttons and show them just how they felt about them. Mm-mm-mm, man. Those were the days. It was the rise of "salsa sensual."

Sebastián stopped listening to 93.7 FM, La Zeta!!!, and set the radio in his Cadillac Eldorado to the Latin jazz station. No words, no sex, no thinking, just the clean sounds of the piano, base, and xylophone. Sometimes, the jazz station got adventurous and played something with a flute in it. An improvised cha-cha with some faint bongos playing in the background started to make more sense to Sebastián than the highly

orchestrated sounds that accompanied those salsa songs, the ones that encouraged hot hot hot women to think about the lead singer and touch themselves in their hibiscus garden, make themselves feel good, real goood, wherever they were: be it the grocery store, their mami's house, or waiting in line at the DMV.

Antonia, sitting with a half-threaded needle in her hand, considered Sebastián's question for a minute.

"No, not really. We don't really need to be those people."

She regretted it the second she said it, even though she meant it: she didn't want to be like those people who wake up in the middle of night 'cause the urge of Santa Magdalena just bit them. Those were the kind of people who'd toss and turn all night, like her old neighbors did, and walked around like satisfied zombies in the morning. No, sir. Things needed to get done and Antonia wasn't about to do them on no sleep.

Besides, she could tell when it was going to happen and liked knowing that. Usually on a Friday night, Sebastián would compliment her on another delicious meal. He'd look at the calendar, then sit on their tasteful navy blue couch to watch TV while Antonia pattered in the kitchen. As the noises from the kitchen slowed down and became less frequent, like the last seconds of a popcorn bag being microwaved, Sebastián would go wash his hands and brush his teeth. When Antonia emerged from the kitchen, he'd gently grab her by the hand and lead her to the bedroom.

They knew where to throw their clothes and where to put their hands and how to spread their legs to make it happen. They moved a bit, kissed a bit, listened to each other's breaths while they held each other. No talk, no eye-contact, just some mild swaying. They just weren't those kinds of people. Their rituals in bed reminded Antonia

of those old bolero singers who were once famous but were now relegated to performing in bars and casinos. They sang well-known songs because it was what they were being paid to do, just good enough to not piss off the audience.

It wasn't that Antonia was unhappy. God had been good to her and blessed her with a man who was clean, organized, nice-looking, hardworking. Sebastián didn't have unrealistic notions about what the world was. Just like her, he saw the world for what it was: a ridiculous mess. Order was desperately needed. Order, only order, was the way to deal with it.

Antonia wondered, though. Through the years, she wondered if less sex was a way to bring about more order to their lives. Just as she thinking about maybe, perhaps saying something, their daughter somehow find a way to crawl her way into her belly.

After their daughter was born, Sebastián went from touching Antonia once or twice a week, to once or twice a month. Antonia was fine with it for a while. But then... Even though she didn't particularly care to have her husband, as handsome as he was, panting quietly on top of her for twenty minutes or so every other day, the infrequency of their forced intimacy irritated her.

Antonia looked at herself in the mirror, realizing that she looked fine, just fine, for someone who had pushed a tiny human being out of her. Her skin was still nothing but liveness and honey, her face was organized, her hair was shiny and pressed down. She always made it a point to change out of the housedress she was wearing for the day into something decent –usually something she'd made-- right after she cooked dinner, around the time Sebastián usually came home.

She also made sure to wash her face and brush her teeth. She'd spray the tomillo-infused water on the house's corners. Their house was spotless, their garden was the envy of their street, the child she'd given him was brilliant and well cared for, and Antonia was still a clean and attractive woman. She had done her part in this partnership. Why was Sebastián suddenly adding chaos to their perfect order?

She turned to the most discreet deacon at their church for advice and made Sebastián come in for couple's counseling for some weeks.

"Nothing's wrong, I'm just one of those people who is not into, you know, that" Sebastián would say every time. "Antonia knows how I feel about her... Plus I'm busy at work. So busy, so busy. These gringos, you know, if you don't work your backside like a mula tuerta, they'll brand you as lazy."

