THE SEÑORITA CURSE

by

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Hurricane Faith

(Memoir)

My sister and I wore our Easter outfits that Saturday, June 25, 1966. Mine was a cream-colored block dress with an oval neckline, my sister’s in tones of green. It was the start of summer, therefore, we didn’t need the matching spring coats, but we did put on our white gloves. I felt fancy in my Easter dress, grown-up even when my white patent leather shoes clicked on the tarmac. Uncle Victor ushered us toward the plane. When we reached the airstairs, he placed me, the oldest, in front to go up first. I looked up. Two Pan Am flight attendants stood at the top receiving passengers. I was taken with the blue of their dresses, not quite sky blue, not quite cornflower. Matching pillbox caps completed their look, and I regretted not wearing my Easter bonnet. It seemed childish earlier that day when Mom had suggested it, but now less so.

I climbed. The airstairs shook the way fire escapes rattle when someone hops in. I spent summers hanging out in our fire escape in the South Bronx. Mom would line the steel rails with a sheet and have my sister, Mari, and me sit out there to cool off while she cared for my younger brother, who was sickly. I sat in the fire escape with a couple of coloring books and a box of Crayola crayons. Mostly, though, I watched the comings and goings of our neighborhood from our fourth floor aerie. I watched ladies hunt for the week’s bargains at the corner marqueta. I watched boys play stickball and girls
hopscotch. On extra hot days, I watched the big boys open the fire hydrant and knock each other out with the force of the water. They placed empty beer cans at the nozzle to direct the stream and douse oncoming cars, angry drivers raising their fisticuffs. The summer of 1966, though, I finally got the opportunity to participate in summer activities rather than observe from afar. Mom, expecting baby number four, decided to send us, her two oldest daughters, to Puerto Rico for the summer. I was six, almost seven, and Mari five.

A flight attendant welcomed me aboard. Her big blue eyes matched her outfit, her blonde hair in an up do, her voice a lilt.

I was in awe. The inside of the cabin gleamed like no place I had ever seen. It had wide aisles. I found excuses to go up and down the corridors at every chance. I relished the plush seats that reclined; fiddled with the pull-down tray table; adjusted and readjusted the complimentary pillows and blankets; chimed to the pings announcing to fasten our seat belts; and pressed endless buttons for lights, air conditioning, and summoning flight attendants. *Excuse me, Miss, where’s the bathroom? ... May I have some water, please? ... Here’s my tray, thank you.*

“Iris, stay still,” said my uncle. Flying made him nervous and my antics increased his anxiety.

There was no listening to him. This ride was luxury beyond my imagination. Our fourth floor apartment in the South Bronx where I lived with my mother, father, five-year-old sister and two-year-old brother, served as a prison. There was no going out to hopscotch like other children or hunting for bargains like other mothers. My baby
brother had been born with a malfunctioning heart. He had spent more time at the hospital than at home. We were not allowed to invite friends over and Mom did not have time to take us out, especially now that she was pregnant. Sending us to her parents’ house for the summer lessened her load and provided an outlet for me and my sister. I intended to enjoy every minute. ... *Miss, my Uncle would like a drink.*

When the plane landed, the passengers cheered and clapped. Mari and I joined the revelry. Uncle Victor made the sign of the cross, relieved to be safely on land. He rushed us along.

The airport in San Juan was noisier and more crowded than the one in New York. Uncle Victor held us tightly and paid an usher to handle the luggage pick-up then whisked us quickly to a hired car for the long trip to the mountains. The heat of the tropics was different than the heat of the South Bronx. Every pore in my body instantaneously opened and intermingled with the thick air, drenching me in sweat. My long hair plastered to my head. The sun reflected off alabaster sandstone and blinded me. I crossed my right arm across my forehead and squinted, following Uncle Victor’s shadow. I anticipated he’d lead us to a luxurious retreat, the kind Bugs Bunny and Daffy Duck frequented in their beach episodes.

We arrived to our final destination at dusk. My grandparents’ retreat in the mountains was a far cry from luxurious. Their flat cement house made my parents’ apartment in the South Bronx look like upscale accommodations. Hooks stuck out of unpainted walls, sackcloth hammocks tied to the hooks. A single light fixture with a pull string hung from the ceiling, attracting moths and other flying insects that cast an eerie
glow and formed long shadows. A lump formed in my throat. In one day, my trajectory took me from bidding farewell to my parents and familiar neighborhood, to experiencing the heights of luxury, to wind up in an unfamiliar and hollow, cement shack. I swallowed hard and fought back tears.

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My first impression of Grandmother came straight from the cartoon *Popeye*: a tall thin woman with a dark print dress. She looked like Olive Oyl scowling at Brutus as she stood by the doorway with her arms crossed. Her dark hair held up in a tight bun. Grandpa, on the other hand, was jovial. He had the sunken cheeks that are prominent in so many photographs of farming peasants. His gray hair matched his gray khakis; the unbuttoned yellow-checkered shirt exposed a grayed undershirt.

“Look at you all grown up,” he said. “Last time I saw you, you were this high.” He positioned the palm of his hand down to his knees then pulled me over and gave me a tight hug. He smelled of smoke. Not cigarette smoke, more like bonfire. I didn’t remember meeting him previously but his smoky scent felt familiar. Later I’d learn he made a living roasting pigs on a barbecue pit.

Grandmother gave me a quick peck on the cheek and rushed through a “*Dios te bendiga*” blessing. I was to learn that Grandmother was a woman of very few words who
kept herself busy all the time. Without much ado, she directed her daughter to get us ready for bed.

The house had three bedrooms that accommodated six: Grandmother and Grandpa slept in the small room, my three male uncles—ages 10, 18, and 20—slept in the largest bedroom, and my teenage aunt slept in the middle room. She was my grandparents’ last unmarried daughter. Mari and I timidly tiptoed behind her. The furnishings of her room consisted of a four-poster bed with mosquito netting and a small dresser. She opened our suitcases and pulled out our pajamas then shoved the luggage under the bed.

“I need to use the bathroom,” I said. Mom had drilled us to wash up and brush our teeth every night before bed.

She pointed to the porcelain spittoon in the corner.

My face crumpled. Tears flowed, no longer able to contain them.

“Don’t be a baby.” She swished her long hair and rolled her eyes. “Just pee there.”

Despite the strange surroundings, that first night I slept soundly, sandwiched between my aunt and my sister, too exhausted to be homesick. The night sounds of the mountains differed from the cacophony of fire engines, police sirens, and the laughter of men playing dominos at the street corner back home. Instead, the night air carried soothing melodies of coquis, nightjars, and occasional howling dogs.
Time stood still in Ciales, and the summer slipped by unnoticed. Before I knew it, it was August 24th, my seventh birthday and my sister and I were scheduled to return to New York in a week’s time. I had acclimated to the rural existence, including using an outhouse. I no longer noticed the swarming flies or staring lizards that blended into the mossy structure of the latrine. Giving up luxuries, such as flushing toilets, provided a newfound freedom, and freedom smelled like banana tree leaves dripping with morning dew. It tasted like a steaming cup of sweetened café con leche accompanied by freshly baked pan de agua with homemade butter.

That morning of my birthday, I awoke to the chorus of roosters announcing the new day. I joined Grandmother in her daily ritual of feeding chickens. She didn’t wish me a happy birthday, but I had become accustomed to her indifference to pleasantries. Despite her angular exterior, she cared deeply for her own, which included me and my sister. She demonstrated caring by plucking chickens, digging root vegetables, and warning us of dangers. And danger loomed everywhere—snakes, tarantulas, poison ivy, sharp-edge stones, waterfalls, loose gravel, rusty nails, just to name a few. I tossed gritted cornmeal on the patio, torn between fear and excitement as the hens clucked and plucked morsels with their chicks in tow. Grandmother checked their nests for eggs, tucking some into the folds of her apron. I went back inside to help my aunt make beds.
and sweep the floorboards. I probably got in the way rather than help but hard work in
the mornings freed afternoons for play.

“Happy birthday!” she said. Unlike Grandmother, she was a chirpy free spirit.
“Let’s have a party later, OK?”

As far as I was concerned, everyday was a party. I had many cousins who visited
nearly every day. I practically lost count: Uncle Victor’s three, Aunt Delia’s five, and
Aunt Nita’s six. Every afternoon we’d play tag, climb trees, or take one of many
expeditions down to the river, hiking up the mountain, or exploring a cave.

It rained every afternoon.

The dense heat of the tropics ascended and formed into thick clouds. Up above
they gathered and simmered, providing a cover from the direct sun. Still, the heat
suffocated. Grown-ups went about their business in a lethargic state, looking skyward,
hoping for relief. Then it’d come. The heat would break the way the skin of a ripened
mango breaks releasing sweet juices. Thick drops would fall and as quickly as they
touched the parched ground, they evaporated. The corrugated grooves of the zinc roof
kept the rhythm of the rain. Other times it rained forcefully, drenching the thirsty
grounds. My cousins and I were at La Cueva de Mameyes during my first heavy
rainstorm. This particular cave was deep into the Cordillera Mountains far from
residences. We waited at the mouth of the cave for the storm to pass. Cousin Gilbert
proposed hunting for alacráns, cave-dwelling scorpions. He reasoned the darkened skies
might deceive the night creatures. The girls screamed, which piqued my curiosity. I
imagined scorpions were like rats, the night creatures of the South Bronx. I later discovered, scorpions were in the spider family. I was grateful the boys found none.

That afternoon, I helped my aunt prepare for my birthday party. We swept the grounds, put a tablecloth over a weathered table, and gathered cups and plates for snacks. There was to be no birthday cake. Frosted cakes required refrigeration and they didn’t have proper electrical outlets, let alone electrical appliances.

My grandmother had a stern look than usual. She looked skyward and mumbled huracán. Hurricane. She said it to no one in particular, or at least not to anyone I detected. It stopped me on my tracks because the word sounded like alacrán, the scorpions Cousin Gilbert had hoped to find in the caves. I thought my grandmother had spotted one by the pile of large stones at the back of her house. Since she didn’t sound squeamish and continued with whatever business she had at hand, I quickly lost interest in the word.

My cousins arrived and the party started. We chased each other in a game of tag. I narrowly escaped my older cousin’s grasp, which pleased me enormously. I had been thriving in the outdoors, gaining speed and agility. My birthday that summer felt like a true growth marker.

That night when I went to bed, I tried remembering my faraway life; the one that I’d return to the following week. I couldn’t picture my mother’s face. I’d forgotten her voice. All that came to mind was the loneliness of the fire escape. A lump formed in my throat. This time, I wished I could stay here forever. I wished I would never go back.
The next morning, I woke to hammering instead of crowing roosters. I ran outside alarmed. My relatives were hard at work, Grandmother barking orders. Aunts plucked chickens behind the house. Their husbands and Grandpa boarded windows and tied down the zinc roof. Cousins Nela and Angel, who were my age, rolled and stacked hammocks.

I went over to them. “Hey, what’s going on?”

“Well, it’s a hurricane,” said Nela.

I remembered Grandmother saying the word the previous day. “What’s a hurricane?”

“Well, it’s the end of the world.”

I imagined a map. A flat map, the world tumbling out its edge. “The end of the world?”

“It means we’re going to die.” That was Gilbert, the scorpion-chasing cousin, who liked to pull my leg, sensing he had a gullible gringa for a cousin.

Nela rolled her eyes at her older brother. “Come with me,” she said.
I followed her to the batey, the clearing outside the front patio. She pointed to the sky. Gone were the thick fluffy clouds I had become used to. Broken clouds passed swiftly with trails following behind. It looked like the heavens were leaving the island. My stomach turned.

