



PUTRID PIEL

Putrid Skin

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Note: All translations are culturally translated, so they are not direct translations.

La Sortija de Sofía¹

Sofía walked around the plaza every Sunday, regardless of if it was sunny, cloudy, pouring, or amidst a hurricane. She dedicated the first two hours of her day to go to mass and the same bench she used to sit on with her mother. Her mother had insisted on this ritual to start their week in high spirits while taking in the beauty that was God and his creations. Her mother had died almost a year before this particular Sunday, and Sofía found herself continuing the ritual to maintain some form of connection with her mother, as God had taken the form of a thief in the young girl's mind.

The quiet was never quiet enough in that plaza. Even as she closed her eyes, she could hear the pigeons, doves, and crows scurrying about on the cement in front of her and in the branches above her. The mix of white, grey, speckled, and black birds were disproportionate in quantity to one another, yet they lived harmoniously. The fountain around ten steps beyond her whispered moistly as it decoratively sprayed water, the breeze occasionally pushing some of the sprinklings towards her. The church some more steps away from the fountain praised the Lord who continuously granted them with strange gifts and unforeseen challenges in life, quadruplet bells ringing every so often to summon the outsiders to the up-and-coming Catholic mass. Children and their parents every so often passed by her, some parents passive-aggressively throwing comments to one another as their child ran through the waves of birds. Two older women sat on the bench besides her and noisily chattered about their friend's daughter's oldest son's children and other distant acquaintances. There were men playing dominoes not so far from them, gossiping about the women in and out of their lives while intermittently cursing amongst themselves—either at each other or in response to the women walking by.

¹ Sofía's Ring, first published in Spectrum Literary Journal, Volume 65 (2022)

Sofía heard their comments often, so much in fact that they had permanently found a home within her subconscious ever since she was a child. Not a single sliver of skin, anatomical imperfection, and slight indecency had been left unglorified, unsaid, and at times even untouched. Her mother had told her from a very young age that from the time men noticed a certain maturity to a young woman’s body, they would only seek to ravish the little innocence she had left after the time she became a woman. But when Sofía first cried to her mother about a man following her home, she was told that her uniform had been too revealing due to her prepubescence. Sometimes, these comments were replaced by praises, since her mother had found great satisfaction in birthing and raising the most gentle, beautiful, desirable woman in town—or so she said.

As the men whispered about the crease between her breasts, another body shoved himself against her left side. Her eyes screamed open as she felt her throat restrict around her larynx, a fist squeezing her heart. He smiled, wide enough for his lips to curl into his gums, while wrapping his arms around her. “¿Te asusté?”² He chuckled calmly, drawing lazy circles on her right arm as the men eyed them with an amused glint to their eyes. Sofía hummed breathlessly and affirmatively, clutching and pulling her dress further up her chest. Her eyes focused on a tiny, insignificant pebble on the ground, the edges around it slowly blurring. She blinked rapidly and sniffed before meeting his dark, glittering eyes.

Luis never seemed to be able to stop himself from surprising her. He often snuck up to her in this way, eager to hear how her screams clutched around her throat—or so she felt. He was as respectful and gentle as a woman her age could hope a man to be, romantic and charming in his own peculiar way. The child-like glow that always flowed around him made him easily

² Did I scare you?

accepted by strangers, especially women. He made sure those around him felt secure in his presence, and he seemingly doubled his efforts with Sofía. She grew accustomed to his mischievousness, particularly after her mother had openly begun to show her approval of the boy. Although Sofía never quite understood her eagerness, she found herself excusing her mother's actions by convincing herself she felt as strongly as her mother did for the boy.

It was after her mother's death that she had come to realize that her youth wouldn't last forever, so she pushed herself to try to truly fall in love with him.

As she sat on the bench, she noticed how his normally smooth, olive cheek was tinged with a flaming red color. He looked ill, panicked, or simply nervous, as he kept darting his eyes to the small, cubic bulge in his left pocket. After a couple of strong huffs, he grabbed her sweaty hands and tugged—perhaps a bit too forcefully—towards himself, “Mira, Sofía, yo sé que nos vamos pa la uni y que we're still young and shit, pero you're the one, you know?”³

She hummed, unable to do much else as she struggled to focus on him.

Luis and she had been dating a few years prior to her mother's death, but her lack of effort made their relationship more of a public affair. As her mother's health had begun to deteriorate, she found consolation in Luis's arms and eager affection. It was not often that they managed to escape into private, as she was taught that a lady should never be alone with a man, especially during the night and for an extended amount of time. However, at times of great loneliness, Sofía found the lustful touches and teasing to be a freeing distraction, albeit one that happened on rare occasions of solitude. Luis could easily spend the night with his friends drinking, smoking, screwing whatever they wanted to without much of an excuse, but Sofía was to make her way home, alone, before the sun changed the color of the sky. The only times she

³ Look, Sofía, I know that we're going to university and that we're still young and shit, but you're the one, you know?

was out after dark were at the town carnivals and neighborhood dances her family sometimes forced themselves to attend to keep up appearances, which grew infrequent as her mother grew ill. Her mother's sickness drew the attention away from the young girl, however, so the opened window in her room was left unnoticed by everyone but Luis.