Of course, nothing really changed: Sebastián just made it a point to hug Antonia and their daughter every morning and every night. Slowly, quietly, Antonia decided to resign herself to the fact that some women are meant to have it all, and God was simply giving her exactly what she needed to survive. Then, Sebastián started to work longer hours, then every weekend as well, until he was nothing but the specter of a roommate in their home.

Antonia waited it out. She sewed and tended to her house and her child. She didn't really know what else to do. It was either she keep calm and quiet and let Sebastián at least keep his shit together at work, or start demanding answers and putting pressures that may manifest themselves at his firm. She had a child to think about, after all, and Sebastián was their provider. It was what they had agreed on.

Antonia also waited it out because that's what the decent wives did in the telenovelas. Just like their fictitious husbands, she just knew Sebastián would soon get bored with all the "work" he was doing lately. She wondered who it was Sebastián was "working" so much with. Although his hot ass secretary would have been the obvious choice, for some reason, some nagging, irrational reason, Antonia wasn't so sure. So she thought of what to ask as a present for when he returned. When they came back, repentant and humbled, the husbands in the telenovelas usually gave their wives a trip somewhere or some new furniture.

As his "work load" progressed, Sebastián and William, not Bill, talked about how they should proceed in order to not raise any suspicions.

"We have to sit on opposite sides of the room during the weekly partners' meeting."

"We have to keep small talk to a minimum and only talk about professional and manly things."

"Yes, manly things."

William, not Bill, suddenly started to pay a little bit more attention to the sports the locals liked: baseball, basketball, boxing. If either Sebastián or William, not Bill, was going to a firm-sponsored event, the other either had to stay home or make sure they had minimal contact. Sebastián, of course, had to make damn sure to bring his family to the events he could attend.

At work, when they saw each other across the hallway or in the restroom, they had to avoid eye contact altogether. And they definitely avoided working on a case

together, at all costs. They didn't want people catching on to anything, nothing, nothing, about them.

The night the Siete Pecados Bridge collapsed, Sebastián was running late from the office to meet William, not Bill, at the motel they had picked for the evening. Sebastián looked forward to touching William, not Bill, really touching his skin with his own, feeling his sweat on him, his breath, the same anxious desire reciprocated as they moved from one position to another.

Sebastián had filled his briefcase with relevant papers and the escapulario of the Virgen de la Candelaria his mother had given him after he passed the bar exam. He said goodnight to his hot ass secretary and jumped into his car. He did a little shimmy as he turned the car on. He couldn't wait. Right now, waiting to see William, not Bill, was a punishment from Satanás himself.

Sebastián's Cadillac Eldorado was looking pretty slick from having been washed that morning by the firm's errand boys. And he was looking spiffy, in a blue shirt he knew William, not Bill, liked on him and his newest charcoal Armani suit. He took off his suit jacket and draped it on the passenger seat. His tie was set with a golden pin that had the Gringo flag on one side and the Puerto Rican one on the other. It was one of the many presents he got from the firm the week he'd made partner. He was looking sharper than a new machete's blade. The sweat that came from the anticipation of seeing his lover, and living in a island in the fucking Caribbean, made him turn his windows down to have the breeze help keep the shirt from staining.

As the Latin jazz station played a live recording of "Guachi Guara," Sebastián decided to take the old bridge. Waiting any longer was turning his torso into a pool of

perspiration. The ache that was growing in his groin and pushing up against his zipper was passing the point of mere discomfort. Taking the bridge would at least put him fifteen minutes closer to William, not Bill, and his strong body, his guided touch, his kisses. That meant fifteen more minutes of paradise.

Their exchanges were filled with noises and talk and touch but, mostly, each other. Sebastián always felt as if he had expended every calorie in his body after being with William, not Bill. It was everything that Sebastián had never allowed himself to be exposed to, all for the sake of good decency and common sense. There was a chaos to it all: the sneaking, the pretending, the touching –especially the touching-- Sebastián didn't know he'd enjoy down to the marrow.