“The Bible says the world is coming to an end,” said Nela, her hand on her hip, her thin elbow sticking out like a spout. She swept her other arm across as if to show all that would be gone.

A chill ran through me. Despite the heat, my teeth chattered.

“Stop saying that!” said her older sister, Maria. “You’re scaring her!”

“It’s true, though,” said Angel. “It’s in the Book of Revelations!”

I couldn’t understand the magnitude of their words, but their gestures and demeanor indicated a grave situation. My eyes filled with tears. “Why are you here, then?”

Nela shrugged. “Mom wants to die next to her parents.”

“That way we can all go to Heaven together,” said Angel.

There was no way for me to know this at the time, but the truth was their houses were not as strong as our grandparent’s house. My grandparents’ plain, low-lying cement house offered better protection than their wood houses.
I felt alone despite surrounded by so much family: grandparents, aunts, uncles, and a bunch of cousins. At that moment, they did not matter. They had each other. They had their parents. Mine were far away. I felt their absence. An image of my mother came in sharply. Her dark, wavy hair, and her burrowed brows that seemed to question everything; the warmth of her hands when she brushed my hair into a ponytail; the singsong when she called my name. I missed her. I even missed the thick oatmeal she forced me to eat during long, cold winters. I wondered what she was doing. Was she sitting on a rocker fanning herself? Exhausted from the August heat and the weight of her belly? Had it grown? Did she know her two daughters were going to die? Is that why she had sent us away? Did she want us to find our way to Heaven by following her parents? Did she need to stay on Earth for Andy? Was he more important than me and Mari? What about the unborn baby? Was the unborn baby more important than us, too?

My eyes searched for my sister, my only link to my gringa life. I motioned her to stay next to me, but she skipped around unaware of the impending doom.

My cousins continued with their end of times stories.

“Heaven is only for churchgoers,” said Gilbert.

I never went to church.

I never went anywhere other than school because of my brother Andy. Tears bit the inside corners of my eyes. I hated our restricted lives ever since he came into it. But it wasn’t his fault, was it? It wasn’t his fault our lives were so restricted. I had heard Mom whispering to our neighbor.
Whenever I heard whispers, my ears sharpened, and my ears tuned in. My brother Andy had been rushed to the hospital in the middle of the night. He couldn’t breathe. Mom and the neighbor talked about his illness. Mom lowered her voice. She mentioned German measles. She said I was four and Mari two when we got the German measles.

Feverish memories surfaced of waking soaked through, wet towels placed on my forehead. My baby sister’s incessant crying. Mom not spared from the contagious German measles. She was pregnant at the time. A few months later, Andy was born. Sickly. Everyone said it was an act of God, but I knew differently.

“It was Iris,” Mom whispered, “Iris brought the German measles home.”

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The rain started. We brought in the pots of white rice and chicken stew that my aunts had cooked outside. The uncles gathered in Grandfather’s room and pretended to fiddle with a battery-operated radio, a convenient excuse to sneak shots of Bacardi rum. The rest of us huddled in the small living room. Grandpa shut the door tight and tied it with rope. He then wrapped rosary beads around his hand.

The air felt thick and humid. I thought of my brother Andy and how his lips and fingernails turned blue whenever he lacked oxygen. I wondered if his lungs felt the way I
felt in the airless room. Thunder clapped. Wind sounded like ghosts swooshing above and around the house. The house trembled as if in fear. My thundering heart matched the pelting rain.

Grandpa lit candles. He began a rosary. “Ave Maria Purísima.”

“Sin pecado concebida,” said the grown-ups.

I lip-synched just in case God watched my mouth.

“En el nombre del Padre, del Hijo, y del Espíritu Santo,” he said and made the sign of the cross.

I knew this part and made the sign of the cross. Mom had taught me the Our Father in Spanish.

“Amen,” we said in unison.

The melodious litany of Hail Marys offered comfort in the midst of thunder and cracks of lightning. They blocked out the whistling wind. They drowned my mother’s damning whispers: “Iris brought the German measles home.”

I leaned in to Cousin Maria and whispered. “What happens to people who don’t go to heaven?”
I awoke again to hammering. I found myself alone on the living room floor, a pillow tucked beneath my head. I panicked. Where was my sister? Did everyone go to Heaven? Did they leave me behind? I pushed the door. Light rushed in. I shielded my eyes and looked up. The sky was blue and cloudless.

“Hey, sleepy head!” said Cousin Gilbert. He was removing boards with a hammer. “God spared us this time!”

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Hurricane Faith blew over northeast Puerto Rico the day after I turned seven, on August 25, 1966. It traveled 6,850 miles across the Atlantic Ocean: the longest tracked hurricane in history. In spite of gale force winds, there were no fatalities on the island. The day before I turned seven, on August 23, my mother gave birth to her fourth and last child. A healthy baby boy. Indeed God had spared us.
The Gazelle

At that time, they lived in the Pennsylvania-Wortman Projects; newly built housing for families that struggled financially. The eight-story buildings intersected Vermont and Stanley in the East New York section of Brooklyn. They lived on the fifth floor and had a view of the courtyard; a circular pavilion bordered with wrought-iron benches and newly planted Linden trees. Metal tree guards surrounded each linden to keep out dogs. The Mom made mention of it at every opportunity. “I don’t know why management bothers fencing in the trees,” she’d say when she looked out the children’s bedroom window, “dogs are not allowed!” The No Dogs rule pleased her since their previous neighbors in Brownsville owned a yappity mutt that often relieved itself in the hallway. She’d then proceed to say, “The windows, though, have no security bars. Go figure!”

They moved to the projects the summer of 1970. Angie was seven and Nancy five. They loved their new building, particularly the elevators which made tasks, such as grocery shopping, much easier. Each building had its own laundry room at the sublevel; at their old place, they lugged laundry in shopping carts to a Laundromat located a few blocks away. By far, though, the best feature was the courtyard, which included a playground with a seesaw, swings, and a jungle gym.

As soon as they moved in, the Mom announced she was expecting a baby. The news thrilled Angie who hoped for a boy. Either way, it didn’t matter because a baby, boy or girl, would unseat Nancy and her annoying ways. I got a boo-boo. Angie is
bothering me. I want a bottle. Imagine, a bottle at five … She’d find out soon enough what it felt like to have a younger sibling. With a baby on the way, the Dad picked up extra hours at Springs Industries, the linen company where he worked as a security guard. The extra money and the lower rent enabled the Mom to quit her job at the sweater factory where she did piecework. She spent mornings in their new kitchen making the girls their favorite treats, such as rice pudding. While the milk, sugar and rice bubbled on the stove, Angie and Nancy would spin on second-hand swivel barstools that the Mom had purchased at the local Salvation Army; Angie’s heavy braids smacked her face and Nancy’s willowy blond hair spanned wing-like. They were as close to living the American dream as they could get with a stay-at-home mother and a brand new apartment.

Another advantage to their new apartment was the close proximity to the Grandparents. The family always visited the Grandparents on Sundays after mass. They now lived walking distance from the Grandparents, who lived on the second floor apartment of a private house owned by Italians. The Grandmother spoke only Spanish and the landlady only Italian, yet they communicated well with one another. When all else failed, they used hand signals. The Grandmother persuaded the landlady to allow her grandchildren access to the backyard on visiting Sundays.
One Sunday in late August, Uncle Pito made a special visit to the Grandparents together with his wife Aunt Nelly and their two daughters, Melissa and Susie. They rarely visited because they lived in the Bronx and Uncle Pito worked Sunday nights. Angie was excited for their visit. Cousin Melissa, two years older than Angie looked a lot like Angie’s mother—skinny, tall, wavy hair. Cousin Susie, who was seven like Angie, looked exactly like Nancy—a blue-eyed blond with dimples. Angie, who considered herself the fashion queen of the little group, looked Taino, like her father—caramel skin, almond eyes, dark hair. In honor of their special visit, the Mom took charge of preparing a large feast. She made roast pork marinated in garlic, oregano, salt and pepper and a pot of rice with pigeon peas—comfort food that fed many. The Grandmother took care of the best part. She brought the flavors of the island by frying tostones, surullitos, and bacalaitos. She mesmerized the girls with her culinary skills, fingers grazing the sizzling oil without a flinch.

“Grandma! Grandma!” they called in unison. “Doesn’t that hurt you?”

She laughed and told them she was a witch immune to pain then let her gray hair loose and pulled out her false teeth. She chased them around the house, and indeed with her hooked nose and blue eyes, she played a convincing witch. The girls ran to the backyard, screaming and laughing.

“Grandma is crazy,” said Angie.

Nancy and Cousin Susie agreed.

The quiet and observant Cousin Melissa said, “Grandma is tipsy.”
As soon as she said it, Angie recognized the behavior. Drinking always made the Dad happy, and the Mom didn’t like it. Too many times Angie overheard them fight on a Friday night in their room about his Viernes social. He’d come home in a playful mood. He’d pick up Angie or Nancy, sometimes both, and swing them around saying things like, “These are my beautiful girls! They are going to grow up to be doctors!” Then he’d have them fish through his coat pockets where they’d find lollipops and trinkets, such as yoyos. On those days, he didn’t mind toys on the floor or the clinging smell of fried pork chops. He’d blast the phonograph and grab the Mom by the wrist to dance with him. She’d beg off claiming the kitchen needed cleaning. It bothered Angie that the Mom refused to join the fun, so she’d dance with him. Angie was his princess. Nancy always stayed in the kitchen with the Mom, a true mama’s girl clinging onto her skirts.

The girls stayed outside until nightfall playing double-dutch.

“A nickel and a dime

Be on time

With an A, B…”

Cousin Susie won and Angie came in second. They ran inside to announce Susie’s victory. The Grandmother gave them a congratulatory hug. Angie smelled wine on her breath and remembered Cousin Melissa’s words. She had trouble censoring herself, repeating everything she heard as long as it was certifiably true. “Grandma,” she said, “Melissa is right. You are drunk.”
The Grandmother’s face collapsed. The skin on her forehead appeared to fold into itself. “Angie, it’s not nice to tattle on others.”

Angie couldn’t believe her ears. Did Grandmother actually get mad at her instead of Melissa? She huffed and walked away, despite the Grandmother’s sniffles. She returned to the living room where the girls were begging both sets of parents to let Melissa and Susie sleepover for the week. Angie quickly forgot her exchange with the Grandmother and piped in. “Please, please, please.” She got on her knees with folded hands. The girls followed suit.

“Angie,” said Aunt Nelly, “they have no clothes.”

Angie pulled out all tricks. “They can wear my clothes! Can’t they, Mom?”

The Mom squirmed but was too polite to outright say no. Angie knew that about the Mom—her need to please everyone—and pressed the issue. The Mom came up with hollow excuses. “Angie, I’m sure they have better things to do than hang around our place.”

The Dad, who was tipsy, dived right in. “Of course they can sleep over! I’ll personally take them back next weekend!” He was in one of his happy moods, and Angie took full advantage of the situation. It was settled then—Melissa and Susie would split their stay between Angie’s home and the Grandparents, who could use their help. That night, the girls skipped all the way back to the projects, arms interlaced. They sang, “Skip-skip-skip to my Lou!”
The Dad joined in with a nursery rhyme from his youth:

“Ventana, window

Puerta, door

Maestra, teacher

Piso, floor!”

“They’re fun!” giggled Cousin Susie.

Angie beamed.