Almost all those nights were spent with Sofía crying in Luis's arms, so it was inevitable for him to find a way into her quivering, weighing heart. He kissed her temple and tightly pressed her under his chin, only indulging in a kiss or two whenever she requested it. He filled her lungs with his woody, pheromone-filled cologne, a smell she welcomed over the stench of lingering death that surrounded her home. Her last conversation with her mother was a confession of her growing attachment to the boy, and her mother admitted to her relief in knowing that her daughter wouldn't die alone.

Sofía only shifted her attention to him when she felt something cold being pressed onto her right hand. He screwed a golden ring onto her ring finger, the three small diamonds adorning the face of the ring casting the sun's rays into her eyes. Once it was nudged into the perfect spot at the base of her finger, Sofía felt a prickling sensation in the pores that were encased beneath the ring. The corners of her smooth, rosy lips tugged slightly upwards while her brows twitched closer together at the inexplicable sensation. The tingling continued, as if the ring had clogged the pores on her skin and had begun some form of swelling.

"Se ve bonita,"⁴ she murmured, staring directly at the ring and how the light shifted and reflected whenever she slightly altered the position of her hand. "Era de Abu. She gave it to me cuando se enfermó y pues ya sabía que you were the one,"⁵ he continued to ramble, but his voice became a distant murmur. The ring kept her gaze. The square diamonds within the body of the

⁴ It looks pretty.

⁵ It was Grandma's. She gave it to me when she got sick and, well, I already knew you were the one.

ring began to shine individually, each absorbing light eagerly before the sun shifted its attention to the rest of the ring. The golden base was less reflective by comparison, but the light vibrated off it like heatwaves on a skin-scorching pavement. She brought the ring closer, noticing how the skin beneath the ring had shifted in color. A green tinge began to ooze underneath her skin, but she snapped her gaze away as she realized her partner had become suspiciously quiet.

“Me tengo que ir,”⁶ Sofía quickly responded, standing up and tugging her hands free from his moist, sticky grasp. She pressed her loose sundress down to cover the skin below her midthighs that had become exposed.

“Pero,”⁷ he stopped himself, sighing as he looked away from her. After a few seconds, he met her wavering eyes. “Esta bien. We’ll talk about it later. ¿Te acompaño?”⁸ He asked, his smile twitching somewhat as he extended his hand to her.

“No te preocupes. Papi me eta eperando,”⁹ she bowed her head towards him, moving only when he pressed his lips against her cheekbone. She took a few steps back and waved him goodbye, hastily turning around as she made her way home. She checked her finger quickly as she crossed the busy street in front of her house, sighing before making her way inside. She hoped her father wouldn’t notice the foreign object wrapped around her finger, but she watched as the reflective jewelry immediately caught his attention.

“Mera, ¿qués eso?”¹⁰ Abdiel’s voice was lower than usual. Sofía only needed to utter Luis’s name before he vividly gestured toward nothing in particular in the air. “Ese prieto no sirve pa na, Sofía. Yo no sé que carajo tú y tu madre ve en él,”¹¹ he continued to rant, his hands

⁶ I have to go.

⁷ But.

⁸ Alright. We’ll talk about it later. Do you want me to go with you?

⁹ Don’t worry. Daddy is waiting for me.

¹⁰ Hey, what is that?

¹¹ That dark-skinned boy is good for nothing. I don’t know what the fuck you and your mother see in him.

gesturing at the ring and the various objects in the house that had nothing to do with what he spoke about. Sofía often found herself in this position whenever her partner was mentioned or implied, more so after her mother's death. Abdiel often voiced his distaste for the boy to come from the lack of passion and workmanship that he had found often correlated with Luis's family, but his late wife often reminded him that she usually found people projecting their own insecurities onto others—something he seemed severely wounded by.

Sofía asked her about it a few times, wanting to understand her father's distaste, and the only reply she ever got from her mother was, "Hay gente que cree que hay que mejorar la raza. Pero no le hagas caso, ya somos perfectos."¹² It puzzled her, for, like the variety of birds that scattered around the plaza, she found that the immediate world around her contained people of different shades, hair textures, and features derived from their ancestors. However, as her mother gave her the same reply for the last time, she noticed the paleness of her skin, the golden hue to her smooth strands of hair, and the lightness in her eyes that Sofía had inherited. As she compared her features to Luis's, she realized her father's preferences aimed for a Spaniard aesthetic, so he would simply never accept the boy.

Valeria had grown attached to Luis for a variety of reasons. She often spoke about Luis's uncanny similarities to her husband in terms of his physique. Their skin color and eyes were almost identical, and Luis's nose curved similarly to that of her husband. Despite the rumors she often heard about the possibility of Abdiel having cheated on her with Luis's mother, she had voiced on more than one occasion that her husband was a good, loyal man. Sofía never heard this from her mother directly, or even in any detailed manner, before her death. To fill the empty, four-foot hole in her heart, she found solace in hearing these stories through her aunt, as her

¹² There are people that believe we have to make our race better. But don't mind them, we're already perfect.

father only seemed to mention Valeria when the lid of his composure was removed from the boiling pot that was his temper.