He thought, he always thought he'd never be one of those men who just ached for someone else's body. That sort of thing had read like pure nonsense to him. It's why Sebastián didn't like literature and stuck to reading biographies. But William, not Bill, and their affair were Sebastián's chattels now. They were all his, sweet and intense, constantly and consistently.

Sebastián had already driven halfway through the bridge, and readjusted himself in his seat to see if that would help ease the pressure on his crotch. He heard the cracking and screeching of giant nails on a giant chalkboard. Then he heard what sounded like the deafening crash of waves on Tres Palmas Beach. Soon after, there were human wails and screams.

He looked in front of him and the cars that were on the opposite lane of his stopped suddenly, backing into each other. A hippie in a yellow polo shirt and bellbottoms got off his motorcycle and made a run for it back towards the road.

That's when Sebastián looked through his rearview mirror, and saw that there was no bridge left behind him. He stepped on the gas and would have made it, had the car not been a goddamn Cadillac Eldorado. His car became a damn huge steel and aluminum trap. Parts of the bridge were already collapsing under him and the cars on the opposite lane were not longer at eye level.

Before Sebastián understood what was happening, the Cadillac dropped several feet into the Siete Pecados River. The impact made his head hit the back of his seat, then his steering wheel, and then right back into his seat, much like a maniacal water bird. Blood starting spilling from his head, and Sebastián felt he could only breathe from one side of his body. The water from the river poured in. It was cold, so freezing cold, against his perspiring skin. His groin shriveled into his pelvis.

With shaky hands, Sebastián took off his seatbelt. He ignored the pain that was taking over, all over, but especially on his right side. His left arm had bounced hard on the car door when the car landed on the water, sending wasp stings into his shoulder and torso. On instinct, he grabbed the suitcase and the suit jacket with his right hand, and tried to open the car door. It wouldn't budge.

The briefcase and jacket still in hand, he slowly and shakily pulled his ass out of the opened window and onto the top of the driver's side door. He turned his torso towards the Cadillac's hard top, the pain making him bawl. Sebastián wiped at his face and saw wet and blood. He couldn't afford to panic, not even with all the screams around him. He needed to think about the steps needed in proper order. He had to get out, out, out. Get to the shore.

He could swim, he knew how to swim, that's what gave him the sculpted look on his shoulder blades William, not Bill, was so fond of. Sebastián tried to breath with the only half of his body that would allow him. He pushed himself onto the top of the car with his legs and arms and shoulders.

The Eldorado was rapidly filling with water and sinking at a steady pace. Sebastián eased his way onto the hood of the car, already slightly under water. With another breath that filled only one lung, he jumped into the freezing river. The swim took less than a few minutes. He allowed his body to do the work. No thinking, just swimming. Just swimming. 1, 2, 3, just gotta get there. Looking up other half-breath to see the shore, letting the current drive him closer and closer. The part of the river he had finally been drudged into was a shallow, muddy bank that had evolved around a forgotten and submerged chunk of the bridge. Sebastián was able to find his footing rather quickly, his legs doing all the work in the world.

He slowly walked onto the muddy shore, still with his brief case and suit jacket in his hand. He realized he had left his keys in the ignition. He turned around, seeing movement in front of him but not understanding it, panting, thinking about how much he wanted William, not Bill, to hug him, hard, bathe with him, soothe his sex with his expert hands and quiet, dirty talk.

Sebastián didn't think of his pragmatic wife or their accomplished daughter as he plopped down on the mud, as far away from the water as he could climb. He'd lost both shoes in the process. They were the one Antonia had bought him from the Florsheim at Plaza Las Americas on their fifth wedding anniversary.

Sebastián didn't even think of the law firm, not really.

All he could think about was how William, not Bill, would start to wonder, perhaps even worry, about him being so late for their meeting. He'd promised to lick his chest just the way Sebastián liked it and he really needed that, he really needed that right now.