The girls loved Angie’s new home. The observant Cousin Melissa complimented the Mom’s sense of style. The new apartment incentivized the Mom to break away from what she considered the chintzy decorating style of other Puerto Rican families. An avid fan of the *Dick Van Dyke Show*, she hung broadcloth curtains on the windows that ran from the dining room to the living room. Aunt Nelly, on the other hand, subscribed to the lace craze: lace curtains, ornate bathroom towels with sewn-on lace fringes, starched doilies covered with plastic for protection. The Mom particularly abhorred plastic coverings. “People without taste cover their furniture with plastics,” she’d say, a point of contention between her and the Dad. “Do you think we’re made of money like the Rockefellers?” he argued. “We cannot afford to ruin our couches.” She appeased him by covering the couches in sheets—they had plenty of sheets since the Dad brought home ill-fitting bed linen from his company. She removed the sheets on weekends, when she’d instruct the girls to sit on the floor.
It was late at night so the girls went straight to change into pajamas. The Mom lent Cousin Melissa one of her satiny nightgowns, which made Angie laugh.

“You look just like my mom!” Angie put on a pink baby-doll, the short kind with matching romper shorts and glittery slippers. Cousin Susie borrowed Angie’s yellow one. Everyone said their night-nights and the girls pulled the mattresses to the middle of the bedroom to camp out for the night. They dozed off to the warm breeze wafting in through the window.

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The next morning, they awoke to Angie’s parents bickering. The Dad’s voice carried through the wafer-thin walls.

“What’s he saying?” asked Cousin Susie.

“Something about wrinkled pants,” said Cousin Melissa.

She said it with a conspiratorial tone that bothered Angie, as if there was something amiss in her parents quarrel. She jumped in right away. “Just Dad telling Mom to iron his clothes.”

Indeed, they heard the Mom pull out the ironing board.

“See,” Angie said.
“Doesn’t your dad wear khakis for work?” said Cousin Melissa.

He did. He wore wash and wear khakis. “So… What’s your point?”

“Well,” she said, “my mom never irons my dad’s work clothes.”

“Well, smarty pants, my dad likes his clothes neatly pressed. What’s wrong with that?”

A look passed between Melissa and Susie. It made Angie uncomfortable, so she turned her back to them and faced the other way. She understood the Dad’s need for perfection. Quite frankly, so did the Mom, who spent hours scrubbing the kitchen, arranging and rearranging closets, and spraying and disinfecting the bathroom, obsessed with an impeccable home. Whenever the Dad wanted something, she’d get right to it. Well, except for plastic covers on the couches.

“Uncle’s a bully,” whispered Cousin Susie.

Angie felt a pang in her stomach. How dare she think that of the Dad? It was he who made it possible for them to sleepover. Were it not for him, they’d be back in that foreign land called the Bronx. She was about to defend him when they heard a slap then the front door slam.

Cousin Susie bolted out the room. She was the inquisitive one of the group, always investigating. The rest followed.

The Mom put on a cheerful face despite the Dad’s imprint on her cheeks. She ignored Cousin Susie’s stare and made a big breakfast of scrambled eggs and bacon. To
break the tension, Angie showed off her spinning skills on the barstools and the girls followed suit. They quickly forgot the morning’s incident and after breakfast went to the playground at the courtyard, far away from grown-up matters.

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The Dad came home from work that evening in one of his happy moods. He brought ices for the girls and a scarf for the Mom; silky with a floral print. Angie gloated relieved her cousins would see the Dad’s fun side again. The Mom smiled wanly and quickly set the table. They feasted on the Dad’s favorite: chicken stew over white rice with maduros. The Dad sucked on the bone marrow with gusto. “Woman, you are the best cook,” he said as he licked his fingers clean.

Cousin Melissa helped clear the table after dinner and the Mom removed the sheets from the couches. She was expecting her friend from the old neighborhood who said she’d stop by for coffee in the late evening.

“Doña Fanny?” asked the Dad. When the Mom confirmed, he mocked, “That Doña Fanny sure has a large fanny.”

The Mom’s cheeks reddened. The Dad laughed.

Angie detected malice in his laugh. His words piqued her curiosity. She sneaked into her bedroom and pulled out the Merriam-Webster dictionary that Uncle Ray had
given her last Christmas with a hearty, “Study! Study hard!” Angie opened it and found the F words quickly. / Fanny: Buttocks. / She looked up buttocks. / Buttocks—the fleshy part on which a person sits. / They were not allowed to say bad words like butt in the house, much less its crude Spanish translation. Angie was pleased to learn a new bad word with a fancy ring to it. She went back to the dining room mulling her new word. She and the girls started a game of jacks.

Doña Fanny arrived shortly. She brought a cake from Valencia Bakery, a layered cake with pineapple filling and white frosting. The Mom thanked her profusely as the East New York neighborhood lacked many of the Latino shops found in Brownsville. Doña Fanny took a seat in the dining room, across from where the girls played jacks.

Angie noticed her large, wide bottom. She blurted, “Its true Doña Fanny! Your fanny sure is big!”

The Mom turned red. “Angie! Apologize right now!”

“What? All I said…”

Before she finished her sentence, the Dad smacked her mouth. His slit eyes cut into Angie’s soul. She ran to her room humiliated. The humiliation stung more than the smack. The Dad reserved slaps for the Mom. She was weak, not Angie. Through her sobs, she overheard the Mom apologize to Doña Fanny.

“I’d keep an eye on that kid of yours, Ana,” said Doña Fanny. “She sure has a big mouth.”
She hated the Mom at that moment for making poor excuses. The girls entered the room to comfort Angie, but she shunned their sympathy. She sensed they judged her the same way they judged the Dad. They remained in the room, away from the grown-ups, and continued their game of jacks without Angie. For her part, Angie dozed off to the sound of the bouncing ball.

After Doña Fanny left, the Mom came into the room. “Angie, you mustn’t repeat everything you see and hear. Do you understand?”

She nodded but didn’t understand. She had echoed the Dad’s words.

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It was the girls last day at Angie’s home. The Dad left pizza money on the kitchen counter. Angie accepted the Dad’s conciliatory gesture; he knew pizza was Angie’s favorite food. She eagerly anticipated a hot slice sprinkled with red pepper flakes and pulling the melted cheese as if it were a wad of chewing gum. She dressed for the occasion with her yellow shorts and matching halter top. She looked for the red one to lend to Cousin Susie but couldn’t find it anywhere. She suspected Nancy had something to do with its disappearance and shoved her to the side as she rummaged through her drawers.

“Mommy!” cried out Susie. “Angie hit me!”
“I did not! Where is my red halter?”

“Stop blaming your sister,” said the Mom. “It’s probably in the laundry.”

Angie sucked her teeth. She grabbed a pink polo for Cousin Susie. “I know Nancy has it somewhere in her mess,” she muttered to the cousins. “She gets away with taking my things. All she has to do is bat her pretty blue eyes and Mom forgives her everything.”

“Hey,” protested Cousin Susie, who also had blue eyes.

“I don’t mean you. Nancy is such a baby.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“I can’t wait until the new baby gets here. That’ll show her.”

They left to enjoy slices at Ray’s Pizza and remained outside at the courtyard for the rest of the day.

After dinner, on their last night together, Cousin Melissa decided to tell one of her stories. The girls changed into nightclothes to be ready for storytelling. Nancy looked for her favorite pajamas, a sleeveless number with an imprint of a palm tree. Sure enough, as she pulled it out of her drawer, Angie’s red halter fell out.

“I knew it!” said Angie. She grabbed the top bunched up into a ball. When she unraveled it, she saw a large rip. “Mom!!! Nancy ruined my blouse! Do something!”
“Oh Angie.” Lately the Mom sounded tired from the extra baby weight. She called from the kitchen. “Learn how to share.”

“But…”

“But nothing. Stop picking on your sister…”

“Shut up!” the Dad fumed from the living room. “I can’t hear the television!” He rose and turned up the volume of the Sylvania console.

Since neither parent cared about Angie’s situation, she took matters into her own hands. She pushed Nancy. Nancy maneuvered herself out of Angie’s reach and ran through the living room to get to the Mom, her protector. She knocked over the Dad’s cup filled with Pepsi Cola. The sticky soda spilled onto the couch, seeping through the sheet.

“Maldito sea!” said the Dad. He reached to grab Nancy, but she slipped out of his grasp. “Ana, look what she made me do! Control those kids!” A full blown argument ensued.

Angie hurried back to her room pleased that finally Nancy got herself into new trouble. She closed the bedroom door to minimize the loud exchanges between the parents. She crossed her arms feigning indignant and complained to the cousins, “Do you see what I have to deal with? It’s not fair.”

“Yeah, I see what you mean,” said Cousin Susie. “Your mom babies her too much.”
“Oh come on,” said Cousin Melissa. “Let’s forget about it.” She grabbed one of Nancy’s old picture books and pretended to read from it. “Once upon a time, in a far away land lived a princess. Her name was…”

“Angie! Say her name was Angie!” said Angie.

“Her name was Angie,” she continued. “She was tall and beautiful with long, black hair all the way down to her toes.”

Angie beamed. She loved receiving equal compliments to Nancy’s gold ringlets.

“Near her lived a mean old witch.”

Nancy snuck back into the bedroom. She sat by Cousin Susie and sulked.

Angie glared at her then blabbed, “Say the witch was named Nancy!”

“The mean old witch was named Nancy,” continued Cousin Melissa, with a twinkle in her eye.

They snickered. Nancy pouted and crossed her arms, but continued to listen. Cousin Melissa had a fun way of telling stories.

“The mean old witch, wore a big sack for a dress,” said Cousin Melissa. “Her blond hair twisted into a mess of knots that looked like a cat lived inside her pointy hat.”

They laughed, even Nancy, who was warming up to the story.
“The witch hated Princess Angie because she was sooo beautiful. She wore pink, satin dresses with ballerina slippers and a diamond crown that sparkled all the way up to the sky.”

Angie ate it up.

“One day…”

THUD! It sounded like something heavy fell in one of the bedrooms.

Cousin Melissa stopped short. “What was that?”

“It came from Titi’s room!” said Cousin Susie.

Angie’s eyes flashed. She looked at Nancy. Nancy’s eyes looked older than her five years. Tears sprang into Angie’s. She covered her ears. “Not again…”

Cousin Susie impulsively rose to investigate.

“No!” Angie grabbed her sleeve. She didn’t want the cousins to see what she had witnessed so many times.

Cousin Susie brushed off Angie’s hold and ran to the Parent’s room. She gasped and returned, her face ashen.

“What is it?” asked Cousin Melissa.

Cousin Susie remained mute, an agitated look on her face.

Muffled yells came through the thin walls.
Cousin Melissa paled.

Nancy began to rock back and forth, banging the back of her head against the wall, a far-off look in her eyes. It was her way of shutting out the commotion.

“We need a grown-up,” Cousin Susie finally said.

“No!” Angie panicked. “Let’s just shut the door.” She turned on her transistor radio. Her favorite song was on, *Stop! The Love You Save*. She raised the volume and tried singing along, but the carajos and puñetas drowned the Jackson Five.

“Angie, that doesn’t sound good,” said Cousin Melissa, rooted like a linden from the courtyard. “Your Mom is screaming!”

“It’s whenever he drinks.” Angie said. She felt defeated. “They fight then he beats her.” This time was different, though. The Dad wasn’t drunk. He had crossed a boundary. Alcohol was no longer a cop-out for his cruel behavior.

“Please,” the Mom pleaded. She slammed the door to her room. The door to the girls’ bedroom flew open. In ran the Mom, barefoot, her nightgown ripped, her big stomach exposed. Angie had never seen her look worse. Her face was unrecognizable with swollen eyes and spittle across her once thin cheeks.

“Ven acá contrallá!” the Dad followed. He looked fierce, his muscular arms flexed.