Andrea was similar enough to Valeria. While Sofía had not specifically mentioned her partner's name or described him to her, she seemed to have a knack for finding out the most intimate of details about her and others. Andrea often stated that women like her had a well-functioning ear, sensitive to the whisperings of the town that easily trickled into her everyday life. Her occupation as an eight-to-five, Monday to Friday nurse and her lack of company at home seemed to give her ample time to work on her craft, especially since—as Sofía had come to realize whenever she took her mother to the hospital—she seemed to not quite put as much time and effort into her paying occupation as the other nurses that attended to Valeria's needs did. So, as the afternoon blended into nightfall, she invited herself into Sofía's room and inspected every minor scratch, dent, and curve to the golden jewelry. “Mija, ese nene te quiere mucho,”¹³ she said in amusement, her words curved in a way that only emphasized her bewilderment. She continued to speak on how finding out about her only niece's love life through the innerworkings of the town's gossip made her feel othered by Sofía, but Sofía merely hummed in reply as she stared at the ring.

She refused to meet those quivering, questioning eyes that seemed to beg for every nook and cranny of her personal life, for she knew she tended to do anything but say no to other people. After a long sigh, she voiced, “Lo sé... pero me ta dando un allergic reaction or something.”¹⁴

¹³ Girl, that boy sure loves you.

¹⁴ I know... but it's giving me an allergic reaction or something.

“¿De qué hablas nena? Yo no veo na,”¹⁵ Andrea quickly replied, her brows spreading wrinkles onto her forehead. It seemed that the pause her niece had taken was a sign for her to continue her train of thought, Sofia’s previous statement becoming merely an assumed nervousness while her aunt ranted about the current youth preferring the company of strangers over a singular lover. As her aunt’s became white noise Sofia struggled to shift the ring upwards, the slightly swollen tissue on her finger sending a few, subtle stings up her forearm. This sensation lasted throughout the night, leaving Sofia no choice in her mind but to forcefully rip the constricting metal off her finger. She delicately placed it on the nightstand, the quiet hiss of her nails grazing the glass-topped wood echoing in her mind.

She continued to think, then wonder, then dream about the ring.

As morning came, she turned her wakening eyes to the table, only to find the jewelry missing. She groaned as she shifted her weight to the edge of the bed, peering over to see that the ground showed no signs of the object. “Ñeta,”¹⁶ she hoarsely whispered, crawling out of bed and onto the floor to check under the furniture where the ring could’ve fallen onto at some point of the night. Panic slowly began to bubble at the lower base of her sternum when she found that the golden shine was nowhere to be seen. She jumped up and began to dash around the room, trying to recall if, somehow, she had misremembered where she last placed the ring while getting dressed as quickly as she could. She shoved the hanged garments aside in large handfuls until she singled out her uniform. Her hand reached towards the uniform, but snagged on a lace, white dress. The skin between her brows creased while she inspected the dress, finding that the lace stretched from the base of her right ring finger.

¹⁵ Child, what are you talking about? I don’t see anything.

¹⁶ Fuck.

The ring, as she extracted the lace from its bite, glimmered in the sunlit room. As she tried to recall where the ring had come from a shiver vibrated through her forearm, then back, and continued to travel throughout the entirety of her body before finalizing at the base of her spine. From the tip of her nail to the base of her knuckle, a deep, chilling green had replaced her normally pale skin. The subtle lines on her ring finger had smoothed over, for there was a small amount of swelling on the area above the ring that made it impossible for her to remove it. She tugged at it and yelped in discomfort, the prickling sensation developing into a sharp pinch.

After tears began to pool underneath her lower lash line, she dressed herself and crossed paths with her father as they headed towards the kitchen. She found him staring at her finger, a bubbling, indigestible anxiety crawling up her stomach as she made Abdiel coffee. Silence had replaced the normally chattering atmosphere, causing her to stumble through her aggravated awkwardness. She waited impatiently, tapping her nails unrhythmically to the kitchen table before sputtering, “Me van a tener que amputar el deo, ¿verda?”¹⁷

“¿De qué carajo habla?”¹⁸ The look he gave her—as if she were yelling obscenities while running bloodied and nude around a children-filled plaza—made her clench her jaw. Her teeth sank into their paralleled crevices tightly, and she began to feel the pressure at her cheekbones. Various thoughts, or rather concerns, rushed through her head, but embarrassment quickly overcame her as her father continued to stare at her, his brows creasing in disappointment. She quickly excused herself, apologizing for her attempt at a joke before going to school.

Luis wrapped his right arm around her middle as they walked through the whispering halls. More than once, a loud gasp interrupted the stream of whispers, which were soon riddled with gossip about what the ring on Sofía’s finger meant. Her body sucked itself tensely inwards

¹⁷ They’re going to have to amputate my finger, right?

¹⁸ What the fuck are you talking about?

whenever her right hand was openly, eagerly, stubbornly stared at and touched, the swelling on her ring finger growing significantly as the day went on. However, no one mentioned the green undertones that continued to spread towards the rest of her hand and fingers. Instead, they focused on the golden band that continued to send shots of discomfort through Sofía's body.