Sebastián looked on, not noticing that he was holding the briefcase and suit jacket close against his chest, leaking water and mud and blood. He was rocking back and forth, the wound on his face tracing a perfect arch on his cheek. His lungs were on fire and his muscles started to shake. His eyes saw, sort of, an athletic looking girl climbing out of her car. She was cursing so loudly that the wind carried the echo of her words to where Sebastián was, several feet away from where his car had landed and was now sinking into the river.

## Rabia (Chapter 2)

“Puñeta, carajo, coño, I hope the cabrón pendejo motherfucker who-built-this-piece-of-shit-bridge-has-his-dick-cut-off-eaten-by-a-pitbull-and-then-spat-out-into-the-flames-of-hell, puñetaaaaaaa, puñetaaaaaaaAAAAAA!!!”

Carmen was furious, as usual, but now with reason. Oh-ho, she definitely had reason! Her adorable white car had just fallen into that dirty ass river and now she was wetter than a parcha after the morning’s first dew. She didn’t know what just happened, but she was going to make damn sure someone paid for it, carajo. What the hell, how does a bridge just fall? Was there an earthquake or some shit? Seriously?!

Carmen was running late for her third consulta with the Santería priestess. After she’d punched her best friend for getting engaged to the World’s Biggest Idiot, Carmen knew she needed help. Well, at least that’s what everybody was telling her. “You need help, girl, you’re outta control,” they all said. Even her mother was in on the whole exhortation towards change.

But Carmen knew, deep inside the soul of her bones, that she was right in punching Nora. Her friend was being stupid. So so SO stupid! Who wanted to get married THAT young and to a guy who was going to be an electrician, not something good, like a lawyer or some shit. Ugh. PLUS, he was as fat as Santo Tomás de Aquino.

He didn’t even laugh –actually laugh-- at Nora’s jokes, which were excellent. He just told her stupid shit like “that’s funny” or “that’s nice.” Condescending prick. He couldn’t even afford his own car. Fucking fuck. Pendejo. Nora just had the worst taste in men and had hit the fucker jackpot.

Carmen and Nora had been inseparable ever since middle school. Nora had approached Carmen after she'd kicked some bully's ass, which really impressed Nora. She put up with and understood Carmen's temper, at times even being able to mollify it, and they'd gotten along just fine. In time, Nora became the only person Carmen would confide in.

Carmen had even helped Nora pay some bills too, when she was fired from her job smack dab in the middle of finals week during her sophomore year in college. Nora had then tried every trick to pay Carmen back, to include sneaking checks into her cabinets or under her pillows with "notes" from the tooth fairy. Carmen would hear none of it.

"Por la Madre de Dios: we're friends, stop being so stupid about all this."

Carmen would say this, her voice deep, not smiling. She'd shove the money back into Nora's hands.

Heck, Nora was the only one who was allowed to keep her shoes on in Carmen's new apartment, even though it always made Carmen uncomfortable, what with her new white carpets and all. But she knew Nora cared and it showed. She'd proven it, especially when it counted.

Nora patiently listened to Carmen complain about the world, how messed up it all was, how exorbitantly expensive gas was becoming, how the people at her job were all lazier than an old priest and meaner than a fat nun. Nora's angelic shoulder was there when Carmen had broken up with Chucho, simply because she suspected something was up. Carmen had cared for that one, Chucho, but she was not going to be someone else's

fool, nope. No no no, sir. She nipped that, and all the mess that came from that, in the butt. And she did it with Nora's help.

Nora was the only person Carmen could stand going on long runs with. They had even completed a couple of marathons together, with Carmen always beating Nora's time, of course. Carmen was proud to say that Nora was her one true friend. Other people just pissed her off. They were boring and said stupid shit. Everyone was just so damn stupid. Nora got it, what her friend meant when she said stupid. She just did.

But now Nora was behaving like those same boring, stupid people, wanting things that made no damn sense, at least not at this point in her life. She was too young and she should just continue going to grad school, see to that and finish it. Why couldn't Nora see that Carmen was right about this?