The Mom scrambled onto the window ledge. She faced the girls and locked eyes with Angie. She looked like a trapped gazelle ready to leap for safety. She turned to the
courtyard, her gauzy nightgown fluttered against the hot summer breeze. Despite her condition, Angie saw a strength she’d never seen before. A determination to what? To escape? She knew then that her mother would jump.

“Mommy!” she screamed.

The Dad lurched forward and grabbed her hair.

“LET ME DIE!” she wrestled with him. She slipped. Her legs flailed over the windowsill.

White fury consumed Angie. How could she? How she take her life? Leave them? She grabbed onto her mother’s nightgown.

She and the Dad pulled her in. She slapped the Mom. She slapped with all her might. She then turned to the Dad and punched him. Her balled fists pummeled against his muscular back. “Desgraciado!” she yelled. “You ARE a bully! Culo! An ugly culo!” Never mind the fancy fanny; she used every crude word she’d ever heard him say.

The cousins pulled Angie away.

The Mom left the room screaming.

The Dad followed the Mom then left the apartment.

Nancy remained on her bed rocking back and forth as if in a trance.

Angie felt shame. Until then, she thought all dads hit moms, but her cousins’ faces said otherwise. Angie now understood her family had a secret. Her father was a
wife beater. Her mom’s ragged sobs tormented Angie late into the night. She recited to herself, “Once upon a time, in a faraway land...”

The limestone reflected sunlight, making it difficult for Angie to find her father’s grave in the bric-a-brac of raised and oversized tombs. She wondered why mourners bothered placing flowers at gravesites; the tropical heat wilted and scorched them almost immediately. Her mother said she’d find his below the Ceiba, a tree taller and wider than the Lindens of Brooklyn. The Ceiba’s expansive shade spread over a number of tombs, but she found his. It was the one without flowers. She placed her hands on it. It felt cool to her touch. She felt nothing. Or as close to nothing as possible. Perhaps what an empty well would feel if it had feelings: cold, damp, a longing to be filled.

That long-ago summer night, the Mom lost the baby. Her screams pierced the night. Angie ran and ran until she reached the Grandparents. They called an ambulance. It was a boy. The Mom was never the same after that. The Dad? He moved them to Puerto Rico, far away from the Grandparents accusing eyes. With an unresponsive wife, and two scared daughters, his violent behavior increased. His slaps no longer discriminated and all three became equal recipients of his temper, until he left the Mom for another woman. The other woman? She kicked the Dad out the first time he slapped her.
The Mom took him back.

Angie longed to understand why did the Mom let him return when once upon a
time she willed to sacrifice two lives, preferring death over living one more minute under
his heavy hand. But she hushes Angie. She fusses over Angie and worries that she
hasn’t settled down. How could she possibly settle down? All a man has to do is give
Angie a slanted look, and she sends him packing. She is her father’s daughter. She
strikes first.
A Cautionary Tale: What Her Mother Told Her When She Commented On Cousin Miguel’s Good Looks

Escúchame bien, hija. Once upon a time deep in the mountains of Borínquen lived a cafetero with his wife, three daughters and a son. Don Joaquín was a hard-working, bona fide jíbaro del campo—the type who wore a straw hat and loose slacks amarrados casi hasta el cuello with a tight belt. And just like depicted in the black and white photographs of yore, every morning he led his horse by its reins to his coffee crop and every evening he returned with frutas y viandas that he grew in the leased piece of land. His wife, Doña Elena, worked equally hard. She milked goats, cooked, cleaned, washed and cared for their children. The plump trigueña kept her hair up en un moño and tucked un trapo between her breasts to periodically wipe her sweaty face and neck. In short, these god-fearing gente del campo led wholesome lives and had much to be grateful for. They counted their many blessings. Their crops, together with their goats and chickens, sustained the family, and their children, ages seven to eighteen, were healthy and obedient.

Lately, though, Doña Elena worried about her eldest, Sofía, who at eighteen lacked suitors. Odd, because by all accounts, Sofía was the prettiest young lady in all of Cordillera. Her face was smooth like creamy porcelain accented by round eyes with curly eyelashes and prominent cheekbones. She embodied a true guitarrita endowed with her mother’s small waist and ample hips. By far, her crowning beauty was her long, shiny hair that hung all the way past her nalgas. She’d brush it daily until it gleamed, but
who would know? Once she hit puberty, the girl took to braiding her hair and hiding her assets under baggy clothes. She spent her free time in church, como una monja. And indeed, Doña Elena and Don Joaquín had believed their first-born intended to become a nun. But alas, time kept slipping and she never announced the calling. Doña Elena and her husband decided to intervene and secure Sofía’s future.

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Sofía shelled peapods, her neck bent, head tilted forward. The task required her full concentration; snap, peel, thumb, and discard shriveled grains or caterpillars that may have wormed their way in. She ran her fingers through the gandules for final inspection. Satisfied, she set the basket aside and stretched. She rolled her head side to side, back to front and arched her back. That’s when she saw her Papá coming up the zigzag road.

They lived at La Cruz halfway up el monte. Their woodhouse was too high up for electricity, but they had running water, thanks to the endeavors of Operation Bootstrap. The view from their home, however, more than made up for lack of modern conveniences. The clearing at the cross—a marker that indicated close proximity to a Catholic Church—offered panoramic views from the Cordilleras all the way to town and beyond. They had a bird’s eye view of the Atlantic Ocean. Sofía liked sitting at La Cruz when undertaking time-consuming tasks. She watched the comings and goings of their neighbors, like Pancho stealing eggs from the Toro henhouse, and Norma’s make-out sessions with him, hechándole leña al fuego to the bochincheros who claimed the pre-
adolescent practiced for future puta-hood. Today, the only out of ordinary circumstance was her father’s walk up the narrow mountain road. Three in the afternoon was unusually early for him. He led their trusty horse, saddled with heavy sacks, up the zigzag road.

She went to the casilla at the back of the house. The rectangular structure served as a makeshift kitchen outfitted with a sink connected to a pipe with running water, a fogón for cooking, and shelves for storage. She poured the gandules into a glass jar and sealed it tightly. Doña Elena stood over the fogón stirring a pot of chicken stew. Sofía’s little brother swung on the burlap hammock tied between two banana trees. Sofía asked him to help out their father.

“He’s home?” said Doña Elena, wiping her face. “The meeting must have gone well.”

“What meeting?” Not that she ever meddled with family matters, mija. Hers was an automatic response to her mother’s comment.

“You’ll find out soon enough,” said her mother. “Go and change. Let’s get ready for an early dinner.”

Sofía took off her chanclas and tiptoed avoiding loose splinters from the hardwood floors that tended to snag underfoot at the most inopportune times. She went directly to the room she shared with her two younger sisters. Their cramped room held two sets of bunk beds and two dressers. Their cramped room held two sets of bunk beds and two dressers. Her sisters’ dresser contained ever tchotchke imaginable from perfumes to headbands whereas her dresser remained simple, adorned with a statue of the Virgin Mary and a tall candle, the kind sold at botánicas. She lit the
candle and pulled rosary beads from her pockets. She kissed the cross and murmured a quick prayer. She prayed for purification. Every day she prayed for purification. She then changed into a white blouse and a plain gray skirt, unflattering garb. Her sisters liked to tease, calling her a nun-in-training. Their teasing did not bother her. She wished to be invisible, blend with the background as much as possible. There lay the irony; the drab clothes accentuated her small but fiery eyes, lush eyelashes, and high cheekbones. She unbraided her trensa, brushed her hair, and re-braided it.

“Vamos,” called her mother. “Hora de cenar.”

The table had been set with chicken stew, white rice, and plantain arrañitas. Sofía helped serve dinner. They ate in silence. They were usually a noisy bunch, but in front of Papá, they conducted themselves reserved and respectfully. He was a strict disciplinarian who enforced the fifth commandment to the fullest, “Thou shall obey your mother and father.”

As soon as they finished eating, Sofía rose to clear the table.

“Stay,” said Papá. “Let your sisters handle it.”

She returned to the cane-backed chair. Her small eyes shot from her father to her mother back to her father. She waited for his next statement.

“Hija,” he said. “You are to marry Alfredo Gomez.”

Her mother clapped her hands together. “Bendito sea Dios!” she praised.

“Next month,” he continued.

Sofía paled. He may as well have stabbed her, but she kept her composure.

Doña Elena eyed Sofía suspiciously. “Que te pasa?”
Sofía lowered her eyes and forced a smile. She refrained from speaking, afraid to betray her feelings. Out the corner of her eyes, she saw her sisters silently jump for joy. Her getting married opened the door for their future marriages. Unlike Sofía, her fourteen- and fifteen-year-old sisters liked the flirting game. They practiced body movements, eye contact, and facial expressions to maximize their attractiveness. For all she knew, they probably practiced kissing like the neighbor. She blushed at the thought.

“Por Dios, hija,” said Doña Elena. “Alfredo is a good catch. At your age, I was already on my second pregnancy!”

Sofía nodded.

“He’ll be here Saturday,” said Papá, “to officially ask for your hand in marriage.” He looked at Sofía who remained with bowed head and a painted smile. He turned to his wife. “Doña, take her shopping. My beautiful daughter looks like an old lady in those clothes.”

“Don’t worry. We will set out first thing tomorrow morning.” Doña Elena loved to shop.

“Voy a la capilla,” said Sofía. “It’s my turn to lead today.”

Reluctant to interfere with their daughter’s church duties, they assented. “Don’t stay out late,” said Doña Elena. “We have a busy week ahead of us.”
The sun descended into the mountainous horizon, inviting a coquí to begin its night chant. Soon, more coquis joined the soloist until an entire chorus formed as if serenading Sofía. She surveyed the garden beds surrounding the chapel and settled on long-stemmed lilies, snapping three. They represented the values she strived to live by: faith, hope, and charity. She covered her head with a lace shawl and entered.

The small chapel glimmered, and Sofía’s heart settled. It was the first she noticed her heart had been racing. She dabbed fingers in agua bendita and sprinkled the lilies. She craved the solitude offered by the empty chapel and tiptoed to the altar, unwilling to break the stillness within. She headed to the statue of the Virgin Mary at the north transept. The statue shimmered the way sunlight dances over clear waters. She placed the lilies at Mary’s feet and kneeled. Tears finally rolled. Hers was a daily chant to the Virgin Mary seeking purification, but tonight’s plea included the latest development. “Mother of God. You, who accepted your path with open heart, purify mine. I cannot marry while my heart belongs to someone else. I beg you, purify my heart.” The chapel doors creaked and quickly she dried her tears. She rubbed the starched sleeve of her blouse against her face to remove traces of her aching heart.

Her sisters in spirit entered with the same reverent silence as Sofía had. Theirs was a newly formed chapter of the Daughters of Mary, the Catholic Church’s answer to the wave of evangelists who challenged the Catholic culture of the island. “Repent, repent!” los evangélicos harkened during their revival meetings. They chanted over megaphones fixed on jeeps that paraded through the town streets. The evangelical chants became as commonplace as el canto del coquí from dusk until dawn. The Daughters of
Mary aimed to refuel the Catholic faith by visiting the infirm and distributing rosaries as a symbol of benevolence and charity. The ladies joined Sofía at the north transept and formed a semicircle. She led the rosary. Afterwards, they gathered at the chapel’s nave and plotted the week’s agenda. There were no new cases of infirm or homebound elderly in the barrio, therefore, they agreed to meet Thursday evening and visit El Hospital Municipal in town. They said a final prayer and parted ways, pairing up according to where they lived.