The color, texture, and swelling continued to worsen and spread, forcing her to hesitantly voice her worries about the ring's effect on her hand to her few friends. Their responses seemed to excite the pinched nerves underneath the ring, adrenaline rapidly spreading a numbness through her body, for they seemed to be unable to point out her worsening condition—much like people did when they hesitantly, carefully avoided Valeria's deterioration. By the middle of the week, Sofía merely existed as her friends muffled through their gossip, wakefully asleep in the reality that stopped fully processing in her mind.

Her veins wrapped around her muscles like vines on an old, run-down house. Her arteries grew and spread like roots from a flamboyant tree. Her capillaries twitched like earthworms under the moss that was her skin. The tips of her fingers had turned a dark, weathered, humid brown, a sap-like perspiration thickly seeping through her porous skin. The smell that permeated through the limb was a mixture of sour, rotten eggs and humid, mold-ridden towels. Hours of nausea emptied her stomach from everything but bile, the contents of her vomit becoming a mucus, throat-sticking green with small chunks of supple, muscle-like clots. The vibration of heated whispers shook her deafened eardrums, and she was sent home by mid-day after fainting in her seat.

In the morning, she dragged her socked feet into the kitchen. Her right hand dangled loosely at her side. Her shaky, inept left hand struggled to carry the intricate movements required to open the fridge, pick out the ingredients for dinner, and place them on the kitchen counter. She

huffed as the warm, humid air licked sweat that stuck her hairs onto the back of her neck, the rancid stench oozing from her arm mixing with the plastic-like smell of the raw chicken that she placed on the cutting board.

Her skin pulsed visibly as the moss spread onto her shoulder, a few mushrooms blooming on her arm. Every time her eyes met a reflective surface, the green cells continued to spread under her skin before bile bubbled from her pores and formed into the texture that had grown throughout her arm. As the growth moistened, it began the process of decomposing, but her limbs remained intact. The rotted pores fell apart into wet, chewed-like chunks onto the floor beneath, and all that was left was the viscous, brown, muscle-like skin that now existed beneath her forearm. The ring, however, had remained unaffected by her body's transformation.

Steam surrounded the kitchen as she removed the lid from the pot containing the rice and pink beans. She used the large wooden spoon to mix the rice, beans, and large, cubic squares of pumpkin together, struggling greatly to do so with her weakened left arm. She turned to the raw chicken, sliding a large, silver, reflective butcher's knife towards her, and her left hand shook weakly. She groaned as she picked the object up, struggling to cut a few slices of chicken before placing the knife down to catch her breath.

The ring cast a shivering ray into her eyes.

The room around her faded into darkness as she stared at the ring, the bright orange tone surrounding her fading into a muted blue. Flies began to land on the uncooked pieces of chicken besides her palm on the cutting board, rubbing the tips of their front legs back and forth before sinking their claws onto the meat. A few flies migrated to her hand, but quickly flew away as her muscles continued to twitch, pulse, and shiver.

The ring glowed warmly as the moonlight reflected from the butcher's knife onto her finger. Her ring finger had become so swollen that the fingerprint underneath the tip had smoothed out completely, blisters that spurted black, runny liquid staining the pieces of chicken near her hand. The pulses that ran under her finger to the moss above her forearm were visible, continuing to push liquids between the cracks and blisters. The ring glimmered against the nail-less finger. Her left hand wrapped comfortably around the handle of the butcher knife. She continued to stare at the finger, carefully separating the digits with the tip of the knife. Her pinky and middle finger almost formed a straight line, a dark shadow reflecting off the ring. A vibration rung softly in her ears, and, after a few shaky breaths, she thrust the knife above her head, lunging it towards the skin beneath the ring.

Abdiel grabbed her left wrist, halting the movement as he yelled. The air surrounding his mouth and Sofia's eardrums vibrated intensely, speckles of spit landing on the curve of her ear. Removing the knife from her grasp, his eyes twitched as he gestured to the air around her head. The artificial light's rays melted onto the golden ring on her finger. The diamonds grinned brightly.

Sofia turned away from Abdiel and made her way to her bedroom, bumping every so often into the objects and walls around her. She closed her eyes as she threw herself onto her bed, asleep before her head thumped against the warm mattress.

Abdiel awoke to crows frantically knocking their wings against the window's metal shutters, his body shooting up as they squabbled loudly before flying away. "Fucking puto chango esto,"¹⁹ he muttered in between grunts, stretching a yawn out of his body before scratching the side of his temple with his pinky. The jagged edge of his elongated nail caused him to hiss, the scratch irritating the skin hidden beneath his thick brow. He brought the nail to his mouth and bit at it, intermittently inspecting it between bites until the jagged edge was smoothed out.