The day of the punch heard around Viejo San Juan, Nora had asked Carmen to meet her at one of her favorite restaurants. Carmen was tired that day, dealing with stupid ass tourists at the hotel she worked at. Those were some needy gringos that day, wanting directions to Fajardo or whatever. Dios mío, it's called a M-A-P, dumbass!

Another old gringo had walked up to the check-in counter and asked --with a smile-- where he should go to eat on such a lovely night. Didn't he book his trip through a travel agent? What did they pay those people for? To make matters worse, that fucker was wearing a t-shirt that said "Hawaii" on it (cue in a very justified eye roll) and a fanny pack that matched nothing on his person.

Carmen tried her best to hide the sheer terror she felt at this ghastly sight, smiled 'cause that was part of her job and she liked getting paid, and sent him to the same place

she sent everyone else: her uncle's restaurant. If they were going to bother her with stupid questions, she might as well get her kickback.

So after all that torturous torture, Carmen just wanted to meet her friend, drink a rum-with-whatever, and complain about how many bottles of sunscreen the hotel had to keep handing out to gringos who apparently didn't know how to pack a bag to travel to an ISLAND IN THE CARIBBEAN. Nora listened, as patiently as always, and waited for her cue:

“Sorry, there I go again-again. How are you?”

Nora just blurted it out:

“He asked me to marry him. I said yes, of course!”

Nora waited for Carmen's lukewarm response, for her fake congratulations, for a forced smile. But all she got was a swift punch in the face. Those Carmen punches were legendary in their neighborhood and Nora knew why then and there. She was knocked off her chair and by the time some waiters at the restaurants had come to her rescue, Carmen had scurried off.

Carmen had seen red, scarlet, crimson, garnet, maroon, claret, and burgundy when Nora told her the news. *What? Wait, what?! She's serious?! Of course Carmen punched Nora, how else would she see how wrong she was? HOW ELSE?*

Then the phone calls came: from her mother, Nora's mother, The World's Biggest Idiot's mother, every body's mother, father, sister, brother, cousin, and pet cotorra called her. These people –THESE PEOPLE!-- they need to mind their own business. After all, this was between Carmen and her friend. Pendejos.

After some forceful prodding from her mother, and then understanding why Nora technically had to say yes to that cave dweller's proposal, Carmen, well, caved in. Her mother coached her on how to go about it:

"You can't say 'I did it because...' You just say 'sorry.' That's it. 'I'm sorry. You didn't deserve that and it won't happen again. Please forgive me.' That's it... Carmen. Carmen! Look at me, carajo. That's it. That's all you need to say. You hear me?"

Carmen nodded and repeated the words, slowly, as if she were learning a Russian phrase phonetically. She called Nora at work and asked her out to lunch to the restaurant across the street from the one she had punched her in. Carmen knew Nora would get the irony of it, and she did.

"Wow, this is where you bring me to apologize?" Nora said after they sat, staring out the window to the fateful establishment.

"I knew you'd get it." Carmen smiled. She missed her friend.

Damnit, why that guy. Why why WHY? Nora gave the faintest of smiles, the swelling around her lip now almost gone, the lip almost completely healed.

"So, yeah, I guess I'm paying for lunch and it's only fair."

Nora nodded back her approval.

Then Carmen did what Carmen knew how to do best:

"... I hate him, I don't like him for you, I think you can do better, much better, and you-"

Carmen stopped when she saw Nora's face start to turn red. When Carmen's face turned red it meant she was angry, but when Nora's did it meant she was about to start crying.

“Nora, Nora...”

Carmen reached across the table and grabbed Nora’s hand and saw that she wasn’t wearing the watch Carmen had gotten her for her last birthday. Nora’s hand was limp and did not return Carmen’s squeeze.

Carmen’s stomach became a bucket filled with wet sand. She hated that her friend was being so unreasonable, so damn emotional, so fucking irrational. Must be the hormones.