Since Sofía lived closest to the chapel, she walked home by herself. She welcomed this alone time and pondered her dilemma. How could she marry anyone, let alone a stranger, when her heart belonged to Nestor? Nestor, her cousin. Not any cousin, her primo-hermano. Their mothers were sisters; their fathers brothers. His parents were her godparents; her parents were his godparents. They were primos-hermanos and god-siblings. A union between Sofía and Nestor spelled incest, biologically and spiritually. She had toyed with the idea of marrying the Lord, but listen closely, mija. The devil seeks to destroy pure hearts and when he sniffs the smallest trace of weakness, he swoops in with the sweetest temptation. Sofia tasted Nestor’s lips, and that nectar forbid her to wholly give herself to the church. Sataná won that round. Now her father, following protocol for his daughter’s future, paired her up with Alfredo Gomez. There was no way to get out of it. She dared not disobey her parents.
The next morning, Sofía and Doña Elena headed to town for a shopping spree. They walked the half-mile down the zigzag road to catch a carro público at the main intersection. There they waited beneath almond trees to shelter from the sun. Doña Elena conversed with other waiting commuters, but Sofía remained detached. This caused Doña Elena consternation. She resented her daughter’s disinterest in shopping. The complete opposite of herself. Sure, on a day-to-day basis, Doña Elena wore baggy house dresses, turbans and aprons, but she cleaned up nice for evening dinners. She sponged herself down and spritzed Agua de Florida, brushed her hair out, and applied rouge and lipstick. Sofía, on the other hand, wore dowdy clothes let alone bothered with cosmetics. A real shame because natural beauty or not, Doña Elena was too aware that men liked their women to dress up for them. She worried for her daughter.

They squeezed into el carro público for the trip to Ciales Centro. Although located a mere four miles away, the curvy road reduced vehicular speed to a snail’s pace, stretching the ride to nearly two hours. Pedestrians on the road forced the driver to swerve often, avoiding men who pulled their donkeys or youths who balanced large containers on their heads. At last, when they reached the bridge, Sofía fixed her eyes on Nuestra Señora del Rosario, the town’s anchor church. Its steeple gleamed against the verdant Cordillera Mountains. She crossed herself and went into silent prayer, seeking purification. The minivan pulled up to the town square by the church. She longed to seek refuge inside, but knew better than to antagonize her mother, who did not share her daughter’s daily devotion.
The business district consisted of shops crammed atop one another on hilly and narrow streets; their storefronts in bold blues, reds, and yellows. Piragua and coquito vendors hawked their icy treats to thirsty shoppers. Doña Elena and Sofía crossed the street to the fabric shop. The stuffy store was refreshingly cool inside. Two ceiling fans whirred; lace and ribbons danced gaily with promises of grown-up frocks suitable for a newlywed. Doña Elena browsed the aisles flanked by tables piled high with bolts of cottons, linens and silks. She grabbed a few cottons in pastel colors, a green organza, and a royal blue silk. She handed them to the shopkeeper without consulting Sofía. In contrast to the colorful surroundings, the shopkeeper dressed in all black, down to her stockings. Her only color, the silver chain holding her eyeglasses, shimmered with cobalt beads. She had a nervous habit of scrunching her hawk-like nose to push up her glasses. The shopkeeper wasted no time measuring and cutting yards for her new customers. They then headed two blocks uphill to La Linda, the town’s shoe parlor. The attendant, a young man wearing a linen guayabera, complimented Sofía’s dainty feet, which embarrassed her. Doña Elena rolled her eyes at her prudish daughter. She selected three pairs of shoes for Sofía: silver sandals, black sling-backs, and pumps. Despite her disinterest in shopping, Sofía liked the shoes, especially the pumps, fashionable ochre leathers in a conservative camel color. A few doors down, they entered Farmacia Colón with its unique glass doors and crystal wind chimes that announced incoming patrons. Doña Elena picked out a complete set of Maja powders and fragrances, a Maybelline color kit, and five pairs of fine stockings.
They returned to the plaza at two in the afternoon loaded with packages. Hot and exhausted, Doña Elena sat at a bench where she spread out their bags and fanned herself. She consulted with an attendant, who advised the next carro público would depart in 15 minutes.

Sofía jumped at the chance to visit the church. “Mamá, puedo entrar un momento a la iglesia?”

“Está bien, anda y corre.” She watched her daughter enter the church. At one time, she had expected Sofía to announce that she’d receive a calling to serve the Lord. A religious life was not the sort of thing a parent requested of a child. It’s an honor bestowed on few. But as time passed, Sofía neither entertained a religious life nor a potential suitor. She realized her daughter struggled with the impending marriage and fervently wished she’d open up about her reservations. Maybe she had a secret love? Nah, there was no evidence to support that notion. People’s tongues wagged loosely and everyone knew everyone’s business. She offered up a quick prayer that their actions had not complicated whatever problem weighed her daughter down.

Sofía opened the heavy door to Nuestra Señora del Rosario. The church was about five times larger than the local chapel. It had vaulted ceilings with embellished rails, the walls adorned with ornate stations of the cross. The stained glass windows bathed her in a blue light, and she felt almost pure. She sat at a pew at the back of the church. She pulled out her rosary beads and commenced a quick round. She closed her
eyes and imagined Nestor behind her. His musky scent filled her senses. She prayed in earnest, “Santa Virgin Maria, purify my spirit.”

“I heard,” he whispered behind her ear.

Relieved her imagination had not taken a life of its own, she flushed. “What are you doing here?”

“Meet me tonight,” he said. “At grandfather’s.”

“I can’t.”

“Te adoro,” he said.

The words sent shivers down her spine, a burning sensation mounted. She clutched her rosary beads. “I’ll see what I can do.” She left without looking at him. It was all she could do to keep herself together.

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“You are so lucky,” oohed and aahed her sisters as they inspected her new acquirements. The youngest sister, Lucy, pressed the blue silk against her cheeks. “What sort of dress will you make with this gorgeous fabric?”

“Oh, it must be pleated!” said Eva, the middle sister. “With cap sleeves! I have just the pattern!” She searched her drawers. “Here it is! Take it!”
Sofía thanked her. Her bubbly sisters exhausted her, especially today. She mentally plotted how she’d leave the house tonight. She’d have to commit two venial sins. You hear that? Two sins in order to meet Nestor. That’s what happens. Once you start lying, forget about. It becomes an arroz con you know what. She’d have lie to her parents about her true whereabouts and excuse herself from the Daughters of Mary.

After dinner, she asked to be excused.

“Where are you going?” Her mother eyed her suspiciously.

“It’s Thursday. We’re ministering to the sick at the Municipal Hospital tonight.”

“Mija, you’re going to have to prioritize,” said Doña Elena. “Soon you’ll be an ama de casa and won’t have time for your church duties.”

“Déjala, let her fulfill her commitment,” said her father. “Just make sure you let the others know tonight is your last night. You understand?”

“Yes, Papá.” She wrapped a shawl around her head and hurried down the zigzag road to the main intersection. Sure enough, her sisters in spirit were gathered at the bus stop. Her heart beat in her eardrums. “Buenas,” she said.

“Perfect timing,” said their leader. “The bus should be here any minute now.”

“I hurried to let you know that I can’t join you tonight after all.”

“Is everything OK? It’s not like you.”

“I’m needed at home tonight. I didn’t want to leave you hanging.”

“Pity.”

“I’ll wait with you until the bus arrives.” She handed over a bag filled with multi-colored rosary beads. “Here, give these away.”
“Thanks! We have more than enough!” The carro público arrived and the ladies hopped on. They waved their goodbyes.

As soon as el carro público disappeared from sight, Sofía turned left and took the back road to her grandfather’s. He passed away earlier that year, cirrhosis of the liver. His one-room hut with thatched roof remained empty. Sofía and Nestor loved playing house there as children. It had a hammock hung in a corner, a dresser caddy corner to the hammock, and a small table with hair filled the other side. Nestor would stretch himself in the hammock pretending to drink rum while Sofía pretended to cook and set the table. As they grew older, each developed separate interests. He turned to softball, and she to the church where she dusted statues, wiped candles, swept floors and straightened the pews. She was so sure she’d join a holy order. When their grandfather died, the family gathered at the hut for the nine-day novenas. Nestor and Sofía, who had been his favorite grandchildren, had remained long after the last member of their families left, reminiscing and laughing at their childhood antics. Before they realized it, they kissed. Y cuando el demonio se mete, ya tu sabes. His lips invaded her thoughts. The kiss both changed and condemned Sofía.

Her body tingled as she neared her grandfather’s hut. She arrived at the old wooden gate. Nestor had lit a kerosene lamp. Her heart thundered, fully aware her soul faced imminent danger. She hesitated at the gate, regretting her instinct to come here.

Nestor snuck up and grabbed her hand. “Ven.” He said the words softly.

She shook her head. “I shouldn’t be here.”
“Come on.” He urged. He clasped her fingers. Her resolve melted. She followed him as if in a trance.

The kerosene lamp stood in the corner where their grandfather’s table had once stood. Cracks had widened and she imagined lizards and snakes had formed nests in the corners of this old house. She blinked back tears. Nestor pulled her down. They sat crossed legged, facing each other.

He wiped her eyelashes. “Let’s elope.”

She shrugged. “It’s forbidden.”

“I love you. You love me.”

She remained quiet.

“You love me, right?”

He looked so innocent, so wide-eyed and naïve. His olive skin glowed, his thick eyebrows knitted together. “What difference does it make?” she said. “We cannot be together.”

“You’re wrong. I’ve looked it up.” He went to the corner and lifted the kerosene. She hadn’t noticed it rested atop a bible. He brought both over and turned to Numbers 36:6. “Read it.”

“I know what it says, Nestor.”
“I’ll read it then. ‘This is what the Lord commands concerning the daughters of Zelophehad. ‘Let them marry whom they think best, only they shall marry within the clan of the tribe of their father.’’’ He looked at her triumphantly. “I’m of your father’s clan. We comply.”

“You’re reading it literally. That passage refers to inheritance when there are no sons to receive a father’s inheritance.” She grabbed the bible from him and pointed to Leviticus 18:6. “Here. This is relevant to our case.”

“None of you shall approach any one of his close relatives to uncover nakedness. I am the Lord.” He shrugged his shoulders. “So what? Los primos se esprimen. Cousins marry all the time.”

“You and I are more than cousins. We’re practically brother and sister. Listen.” She read from Leviticus 18:9. “Do not have sexual relations with your sister, either your father’s daughter or your mother’s daughter, whether she was born in the same home or elsewhere.”

He flung the bible to the wall. “You are not my sister.”

“A union between us would never be sanctioned. At best, our children would be deformed!” Her face burned. Why would she bring children into the equation? She felt the walls closing in. She needed air. She ran out the door, her feet deftly sidestepped stones hidden by overgrown greens. She reached the gate and lifted her skirt to jump. Nestor grabbed her.
“Leave me be!”

He turned her to him. He took her face into his hands. They sank into the ground. The wild grass consumed them, rendering them invisible to the naked eye.

Up above, in the thick foliage of an almond tree, two owls ruffled their feathers. Their sharp eyes focused on the movement below. But disappointment quickly set in when the activity did not belong to mice. Instead, they watched the union of the human forms.

∞

Sofía woke early, before the crow of the first rooster. She laid on her bed. She stretched her arms above her head and arched her back. Her spine cracked. She rolled her neck side to side, back and forth. Every movement felt delicious. Her heightened senses sent shivers down her spine. She and Nestor agreed to run off that night. They’d make their way to San Juan and eventually to New York City, far away from everyone. She’d just have to get through the day according to her parents plans, as if nothing had changed.