He groaned as his knees popped when he stood, the twisting of his back emitting another coupling of cracks, "Diablo, etoy viejo."²⁰ After thirteen minutes of shuffling his feet to and around the bathroom, he blindly picked a faded white t-shirt from his drawer and a pair of well-worn jeans from his hanger in his closet. The Sunday church bells rung softly in the distance while he headed to the door to put his shoes on, and as he toed his wrinkled feet into his brown chanclas,²¹ the thick smell of coffee wafted into the room. He made his way to the brightly lit kitchen, "Sofia, ¿eta mejol?"²²

Sofia's body was hunched over the table, leaning above her right hand that was tightly pressed against the weathered wood. She shivered as sweat collected at the base of her neck while the rest of her exposed skin was covered in thick, running drips. Her transparent skin looked like raw duck meat as it exposed the veins that weakly vibrated underneath. Her thin, white nightgown hung from her elbows, exposing the upper half of her torso.

Abdiel's eyes roamed slowly as he stood behind her, following the skin from the base of her neck to her shoulder, down her back, and snapped his eyes away as they landed on her

¹⁹ These fucking crows.

²⁰ Damn, I'm old.

²¹ flip-flops

²² Sofia, are you feeling better?

twitching breast. “Sofía, ¿qué te pasa?”²³ He asked, placing his hand on her right shoulder. She twitched and yanked her shoulder away from his hand, breathing in short and quick breaths as another drip of clear liquid fell onto the back of her hand; and her head hung closer to the ring.

“Café... Quiero café,”²⁴ she mumbled through another shiver.

“Okay,” he replied slowly, walking past her towards the other side of the kitchen. He opened a few cabinets, first one with full of glass plates, organized by size and plainness; then one with the wine and whiskey glasses, evenly divided throughout the whole cabinet; then one full of glass bowls and cups, the latter being found at the bottom of the cabinet and organized similarly to the plates. He picked a large, plain white coffee cup and a smaller, decorated teacup. He filled the first to the top with only coffee, while the latter was filled mostly with milk and sugar. Leaving the milk and sugar containers open, he turned towards her.

Time slowed as he watched Sofía gasp softly, a high-pitched, euphoric breath spreading a smile across her paled cheeks. Her eyes momentarily twitched into the back of her head, her body physically relaxing from its previously tense position as she stopped shivering. She held her breath.

The finger rolled off the table, leaving a trail of blood behind it until it landed on the floor besides her quivering feet. Blood continued to ooze out of the finger, the ring still wrapped around the base of the pale, white dismembered limb.

“¿Qué carajo hiciste, Sofía?”²⁵ He yelled as he dropped the cups and quickly looked around him. As he grabbed the kitchen towel, he looked down at the finger on the floor and

²³ Sofía, what’s wrong with you?

²⁴ Coffee... I want coffee.

²⁵ What the fuck did you do, Sofía?

gagged, holding his hand to his mouth. The scent of coffee mixed with the minty sourness of vomit circled around him, and he stepped back until his lower back hit the counter.

Sofía stared at her pale, white hand, flipping it back and forth and bringing it closer to her face. She counted the fingers left in her hand with her eyes, taking in the knob that twitched in between her pinky and middle finger. Her breathing became erratic again as her eyes roamed the rest of her pale, white arm. A gush akin to bright red rain rushed from her hand and onto her nightgown from the tip of her bony elbow. The blood pooled and soaked into the delicate, smooth fabric, sticking to the skin on her thigh and spreading to the chair below it. The ring suffered the same fate, the high-quality metal becoming encased in drying, viscous blood. The small diamonds encrusted at the top of the ring still glimmered subtly, as the blood had yet to contaminate them. The finger laid still, life pouring out of it as it began to grow paler and transparent. Her brown eyes met his, opened wide as they vibrated intensely.

The knife fell from her left hand, thumping onto the table as she screamed, and the finger twitched slightly, causing the ring to slip onto the bed of liquified roses beneath it.

Nevada de Sangre²⁶

Verónica's thick coat tightened across her shoulders as she heard her daughter frolicking in the snow. A spray of snow kicked up by María's feet hit her face. Her brows twitched. She sucked her lips into a thin line, feeling her gloved hands curl into tight fists. As she thought of hitting her daughter, her joints ached. She only wanted to stop and sit for a moment, to rest her head against the wet tree trunk behind her. She breathed heavily as more snow hit her face, a headache quickly setting before she counted back from ten. With the number six, a small giggle shot her eyes open.

"María, cáyate la fucking boca,"²⁷ she hissed in between gritted teeth, staring at the little girl who immediately froze. María's eyes widened before looking down, her orange gloved hands slowly covering her eyes as she sat on the ground. Verónica sighed while her body numbed, the quiet forming a thin bubble around them.

She forced herself to walk towards the ball of oversized, mismatched clothing—solid mixtures of royal purples, baby pinks, vibrant oranges, and deep blues cocooned María's body. She noticed her daughter had dug a hole into the snow. The wet, muddy ground smeared the snow around it, a mix of leaves and dirt clumped onto María's pink and purple boots. Verónica sat next to her, wrapping her arms around the twitching, sniffling child. "Mamita, perdóname, you just can't go playin in the snow like that,"²⁸ she reminded her in a raised pitch. María's body moved, and Verónica pulled away slightly after her daughter's quiet whimpers muffled.

²⁶ Bloody Snowfall

²⁷ María, shut your fucking mouth.

²⁸ Baby girl, forgive me [...]