But... She couldn’t lose her. Nora was her friend. Her now unreasonable, emotional, irrational pregnant friend. She had been her friend all these years. She’d taken the heat for her many, many times at school. Sometimes Nora had even lied, outright, for her. Like that time Carmen had thrown her book at Plutarco and split his cheek open because he said the classroom smelled like someone was on their period. He still had the scar from that, ahahahaha. That pendejo, he had it coming. Anyway, Nora had told the Principal that Plutarco had challenged Carmen to try to hit him in the head with the book because, apparently, girls couldn’t throw for shit, and what was Carmen to do?

Soon after that incident, it was Nora’s birthday. Carmen had nagged her mother down to a nub to get them both tickets to go see Hector Lavoe at the Coliseo as a birthday present for her friend. Carmen had cleaned her mother’s house like she was a maid at one of the gringo-owned hotels in San Juan. She did all her homework without complaint, even though she broke a lot of pencils in half and fought the daily urge to tear out ALL the pages from her catechism books.

She had even restrained herself from climbing on the avocado tree in front of the house to throw ripe avocados at the postman, who was competing with Methuselah for

oldest motherfucker alive. Carmen's mother noticed the effort and was quite impressed by the good behavior. She had to reward it to set an example and, after careful deliberation with Nora's mother, had finally said "yes."

The four of them went to the salsa concert and saw him, Hector Lavoe, liver than live. Nora and Carmen stood on their chairs the whole time and the people behind them didn't complain. Grownups sometimes know when children need to be part of something big. Some people just have gifts from God. Hector Lavoe's was his voice and he knew how to use it for sure.

Sitting at the post-punch restaurant, Carmen remembered her friend's protection. She took a deep breath just like her mother, her ex-boyfriend, and all of her therapists had taught her. She had no choice but to start to dig. She had to do this, the live wire of her anger still sparking, but she pushed in and pushed through. When the anger was not enough to stop her intent, her instincts fought her. She was right, SHE WAS RIGHT, coño, about everything, she knew it, but she had to do keep on digging. Nora was a connection to something Carmen didn't understand but knew she needed.

Steadily, Carmen was able to start scratching at it. She hadn't worked this hard at something since that semester she took Advanced Calculus, Shakespearean Literature, and Theology. Carmen focused back by mentally slapping herself in the face, hard. Nora, she needed Nora. More than being right, she needed her one and only friend in the world.

Carmen dug some more.

And some more...

And some more, until, a billion nanoseconds later, she was able to reach it, that place most people don't even know they have in them. She said the words her mother taught her, and she said them with meaning:

“Nora. I'm sorry. You didn't deserve that and it won't happen again. Please forgive me.”

Then she added: “What can I do to make this up to you. I-I'll do anything.”

Nora's eyes went from saddened to surprised: “What did you just say.”

Carmen reached in again, angry at the anger that was making it all such an effort.

“I'm sorry. You didn't deserve that and it won't happen again. Please forgive me.

What can I do to make this up to-”

“You need to get help.”

Carmen sighed and nodded, slowly: “... Ok... Yes.”

Another billion nanoseconds passed.

“...And you need to be my maid of honor.”

Carmen nodded her agreement.

“And the baby's godmother.”

Carmen made something that was intended to be a smile. It looked more like her facial muscles were trying to make her look like The Joker. After a few minutes of staring at Carmen's face, holding that odd-shaped oval of lips around her teeth, Nora started to shake her head back and forth.

“You. You are my charge, you know.” She sighed.

Carmen felt Nora finally squeezing her hand back, which her made her smile. It was a real smile this time, which took over her whole face the way it was supposed to. Her anger was there still though, just like it always was.

Nora and Carmen decided that they would do what Hector Lavoe did when he had the addiction demon in him. Carmen would seek out a Santería priestess, an Iyalorichá, for help. Nora had mentioned several times before she felt that Carmen had a demon of rage in her, and that's why the therapy never really worked.