She went to the outhouse. A lizard peeked through a crevice on the latrine’s wall. She felt its accusing eyes. Who was she kidding? Their reckless actions would hurt many: the unsuspecting Alfredo, her well-meaning parents, Nestor’s parents. How could she run off with Nestor? Yes, he was the love of her life, but it was a forbidden love. Her lack of restraint ruined her parents carefully laid out plans. She felt torn and vulnerable. Her breath became shallow. She piled her hair on top of her head, willing air
to cool down her neck, but the air remained still. Nothing but shame piled. She needed to cleanse herself; purify herself. She ran to el pozo and submerged herself completely.

Viste, como life changes in a moment? For months, Sofía suffered in silence pining for a forbidden love. Then her unsuspecting parents arranged a marriage for her. So she suffered in silence the burden of marrying someone she had not chosen while in love with another. Now her burden tripled porque metió las patas. No longer a virgin, she committed the sin of fornication. She washed her body hard, but no matter how hard she scrubbed, she could not wash away Nestor’s touch. She had disgraced herself. She had disgraced her parents’ good name.

Defeated, she pulled herself out of the well. She could never be cleansed, or undo what was done. There was only one way to purify. Resolved to her fate, she walked back home slowly.

Doña Elena brewed coffee at the casilla. “There you are.” She beamed seeing her daughter wet. “Good girl, you bathed! I’m glad you’re getting into the spirit of things.”

Sofía smiled wanly. In a monotone she said, “Let me help you.”

“Shush. Go and get pretty. Tell your sisters to get up. We have a lot to do today before noon.”

Sofía returned to her room. She made the sign of the cross and lit the candle on her dresser. She pulled out her rosary beads, but her fingers didn’t count the beads. Her lips remained unmoving. For the first time ever, she could not pray. She felt unworthy to
turn to her spirit guide and ask for interventions as she had been doing. She tucked away the rosary beads and blew out the candle.

“Get up,” she said to her sisters. “Mami needs you.”

“Today is the big day!” they said. “Are you excited?”

She didn’t know how to respond. “It is a big day. Life as I know it ends for me today.”

They went to their mother and Sofía remained in the room by herself. She went through her things. Their previous day’s purchases had been piled on the empty top bunk. The fabrics her mother had chosen indeed were beautiful. She imagined the royal blue silk fashioned after the pattern Eva gave her. Indeed her mother and sisters had stylish taste and momentarily wished she had their keen eye. She wished the dress had already been made so that she could wear it today. She wanted to look pretty on this special day. She found a dress in her bottom drawer. A sleeveless her mother had made when she turned fifteen; green with white flowers. She had not liked the fuchsia colored stamen, but for a day like today, its showy improbability suited the occasion. She tried it on. It still fit. She took the dress to the casilla. She inserted three charcoal briquettes into the iron. She poured gasoline over carbon, struck a match and lit the fogón. While the iron heated on the fogón, she laid the dress flat on a board and sprinkled it with starch. She should’ve soaked the dress completely, but time was limited. The short cut would have to do. When she saw the charcoal turn bright red, she removed the iron and carefully, so as not to burn herself, pressed the dress.
She returned to her room and laid the dress on the top bunk. She clipped on a garter belt. Not that her intended would see the garter belt, but she felt like a woman and wanted to embody the role. She unrolled a pair of stockings, the kind with a seam. She inserted her toes carefully so as not to snag them. Dainty, the shoe salesman had called her feet. She smirked. At this moment, she felt far from dainty. She pulled the hosiery gently making sure the seam remained straight. She snapped the garter ends to the stockings. She put on the brand new pumps. They felt beautiful on her feet. She allowed herself a girlish moment and twirled. She then pulled on the dress, tugging down until the elasticized waist hugged the right places. She brushed her hair and let it drape down her shoulders past her waist. She powdered her breasts with Maja talcum, the way she had seen her mother do so many times. Lastly, she put on blush and lipstick. She rummaged through her sisters’ dresser and found silver barrettes. She put them on and their jingly bracelets.

Finally, she dared looked in the mirror. For a second, she thought it was her mother looking back at her. She looked like a full-grown woman. She fit the role. Her eyes blazed, her bosoms rose with each breath. Satisfied, she joined the rest of the family.

They gasped. “Sofía!” exclaimed Lucy. “You look beautiful!”

Her father smiled, “What is this vision before me?”

Her brother teased. “Sofía has a boyfriend…”

She blushed at the attention.
Her mother hung back. She noticed something different in her daughter. Something she couldn’t put her finger on. It made her uneasy. “Hija,” she said. “Help me make tea.”

Her father was about to object but then reconsidered. He assumed they needed to have some private women talk.

They went to the casilla.

“Do you want to tell me what’s going on?”

“What do you mean? Did I put the stockings on the wrong way?”

“No, you look perfect. But your face, you have a strange look on your face.”

She pouted. “It’s not every day a girl gets a marriage proposal, Mami.”

“Knock it off. Yesterday you looked green the entire day. Today you’re pink. Something is askew. You’re not fooling me.”

“Well, I have made peace with my fate.”

“Fate? Listen to you. Hija, all we want is your happiness. Are you happy?”

“Yes, I am.” And she meant it. She felt at peace with her final decision. She knew her salvation would come. “Don’t worry about me.”

∞

Her little brother volunteered to serve as the lookout at La Cruz. He played with a Hot Wheels car that an uncle had given him on his last birthday. The bright yellow color intensified as noon approached. “Vrroom, vroom,” he spun the car around the pedestal.
He liked playing at the Cross to observe vehicles taking turns when crossing the one-lane bridge into town. He couldn’t wait to grow up and drive his own car. Maybe he’d become a chauffeur. Out the corner of his eye, he saw the man walking up the zigzag road. He cried out, “Ahí viene el chamaco! He’s coming!”

Sofía jumped.

“Relax,” said Doña Elena. “Your father will greet him.”

“I’d like to get a drink of water.”

“Hurry.”

She kissed her mother and walked outside. She felt calm. The palms of her hands were sweaty, but she felt calm, relieved even. Her feet led her to el fogón. For a brief moment, she considered another possibility. She considered leaving Puerto Rico by herself and seek anonymity in the streets of New York. She’d spare her parents the embarrassment of an unclean daughter. She’d spare Alfredo marrying an impure woman. She’d spare Nestor the burden of living a damned life. She knew, though, rumors and gossip, whether true or not carried little weight. What truly mattered was her relationship with God. She needed to atone for carnal desires. Make herself pure for her God.

She picked up the can of gasoline and doused herself. Her hands shook, but she took her time then struck a match.
A lonely cross marks the spot where Sofía died. La gente del campo say an orange ball of fire streaked through the mountain, long hair trailing behind. She ran silently and collapsed at the old wooden gate in front of her grandfather's house. Legend has it she died pure, her untouched hair evidence of her purity.

And that’s why, hija mia, no te fíjes en los primos. The devil sniffs out temptation anywhere and causes needless heartache.
The two blocks between our apartment building on Tiffany Street in the South Bronx and my school building, P. S. 150 on E. 167th Street, felt extra long that morning. My father and I passed the lot where a grand four-story brick building, much like ours, had once stood with its marble façade and wide stairs. Now charred rubble filled the empty lot, creating a wind tunnel. Dry leaves swished past us. My ponytail slapped my face. I pushed it aside and kept my eyes on the ground, jumping over the seams that joined sidewalk tiles like I had seen other children do, chanting something about “stepping on the line.” Dad held my hand tightly and we pressed forward, heads bowed against the November draft.

As we approached school, my father explained that the teacher would ask why I had been absent. “Dile,” he said, “I had estomek egg.”

I was six years old and in first grade. My memories of school those first few years are fuzzy like the silent movies of yesteryear. No beginning, no end, just shades of gray with white letters blending into grays. As the firstborn of first generation immigrants, I knew no English. We spoke Spanish at home. We listened to Radio WADO and watched Telemundo. Dad knew enough English to get by, but he worked days as an apprentice at a printing plant and nights as an office cleaner. I was usually
asleep by the time he came home from work. I had no exposure to English before entering first grade.

To complicate matters, I had poor eyesight, though I wasn’t aware of it. I guess I had become accustomed to my blurry world and knew where everything was situated at home. Therefore, my deteriorating eyesight went unnoticed. At school, though, the teacher saw me squinting. She moved me to the front row next to Phillip, a boy who wore glasses but knew no Spanish. She sent notices home recommending I have my eyes examined. Mom, though, always threw away school correspondence. She only cared for neatness, and as far as she was concerned, my schoolwork was a mess. Like most students, I carried books by binding them together with elastics that had hooks for easy maneuvering where I’d slip in a pencil case. On Sundays, Mom threw out any loose papers or envelopes inserted in my notebook. She even threw away my artwork commenting I needed to learn how to color properly. She never checked for homework— the homework I never did. How could she? She couldn’t read, write, or speak English.

Because of the language barrier and my nearsightedness, I welcomed any excuse to miss school. I feigned sleepiness or complained about the weather. Mom often let me stay home, especially when it rained, because walking me to school was more of a nuisance than keeping me home with Andy, my one-year-old brother, who was often sick. Andy had stomach pains accompanied by awful bouts of diarrhea. Curled up in his crib, he’d moan or rock back and forth at a frantic speed, laughing incoherently. I thought him a freak. It shamed me to think this of him, but worse than having a freak for
a brother was the fear of being a freak myself. Mom was my security. I did not want to go to school. I wanted to stay home, and in this she was a willing partner. My education mattered no more to her than her own schooling had mattered to her parents in Puerto Rico: when she finished sixth grade, they kept her home to do the household chores.

Now I had been absent from school for a few days, and Dad was instructing me on how to explain my absence. I frowned and asked him to repeat it.

He let go of my hand, grasped his stomach and said, “I had estomek egg.”

With his motion, I understood estomek referred to the stomach, and I recognized the word egg. But I couldn’t understand why my Dad would advise me to say I had an egg in my stomach. Why would he tell me to lie? Or was it a lie? Did I indeed have an egg in my stomach? Wait? Could I be growing a chicken? Why not? I was already a strange duck. I thought about how my long, thick hair had been infested twice with lice, little bugs with wings that my father suffocated by spraying Black Flag into my hair and wrapping it in a towel. And now, there was this chicken inside an egg inside my stomach. Let’s face it. I was a freak. A freak like my brother Andy.

The morning bell clanged. I walked slowly down the school hall afraid of cracking the egg in my stomach. I sat quietly at my assigned seat in the front row, close to the blackboard I could barely see. I folded my hands on the wooden desk as the teacher began to take attendance.

Our teacher, whose name I never learned, was an older woman with teased blonde hair who kept her glasses on a chain around her neck. When she called my name, I raised
my hand to declare I was present. Then, just as Dad had predicted, she asked why I had been absent. I stared silently at her blank face. She repeated the question twice. My cheeks burned with the shame of being a girl with little English, a girl who could barely see, who had a freak for a brother and a chicken growing in her stomach. Somehow I managed to speak.

I stood up and held my stomach just like Dad. “I had egg in estomek!”

The class broke into laughter.

“Oh! You had a stomachache,” said the teacher.

All she did was change the order of my words, but to me, the meaning remained the same. This became the first of many language confusions for me. Not knowing how to question, and more specifically, wishing to divert the spotlight away from me, I went along and pretended to understand.

I swallowed my tears and said, “Yes. Estomek egg.”