María bit down on her index finger's knuckle, her eyes screwed shut. Her olive skin flushed as she began to shake, tears seeping down over her cheeks. The bitten skin beneath her teeth whitened before she wailed deeply.

Verónica pulled María onto her chest, carefully running her fingers through her daughter's tight curls as she pressed her cheek onto the top of her head. She took a deep breath in, her daughter mimicking her before taking a slow breath out. She repeated the action until she felt her daughter's body relax. Verónica only hoped that one day her daughter could return to being a normal child again.

Heavy, dark gray clouds stilled these woods, and the persistently worsening snowfall had already packed around two feet of snow around them. The White Christmas María was promised came early, as they had traveled up north sooner than planned. This past month of seemingly endless walking, running, scavenging, and fighting for survival had thickened the skin underneath Verónica's feet, suctioned her skin onto her bones, and reduced her thoughts to simply keep going until they reached Toronto. She lost count of how many miles were between her and safety. All she could remember at that exact moment was what to do once she managed to get to Detroit. *Follow I-94 toward Blue Water Bridge, someone will meet you there*, she repeated whenever the quiet became too much for her. All the directions before that had wandered off into the unknown, much like the group she had previously tagged along with.

The pine trees breathed deeply while the wind consistently howled through them. The dead trees that were sprinkled throughout the forest quivered. If it weren't for the hints of green amongst the pine trees, and María's obnoxiously colorful set of clothes, Verónica would have thought the world had become monochromatic. For days, dark clouds and heavy snowfall had dulled her vision, a dense homesickness settling within her very soul.

Verónica never thought she'd miss Orlando as she did then. While it never felt quite like home, it was a decent substitute, all things considered. She missed the warm blue skies and vibrant green palm trees, along with the vibrant blue, red, and yellow buildings she'd pass on her way to work. She missed the smell of rain. She even missed the sometimes loud and obnoxious people she'd run across. She was used to handling herself there, knew the unspoken rules of where to speak Spanish and where to keep to herself. She knew where she could meet people like her and where she would rarely come across them. She knew the environment, felt comfortable in knowing what she was up against. Her days were repetitive, predictable, and, most importantly for her, easy. *Ahora ni tengo una puta idea que carajo etoy haciendo,*²⁹ she thought, rubbing her eyes slowly as she sighed.

A deep, guttural growl emanated from behind them.

Verónica snapped her body toward the sound. It was an animal, its movements a dull yellow blur as it leaped toward her. She barely had time to think before pushing her daughter away. María stumbled back headfirst into a log and yelped loudly, her hand shooting to the back of her head. Her daughter's eyes widened as she noticed her hand before darting in Verónica's direction.

The animal's paws shoved Verónica's chest.

The dog opened its mouth with a *squelch*, then snapped its teeth shut as it landed on her chest, its mouth dripping black slime on her face and neck. Verónica fell onto her back, while she struggled to keep the dog's sharp teeth away from her face. She pushed against its neck with her right hand, her left pushing against its torso. The animal continued to snap its mouth at her, Verónica digging her hands into its shoulder and neck to keep it away. Then she remembered her

²⁹ Now I have no fucking idea what the fuck I'm doing.

pocketknife and searched her pocket for it with her left hand. At the same time, she forced her right arm into its mouth, hoping to keep its teeth away from her face. The growling muffled as its teeth sank into her thick sleeve.

Her body suddenly jolted as she grabbed the cold metal.

She flicked the knife with her thumb and stabbed the blade into the animal's torso. It whined and growled, and she continued to plunge her weapon into the body. Slowly, the animal's cries subsided as it collapsed onto her chest. Verónica's ears rang as she frantically pushed the animal off her.

She thrust herself backward, propelling clumps of snow into the air. She could hear the high-pitched wheezing that burned her chest and throat. She clutched her heart as her vision blurred and sharpened. She felt tears warming her frozen cheeks. She counted from ten, breathing deeply before her eyes darted toward the dying animal.

The dog, a golden retriever, was ghastly and malnourished, its twitching rippling the mangy fur that sporadically covered its flesh. It huffed with its final remnants of life. Its white, cloudy eyes rolled onto the back of its head; its pale green gums hidden after the tight folds around its nose relaxed. Its fur was wet and matted, stuck together by dried and fresh clumps of blood, snow, and earth. Most of the blood carpeted the fur around its mouth, neck, and chest. The fresh wounds oozed a thick, oil-like substance, small clumps of red and dark green matter splotching onto the snow.

Verónica felt her organs sink and tense as the animal began to look more docile upon death, despite its emaciated state. She slowly stood, shuffling towards it as flashes of the dog's sharp, brown canines, its thick, oily saliva and spotted, pale tongue, and its heavy, empty eyes ran through her head.

She wiped the slowly freezing tears and saliva off her face, her heart pumping out of her chest as she grabbed her abandoned backpack.

“Mamá,” María whined.

Verónica turned to see María who had crumpled to the ground behind a nearby tree. Her small hands dug into her tight brown curls, and a shivered breath whispered past her pale, cracked lips. She was clearly in pain, but all Verónica could bring herself to care about was the still animal lying a couple of feet away from them.