Carmen just wanted her friend back. She would have drunk a dozen raw eggs at that point if it'd made Nora happy. So, she made the appointment through a superstitious cousin of Nora's with an Iyalorichá, a woman from the lush town of Utuado. Carmen had agreed to make the drive from San Juan to the mountain town every week, for three weeks, all for the low price of holy fuck. That's how long and how much it would take for the demon to come out, the Iyalorichá said.

Apparently, Carmen had a strong, strong demon attached to her since childhood or some shit. Carmen, clearly, didn't care. She didn't really believe that a demon could take ahold of someone, not unless one let it in. But she knew that Nora's gossipy cousin would say something if Carmen didn't follow through. She used her only night off from both school and work to take care of this mess. It was an inconvenience to say the least, really, having to deal with rural traffic at that time of day. Coño.

Carmen made it to her first consulta with 10 minutes to spare, so she stayed in her car, parked in front of the priestess' white and blue house, until it was time for her appointment. That's what shy Puerto Ricans with good manners did: they waited until a couple of minutes before their actual appointment to walk in and announce their

presence. Otherwise, receptionists or whatever they were called were stuck with a chatty person until their boss was ready to see them.

Most 'Rican receptionists welcomed this, mind you. It was a welcomed break from an otherwise monotonous day and most normal 'Ricans were flirty and friendly to begin with. It was the way the island made them. But Carmen wasn't going to force herself to be one of those chatty people, smacking their jaws up and down, back and forth, with small talk. Blah, blah, BLAH.

Carmen had no time for small talk, dammit. She only wanted to talk about REAL shit. And yet, here she was, dressed all in white so a Santera would "cleanse" her.

Carmen sat in her car and opened up a copy of Jorge Luis Borges' *El Aleph*. She always found the stories about men who were immortal or obsessed with the quest for God and knowledge fairly easy to read.

The Iyalorichá, Doña Glorimar, came out and knocked three times on the window of Carmen's white Mazda Protegé. Carmen looked up, startled and annoyed. All she saw was a spindle of a woman. Doña Glorimar was nothing but arms and legs attached to the thinnest of torsos, all covered by a bright white cotton dress birthed from a marriage between ruffles and lace. Her head was long and thin, almost like a horse's. Her skin was the color of deep amber.

She had a white scarf, matching her white dress, wrapped around and around and around her head. There were yellow, red, and pink roses poking out on top of her long forehead, and a long and thick bootleg Cohiba cigar resting on her thin lower lip and stuck in between her bright teeth. Her teeth were as white as her dress. Her eyes were dark.

“Carmen?” Her throaty voice was muted through the car’s window.

Carmen nodded.

“You’re here early, and of course you are. Come on in.” She inhaled deeply from her Cohiba and smiled, the gray smoke trailing in between the luminosity of her teeth.

“Don’t the gringos have an embargo against all things Cuban?” Carmen asked as she got out of the car.

She pursed her lips to point at the Cohiba on Doña Glorimar’s mouth.

The Santera laughed, the smell of smoke and guayaba exuding from the perfect oval of her smile.

“Yes, they sure do, don’t they,” was all she said in reply.

Carmen closed her book, even more annoyed now because she had to wait to reread the ending to the Averroes’ story. She put the book in the passenger seat, grabbed a tiny purse she used as a decoy in case someone wanted to mug her, made sure her car was properly locked with the special chain and lock her uncle --not the crazy one, but the one who served in the Korean War-- had made for her, and followed Doña Glorimar.

The main house was surrounded by moringa trees and flor de marta bushes. It fit in the quiet, rural, lush neighborhood. The house was two stories high, both levels made of the concrete favored by the locals to keep the Caribbean heat out. The ground floor was circled by concrete columns that supported the house’s top floor. The whole house was painted as white as the dove that represented the Holy Spirit. Carmen could hear a cow mooing outside, in what she hoped was another property.

Doña Glorimar motioned for Carmen to follow her to a plain concrete building about the size of a two-car garage, which was peeking out from behind the house. It had

been painted in the same shades of white and blue, and had multicolored candles that lit a path towards the doorway. Carmen held her tiny purse between her hands, close to her stomach. What had she gotten herself into.