Amalia’s Song

Viernes Social

The faulty light on the jukebox flickered. It reminded Rolando of the intermittent static emitted by a television left on past midnight’s Star Spangled Banner. A patron dropped coins into the jukebox. Judging from the pana’s long sideburns, Rolando anticipated the patron had selected Sandro, the Argentinian roquero. Young Latinos emulated Sandro’s rock and roll style. Admittedly, Rolando, a medium-built, medium-height fair skinned Latino, sported his hair in a pompadour. The similarity ended there, though. His undershirt showed through his open necked shirt; his gabardine slacks pressed into a sharp crease. He nursed a beer at Frank’s Bar while he waited for his old friend, Carlos. The carousel spun until the mechanical arm selected a 45. Trumpets filled the air. Not bad … Rolando tapped his fingers to Flight of the Bumble Bee. He preferred mariachis, but Prado’s oldie was an infectious fusion of mambo and classical. It neared crescendo when his friend arrived, his quick steps matching the speed of Prado’s trumpets.

“Pal, forgive me,” said Carlos.

Rolando rose and addressed the bartender. “Mozo, a beer for my friend.” They shook hands.

“The roller got jammed,” said Carlos. “It took longer than I thought.”
“It happens.” Rolando pulled out his wallet and placed a $5 bill on the table. “I sure don’t miss those incidents.” He had recently been promoted to cameraman at the printing plant. He was now in charge of camera calibration.

“Mr. Cameraman!” Carlos inhaled a long drag of his Winston. “You, my friend, are perfect for that job.” He exhaled. Smoke curled.

The harried waiter, with a white apron carelessly draped around his neck, placed two glasses of draft beer at their table. Suds splashed. He took the $5 and left change.

Rolando stared at the frothy spill, bubbles dissipating to yellow liquid. He wiped the sides of his glass and placed a napkin beneath to catch any spillovers.

Carlos continued, “You have a good eye for detail.” He raised his glass. “Salúd!”

The tunes of Makeba’s *Pata Pata* filled the bar. Rolando didn’t care much for this type of music. Too earthy for his taste. “Salúd.”

Carlos shifted in his seat. “How’s it going with whats-her-name?”

“That’s been over.” Rolando downed the rest of his beer and signaled the waiter. “Mozo, another round.”

“Really?” Carlos bobbed his head to the beat. “Wanna go out with my Cousin Ana?”

“I don’t know, Carlos. You’re like family to me.”

“Come on. It’s time you settle down. She could just be the girl to get you there.”
“I confess I’ve been thinking about settling down, with my promotion and all. I just don’t want static between you and I if things go awry.”

“Come on. We gotta look out for each other, ‘mano. See those gringos over there?” He motioned with his chin. “We don’t want my cousin with someone like that. I don’t even want her with a Nuyorican. Too fast. She’s innocent, naïve.” He tapped his hands along to the Makeba’s chorus. “God, I love this song! I don’t understand a word she’s saying but I love it! What is she? Afro-Cuban?”

“South African.” Rolando shrugged. “I don’t like it. It’s too urban, unrefined.”

“You’re fastidious! Loosen up, ‘mano.” Carlos shook his head and took another gulp. “It’s the mid 60s. Catch up to the times.”

“Alright, already. Set it up.”

“Perfect! She and my wife get along good. We’ll set up a double date. Mozo! Another round! On me!”

“Now you’re talking!” Rolando smiled.

Saturday Night

Rolando waited at the corner of 60th and Madison. He hated the Copa; too crowded and noisy, difficult to carry on a conversation, but La Sonora Matancera
headlined tonight, and everyone was into this new Latin sound. The March wind went right through his thin cape. He dug in his pockets and pulled out a pack of Marlboros. He lit a heater, hoping for a psychological warm up. A young couple, aglow with love, squeezed past him and entered the club. He felt jealous. He longed for a soul mate; maybe start a family. The women he met lately were either buttoned-up momma’s girls or opportunists wearing too much make-up and too little clothes. And their vocabulary, coño, could redden a trucker. The few in-betweens did not spark that je ne se quoi that deluded him. Up ahead, he saw Carlos approach with his wife and Ana. Her dark hair, long and pulled away from her face in a half twist, brought to mind his idol, Amalia Mendoza. The Mexican singing sensation always brought tears to his eyes when she belted one of her mournful mariachis. Instinctively, he touched his pompadour and hoped the Brillantina cream held up in the wind.

“Hey!” said Carlos. “Hope we didn’t keep you waiting too long?”

They exchanged greetings.

“Rolando, you’re looking sharp!” said Carlos’s wife.

“You remember my cousin, Ana,” said Carlos.

Rolando felt shy, which was out of character for him. “Nice to see you again, Ana.”

She reached over and kissed his cheek. She smelled of Mitsuoko by Guerlain, which pleased him. It signaled a modern yet classy girl.
“Shall we?” He offered his arm.

Ana latched on and they walked in.

The Copa sizzled with energy. Sparkly chandeliers graced the ballroom. A long bar with five harried bartenders flanked the far right side. Ladies dolled up in finery and men donning their best covered every inch. The dance floor maxed to capacity with fans whistling and twisting to the congas of *Burundanga*. *La Sonora Matancera* showcased their newcomer, Celia Cruz, who had the club jumping. Rolando and his entourage squeezed through dancers. They found a small table at the opposite end of the bar. Ana wasted no time and pulled Rolando to the dance floor. She swung hips side-to-side and shimmied shoulders. Her stylish dress sashayed with each movement. Rolando led and made a couple of awkward turns. Ana didn’t seem to mind his clumsy moves. The band shifted to a bolero, *Amor Sin Esperanza*. She put her arms around his shoulders and rested her head against his chest. Her familiarity made him uncomfortable. But he determined not to rush to any conclusions.

They emerged from the Copa a few hours later, giddy from the night’s excitement.

“I am exhausted!” said Carlos’ wife. “I’m afraid I overdid it. My feet are swelling!”

Carlos whistled at a passing yellow cab.

Rolando leaned in and asked Ana if she’d accompany him for a cup of coffee.
“A cup of coffee sounds perfect!”

“Carlos, Gloria. Ana and I are going to the coffee shop. I’ll take her home.”

“Ok, then, caballero. Have a good night! Ana don’t stay out too late!”

“Ha, ha,” she deadpanned, a twinkle in her eye.

They said their farewells and walked to the corner deli. Ana and Rolando scoot into a booth. It had a mini jukebox on the table. Ana twisted the knob and flipped through the selections. She squealed with delight when she found her all-time favorites, the Beatles. “Don’t you just love the Beatles?”

Rolando cringed. “Not big into American music.”

“Oh, but this is British, not American!” Ana searched through her bag. She flipped open a powder compact, and blotted her nose and forehead.

Rolando was surprised she took such liberties. Most women excused themselves and handled those private matters in the ladies rooms.

She snapped it shut then fumbled through her bag and pulled out a box of Marlboros. “Don’t tell me you’re a stickler for old-time music?”

“I prefer mariachis and ballads,” he admitted. He lit her cigarette.

“Ugh, I hate mariachis. That music belongs to my parents’ generation.”

“Ay, cará, are you calling me an old fogey?” Rolando laughed.
Their waitress approached, a tired woman with an ill-fitting pink uniform. The embroidered tag revealed her name was Mabel. Mabel pulled out a pad from the white apron, bunched around her stomach, and grabbed a pencil lodged behind her ear. “What can I get you?”

“Coffee!” they said simultaneously. He toasted corn muffin, she pancakes.

“That’s a lovely dress you’re wearing, by the way,” said Rolando. “It’s a tent dress, no?”

“Very good! How would you know that?”

“I like to browse at Macy’s during my lunch hour. Did you get yours there?”

“No way! I cannot afford their stuff.” She lowered her gaze and looked at her nails. “My mom made it. I’m lucky. She’s got a good eye and can copy most anything.”

“My sister, too!”

The waitress brought out their food; the plates clattered when she set them on the table. She refilled their coffee cups, leaving a trail of coffee drip on the table. Both Rolando and Ana immediately grabbed napkins and wiped. They laughed at their mutual compulsion for cleanliness.

The moment warmed Rolando. “What sort of work do you do, Ana?”

“I’m a file clerk at a law firm on Madison. I take typing classes at night. I wish I could go to Katharine Gibbs, but it’s too expensive. The executive secretaries come from
there. They make good money. What about you? You work with my cousin Carlos, no?”

“Pues sí. We work at the same printing plant, but now I’m a cameraman.”

“You’re a photographer?”

“No, a cameraman. I work with a high-resolution camera that transfers pictures from film to print for glossy magazines.”

“Qué chévere!” How did you manage to pull that off?”

“Ay, cará, you’re so direct! Night classes at RCA. The union paid for the classes. I tell Raul he should take classes, too, but he’s scared of physics and mathematics.”

“Well good for you!”

Mother and Daughter

Ana brushed her curls. She shielded her eyes with one hand and sprayed Alberto VO5 with the other. A mist covered her dresser filled with jars of Ponds, nail polishes, and perfumes. She dabbed lip gloss and grabbed her favorite gold earrings. “Someday I’ll replace these with diamonds.” Ana knew she’d never settle for a plain life like her mother. Life had so much to offer and she wanted it all. She wanted to travel like her gringa co-workers who took yearly vacations to exotic places. She wanted to frequent
the hot spots of New York City, attend Broadway shows, and dance at the Rainbow Room. She did not want her Latinidad to limit her choices.

“Ana, coffee’s ready,” called Luz.

“Si, mamá.” She turned off her lamp and closed the door behind her, ensuring to secure the one private space in her home. She hadn’t been able to prove it, but she suspected her brother snooped through her stuff and gave some of her things to that low-class cualquiera he called his woman. She joined her mother in the kitchen.

“You look nice today. Going out after work?” Luz leaned against the sink. She called the sink her backside’s resting place. She lit a cigarette.

“Meeting Rolando for lunch.” Ana fixed herself a cup of coffee and popped a slice of Wonder bread in the toaster.

“Rolando, eh?” Luz scrutinized her daughter’s expression. “When do we meet this mysterious Rolando?”

Ana shrugged.

Luz flicked her ashes in the sink. “It’s not proper for a girl to date without the parents blessing, you know.”

“Por favor, I’m not a little girl.” The toaster popped. Ana buttered her slice and bit into it. She avoided the conversation and concentrated on the swinging tail of their cat clock. Whatever possessed her to buy that godawful clock with roving eyes? It seemed clever at first, now it just irritated her. Their kitchen, a hodgepodge of unrelated themes
and fabrics, desperately needed a makeover. Plaques hung on either side of the cat clock, one with the Lords’ Prayer in Spanish, the other with a coqui wearing a straw hat inscribed *Puerto Rico Me Encanta*. Plastic covered the table to protect the placemats her mother had embroidered in a rooster motif. She dragged a metal chair and sat on its brown, pleather cushion.

“Just because your father is gone, may he rest in peace,” said Luz making a sign of the cross, “it doesn’t mean we don’t have morals. On the contrary, you have to be even more careful.”

Ana sighed. She knew her mother meant well. She’d have to bring Rolando around sooner or later. At first, she went out with him on her cousin’s insistence. Turns out he was right. Rolando was a good guy, mature with a steady job. The kind of guy a girl brings home. Bringing him home, though, signaled a change in their relationship. It set expectations of a serious courtship, and she wanted to make sure Rolando wanted the same things out of life as she. At this point, she was unsure.

“A respectable man with good intentions,” said Luz, “will come to our home to pick you up. None of this meeting in the streets.”

“OK, mamá, I’ll talk to him today,” Ana rolled her eyes. “Gotta go. La Bendición.”

“Dios te bendiga. Don’t forget the umbrella. It’s supposed to rain today.”