She grabbed her backpack, then María’s arm before she dragged her child across the snow. She chose to ignore María’s grunts and shivers of pain. She chose to ignore the way María pulled against her hold on her arm. She chose to ignore everything until a small whisper settled guilt into her gut, “Mamá, blood.”

María’s face paled as she stared at her dark-red hand.

“Mamita, why didn’t you tell me?”³⁰ Verónica asked, sighing as she set down her backpack in search for some form of fabric or bandaging. The snowfall had thickened, she realized.

“You pushed me,” she whispered softly, sinking her small arm into the backpack, and pulling out a candy bar. She struggled to bite into the stale, frozen chocolate.

Verónica hummed, looking up at the densely clouded sky. The dark greys didn’t provide much to look at, but she could feel her body begin to panic. Her ears grew heavy as the slightest sounds rang within them. Her sight hazed at the edges, blurring while her head tried to make sense of the present and past. She felt as if she were sinking further and further into the ground

³⁰ Baby girl [...]

with every breath she took before the last few seconds, maybe minutes, maybe days repeated themselves in her memory.

She did push her, didn't she? But she didn't push her that hard, not that she could recall. So, why was she bleeding? She crumbled to her knees before a choked sob ran through her body. A small body pressed against her chest, and her spine curled as she wrapped her arms around her daughter. She held on to the oversized, dark blue coat that swaddled María's body as if her life depended on it. Broken syllables and consonants stabbed her collarbone as moist breaths caressed her neck. The words slowly stitched together, and she came back to just in time to hear her daughter whisper, "Mamá, it's okay. Te perdono."³¹

Verónica convulsed as she swallowed any sound that attempted to crawl out of her body. They strangled her, burned her throat, and hammered onto her chest before they tried to force themselves out of her. A thin cry expelled from her constricted vocal cords, a final convulsion shattering every cell in her body before she abruptly stood.

María huffed as she was shoved onto the ground. Small, soft puffs of air pooled from her slightly parted lips, her chest barely lifting as her eyes locked with Verónica's.

Verónica sighed deeply, kissing María's freezing forehead before a harsh gust of wind almost propelled her onto the snow. She quickly scanned the area, but only the shadows of trees circled around her. She noticed a large, empty space between the trees, and she tugged her daughter onto her hip before she walked towards it. She struggled to keep herself up against the winds, push her legs through the snow, and focus her eyes through the thick downfall, but she eventually managed to see the outline of a building. A thick layer of snow covered what looked

³¹ I forgive you.

to be the front porch of the cabin. When she found the front door, she shoveled as much snow as she could away from the entrance with her feet.

María practically shoved herself against the surprisingly unlocked door, the door banging against the wall as she loudly claimed ownership of the cabin.

The screaming winds pushed Verónica's body inside as she chased after her daughter. She could feel her hand digging tightly into María's shoulder, a developing headache intensifying her rage. She could care less for the quiet, pained sob María made as she gripped harder. She could feel a vein in her forehead throb as she locked eyes with her daughter. Her lips tightened, and she had to remind herself that hitting María would only lead to more trouble.

“¿Qué... carajo... te dije?”³²

“Pero Mamá... nobody's home if the lights are off,”³³ María whispered, her voice cracking when Verónica forcefully let go of her. She continued to stare daggers into her daughter's eyes, speaking through her teeth, “Tú sabe que la gente apaga la luces pa econdense.”³⁴

She let go of María, clenching her fists as she walked to the front door. The cabin seemed to be barren of any furniture, but she found that all the couches, chairs, and tables had been piled up by the front of the staircase. The wind pushed against her persistently as she forced the door closed. The air within the house was dense and still, the walls muffling the howling winds outside. It would make sufficient shelter for the time being.

She threw her backpack by the fireplace before collecting four wooden logs from the pile nearby, throwing them onto the ashes, and igniting the logs with a match and a bit of rubbing

³² What... the fuck... did I tell you?

³³ But Mom... [...]

³⁴ You know that people turn off the lights to hide.

alcohol. María hesitantly shuffled towards the fire, locking her wide-open eyes with Verónica's as if asking for permission to sit. She sighed, reaching her hand out before pulling her daughter as close to the fire as she felt comfortable. She helped María out the thicker layers of her clothing, setting them aside for the time being. Digging through her backpack one last time, she pulled out a flashlight—shoving it into her coat's right pocket.

She stood and glanced at María, noticing how pale her face had become. *Follow I-94 toward Blue Water Bridge, someone will meet you there. I-94, Blue Water Bridge, someone will meet you there.* A small bead of blood stuck to the back of her neck, and she realized she had never patched her daughter's wound.

“María, I need you to stay still. ¿Entendiste?”³⁵ She barely waited for her daughter to nod before she pulled out the fabric and bandages from her backpack, securely wrapping it around her head. She slapped the small hands that tried to adjust the bandaging, a consistent whining worsening her headache. Verónica clutch her daughter's cheeks with her hand, forcing her to look into her eyes, “Vengo ahora, quédate aquí. Don't you dare move.”³⁶ Letting go, she kissed María's forehead as she walked towards the barricade blocking the stairs.