“Ay, my hair! I better grab a scarf, too! Bye mami!”
Rolando walked up to the third floor of the brownstone. The brownstones in this section of Park Slope had been converted to apartments, cramming four to six families into the space that once housed only one family. The airless staircase smelled of sofrito and fried foods. Ana was #3B but even if it didn’t have the apartment number, he’d know it as her door. El Gran Combo’s latest hit, *Boogaloo*, filtered through. He paused. Ana was a great girl, fun, good looking, kind, and above all smart. He enjoyed her company tremendously. He felt an inexplicable tenderness, a protective impulse to shield her from the immature ways she passed off as sophistication. He wished to continue their friendship; guide her, even if it took meeting her mother, but he knew he didn’t feel passion for her. He took a deep breath and rang the doorbell.

Luz opened the door. “You must be Rolando, welcome.” She offered her hand.

Rolando mentally snapped the picture before him: red hair piled in a bouffant, single strand of pearls, chiffon A-line dress accentuating her waist. He took her hand mesmerized. Electricity coursed through his fingers straight to his heart. He held onto her hand longer than prudent.

She pulled away, embarrassed.
Ana joined them at the door, oblivious to the awkward moment that had passed between her mother and her boyfriend. “Rolando come in, come in! This is my mother. Mami this is Rolando.”

Rolando’s heart sank. A sheepish smile froze on his face. “Of course, I see the eyes. My pleasure, Mrs. Dominguez.”

“Luz. Call me Luz.” Rolando noticed her flushed cheeks. She disappeared into the kitchen and his heart lurched, willing to follow her.

“Come, come meet my brother,” Ana pulled him into the living room.

He formally met Bobby and his girlfriend. The girl fit Ana’s description, a poor imitation of Jane Fonda: mini dress, go-go boots, hoop earrings the size of a platter, or so Rolando perceived. Bobby, a congenial fellow, joined his mother in the kitchen. He returned with Schaeffer and Manischewitz Concord grape wine. Luz carried a tray of Ritz crackers topped with Cheez Whiz and chunks of salami speared with toothpicks shaped like miniature swords. As soon as she walked in, Rolando’s spirits soared. He felt giddy, an excitement, rather awe, flowed through him like a kid at the circus seeing a high rope act for the very first time.

“Salúd!” he cheered.

They clinked glasses.
El Gran Combo’s single ended and a new record dropped. The mechanical arm swung and settled on the vinyl’s first groove. *Amarga Navidad*, by none other than Rolando’s all-time favorite songstress, Amalia Mendoza.

“Mami, did you sneak that in?” Ana got up to change it, but before she reached the stereo, Rolando and Luz sang the first line.

“Acaba de una vez, de un solo golpe.

Porque quieres matarme poco a poco?”

[Strike me with one blow, why kill me slowly?]

They faced each other and continued.

“Sí va ha llegar el día

Que me abandones

Prefiero corazón que sea ésta noche.”

[If the day should come / that you’ll leave me, heart / just do me in tonight]

Ana surrendered and let them finish the song. Rolando’s baritone and her mother’s soprano blended majestically to the strings and brass instruments streaming through the phonograph. She knew he dabbled with music but had not seen this side of him. The emotions he evoked through song, his shining eyes, his body relaxed into the rhythm, his cheeks flamed with color. He looked beautiful, even sexy. She looked at
him with new eyes, with a certain pride. When the song ended, the group clapped enthusiastically, complimenting the duet. Ana felt herself falling in love with this man full of surprises.

“They don’t make music like that anymore,” sighed Luz.

Rolando’s heart soared. At last someone who truly appreciated fine music.

_Luz_

The night ended. Dishes washed. Floor swept. Face cleaned. Luz sat on her vanity stool and brushed her hair. Her reflection revealed flushed cheeks. Surely the wine got to her head. She had not enjoyed herself this much in years. Her life had become a humdrum of work. Work at the factory, work at the apartment, and volunteer work at church. Ever since her Eddie was called by the Lord, she rarely laughed.

Ah, but this Rolando. He turned out to be delightful. So knowledgeable. So articulate. An old soul trapped in a young body. Who knew her daughter had such good taste in men? She was so happy for her daughter. She had prayed Ana would find a good man. Surely Eddie watched from Heaven and blessed their daughter’s future.

She should’ve taken them on their offer to go out for a nightcap. It was that kind of night to lend itself to such lightheartedness. She should have gone. “No, no,” she had said. “You kids go out and enjoy yourselves.” She sensed Rolando really wanted her to go with them. And she was so tempted. But no. No. No. The night was for young love.
She continued brushing her hair. Her eyes gleamed. She had not seen such a gleam in her eyes. Not in years. Perhaps not ever. Well maybe, maybe the time that she rode a carousel for the very first time. The music, the gaiety of the event, the closeness to Eddie when he pressed his hand down her lower back, she on top of the porcelain horse with wild eyes. The horse rising and lowering rhythmically. They were so young, so in love. So full of life. That’s what she desired for her Ana. Ana with her new Rolando.

Rolando, so full of life. What a voice. He held onto that vibrato with expertise. He must be a professional musician. Not just anybody can sing like that. She felt such emotion, such excitement when they sang together. She had not felt so full of life in such a long time. She felt a twinge; a twinge in a long forgotten place. She touched herself. She touched herself in the forbidden place, and it felt good. She had not felt good in a long, long time. Oh, but the shame! The shame; she saw Rolando’s face as she touched herself. No! She could not do it. But she couldn’t stop. It was his hand she felt. His hand that held hers for an eternity. She continued to touch herself seeing the face of her daughter’s lover.

Amalia’s Song

Rolando replayed the evening. When he closed his eyes, he saw Luz, and only Luz. Luz, radiant like her name. A real woman in flesh. Curvy. Sophisticated. Strong. To live! To finally be alive! Feel fire through his every visceral fiber. The timbre of her voice shook his core. He wished to lap every barely visible bead of sweat that formed
over her upper lip. Sink into her fountain and drown. Die, rather than endure this slow torture.

Luz. Ana’s mother. Sweet Ana. Sweet, sweet Ana. A girl. A sweet, innocent girl. He couldn’t bear to hurt her. He’d have to break off their friendship. Never speak to her again. Yet, to never speak to Ana meant to never hear Luz’s voice. Never bathe himself in Luz’s light. The night he lived is the night he died.

He thrust himself into his music like a madman. He pulled out his pad and scripted words and notes, in a feverish pitch until the sun rose.

**Luz de Mi Vida**

The sun streams through the shutters of my room

Bringing to life visions of dew-dripped leaves

The scent of mangoes, the call of the land


The tendrils of your hair capture me and

Pull me in with each radiating pulse.

*(Chorus)*

*Woman, let me in.*

*Let me in your heart*
Filled with treasures,

Delights for me alone.

Woman, let me in.

Let me make your dreams

Filled with happiness

A world of our own.

In your arms I am home, a child nurtured

Loved with no conditions. In your gaze, I’m


In your hands, I am just a simple man

Giving my heart. A man simply in love.

(Repeat Chorus)

You are my guiding light, beacon of my

Soul. I want to hold you, be the anchor

Of dreams. Feel your waves crash against my shore.

Purify, wash away the sin of our

Forbidden love. Let sin float out to sea.
Ana stormed in. She slammed the heavy steel door. Three times. Each time harder than the time before.

Luz ran to the front door. “Hija, por Dios, what’s going on?”

Ana brushed past her and slammed the door to her bedroom. Hard. Three times. Each time harder than the time before.

She flung her pocketbook on the bed. She flung herself on the bed. She slapped her forehead. “Stupid, stupid, stupid!” She should never have brought Rolando here. Gone through the embarrassment of presenting him to the family for what? So that he could dump her? Ordinarily she wouldn’t care, but it came so unexpected. They seemed to be getting along so well. They had a terrific time last night. Admittedly, he seemed to wane when they got to Frank’s Bar, but she attributed it to excessive drinking. They drank a lot here, and then at Frank’s. She had hoped that they’d go together to his place. She had felt ready to move to that next step. She thought he was ready, too, but he sent her home in a cab. Why the sudden change of heart?

Knock. Knock.

“Go away, Mami.”
“Open up.”

She got up and opened the door for her mother. “Rolando dumped me.”

“No! When? Why?”

“This morning. We went out for breakfast. He said something about friends forever but that it could never be more than that.” She flashed her eyes at her mother.

“It’s your fault, you know.”

Luz covered her mouth. “Nena, why do you say that?”

“Everything was going fine until you insisted he come here. What were you thinking? You pushed him away. Scared him off. He probably wants nothing to do with our freaky family.”

Luz sat on her daughter’s bed. “No, mi hija. You are wrong. Maybe you misunderstood him?”

“Mother. There’s no misunderstanding.” She dried her tears and sat up. “You know something? It wasn’t until last night that I really started to feel something meaningful. He came to life like I had never witnessed before. Oh, but what’s the use. It’s over.” Tears flowed uncontrollably.

Luz kissed her daughter’s forehead. She blessed her a thousand times over.

**Crux**
Rolando waited at the corner of Flatbush and Grand Army Plaza. He shielded his frame from direct view of the IRT subway line. He saw Ana’s navy blue wool. She turned the corner. She continued on to the subway. He watched her descend. He waited a few minutes then walked along Prospect Park to Underhill and St. Mark’s. He stood in front of her brownstone. He paced. It had been a week since he first laid eyes on Luz, and he couldn’t rip her out of his soul. He breathed deeply and opened the front door. He climbed to the third floor. He stood in front of #3B. He closed his eyes. He needed to see her. He needed to know if this all-consuming feeling was real or his mind playing tricks on him. Maybe it was nothing more than one magic moment, one magic night. Either way, he needed to know. Just as he was about to knock, the door opened. There she stood, Luz, radiant in her pea coat, yellow scarf tied around her head.

“Rolando? Is that you?” she asked startled.

“I should’ve called first.”

“Ana is not here, and I’m on my way to work.”

“Is there any way I can persuade you to wait a bit? I really would like to speak to you.”

She looked at him closely. He looked troubled. “Come on in. One day that I get in late will be fine.” She put down her purse and keys. She removed her coat. “Could I offer you some coffee?”

“Black. No sugar.”
“Yes, I remember.”

Warmth washed over him when she said those words. He sat silently observing her every move.

She filled a saucepan halfway with water and placed it on the stove. She opened a counter drawer and pulled out a box of Three Star safety matches, striking one and setting the burner on high. The sulfurous residue remained in the air. She felt Rolando’s eyes burn behind her. Her knees weakened. She continued moving; ignoring his stare, but her heart beat wildly. She grabbed a cigarette. Her hands shook slightly. She bent to light it against the open flame of the stove. She offered him one.

He accepted.

The radiator hissed. She removed the scarf covering her head. The water boiled. She added two tablespoons of Bustelo and stirred rapidly. She strained the coffee grounds through the coffee sock. She rinsed the saucepan removing any trace of coffee grounds. She grabbed cups and saucers from the chinero, bypassing the everyday ones chipped here and there. She turned.

Rolando stood before her. She stepped back, her backside flushed against the sink. He got closer. She dropped the cups and saucers. She dropped her guard.

**Wilt**
Rolando folded his walker. He entered the ambulette service. It read Riverdale Nursing Home.

“Good morning, Mr. Rolando. Gonna see that pretty lady of yours?”

He nodded. He pulled out a picture from his wallet and showed it to Ernie.

“She sure is pretty. How long she been there?”

“Not that long. About a year.”

“You know, spouses can reside there. Ever thought about it?

“We’re not married.”

“No? I thought…”

“Ours was a secret love. But she is the love of my life. You don’t need a piece of paper to dictate the love of your life, you know.”

“You got that right, Mr. Rolando.”

Rolando smiled. “She gave me the best years of my life. Now she doesn’t know who I am any more. But I sing to her. And she sings. For a brief moment she remembers.”