She began to move the furniture towards the main room, which she assumed was originally the living room. In the beginning, she tried to arrange the furniture in a way that made logical sense, placing the dining table and matching set of chairs in the area between the living room and the kitchen. However, after moving the fourth chair into its place, her struggling lungs forced her to sit down. The couch, recliner, lamps, end table, bookshelf, and anything else that was lodged into the makeshift barricade was simply pushed aside into another cluster.

³⁵ Understand?

³⁶ I'll be back, stay here.

As she made her way upstairs, a sickly sweet, putrid stench oozed from the top of the stairs and into her nostrils. She gagged loudly, her throat and abdomen constricting as she hunched away from the odor. If she had eaten anything in the past couple of hours, she knew her body would have thrown it out of her system. A thick, tacky fluid lodged itself between her throat and mouth, a bitter, burning taste spreading itself on her tongue before she spit onto the floor. Verónica shivered intensely at the feeling, wrapping an arm around herself while the other pulled her turtleneck up to cover her mouth and nose. Her eyes focused on the floor, noticing droplets of blood that trailed from the bottom of the stairs. She held onto the railing while storm-ridden waves rocked her brain within its skull, forcing her to sit on the steps before another shiver pulled sweat from her pores.

The entrance swayed slightly along with her body. It was getting dark outside, yet the light emanating from the door's windows glared at her. She focused on the steps before her in a desperate attempt to calm her overwhelmed senses. Splatters of blood trailed from the bottom of the stairs, from the entrance, all the way toward the top of the stairs. She stood slowly, following the trail after the pressure from her head subsided.

Her feet shuffled while she forced her body into the hallway, the fabric held over her nose doing little to keep out the persistent stench. It grew so much in severity the further into the hallway she went, that she had no other choice but to force herself to get used to it. The hallway looked like it was around fifteen feet at length, and three doors were located on each wall towards the end. The only opened door was the one on her left, the trail of blood leading to the one located on the right. A tight, thick rope attached the middle and right doors together by the handles. She cut the rope with her pocketknife, wondering why the hell it was there to begin with.

She opened the door to the right of the hall first. The room was small and dark, and Verónica instinctively flipped the light switch located by the door, despite fully knowing that most places within the country had lost power a few weeks into the pandemic. She groaned while she pulled out her flashlight, the dull, yellow glow revealing the matching furniture within the room. Two-twin sized beds were pressed together into the farthest corner of the room, and two nightstands stood in a similar fashion beside the beds, one lamp located on the table closest to the beds while the other sat next to the door. The bedsheets were heavily taped over the windows, creating a thick shadow over the two, still bodies within the room.

As she hesitantly stepped in, she examined the body closest to the door. Still clusters of maggots covered the large cavity that made up the body's torso, its face void of any human features. Blow flies covered every surface. The large pool of dried blood below the body thickened the carpet around it, making the floor feel as if it were made of solid wood. The body's arms were torn apart, chunks of muscle and flesh scattered around. The clothes surrounding the wounds and cavity were torn to shreds. Whoever this was, they were a little over half her size, their long, blonde hair—that stuck and mixed into the blood beneath it—suggesting the body could be female. They looked like they were violently torn apart and consumed.

The second body sat at the foot of the bed, the darkest area in the room. The body was skeletal and pale, its slightly open eyes a murky grey. The skin had a dull translucency to it, veins and arteries darkened and prevalent on the skin that wasn't covered in blood. A dark, thick substance bubbled from the body's mouth, nose, and ears, and it oozed onto the carpet. Small chunks of matter congealed on the floor, spiderwebs of mold mattifying the secretions. The clothes on the body were covered in this substance, the rest stained with blood. The girl seemed to be roughly the same size, only significantly thinner, than the other corpse. Her hands held

strands of her long, blonde hair, and torn chunks of her scalp connected them. A thin layer of moss-like slime covered the wounds on her scalp. It reflected the yellow glow of the flashlight.

Verónica turned, quickly walking out of the bedroom before shutting the door behind her.

She mindlessly opened the remaining door, a slow, heavy breath soothing the aches in her body as she walked into the small bathroom. The sink and bathtub were filled with water, a thick layer of tape covering the drains. Baskets of first aid supplies, hygiene products, and food covered the areas on top of and surrounding the toilet, unmatched towels hanging from the shower rod instead of a shower curtain. The small medicine cabinet contained a few prescription bottles, two of which Verónica saw her father take a decade or so before his death. She sighed, crouching down to open the cabinet under the sink. A dirty, stained bucket sat next to a dozen rolls of toilet paper, and as the rancid smell of feces rose, she stood and closed the cabinet with her foot.

Verónica hadn't noticed the droplets of blood on the tiles beneath her, and her heart vibrated intensely within her chest as she realized blood dripped from her right hand. She impatiently threw her coat and underlayers out of the bathroom door, staring at the bloodied tears on her thin turtleneck's sleeve. It stuck and tugged at her skin while she rolled the sleeve up as much as she could. Just below her wrist, on her forearm, small chunks of her flesh hung from the crescent wound. Dark, thick blood slowly oozed from it, and she quickly searched the baskets for rubbing alcohol, gauze, and medical tape. Deep colored veins surrounded the bite, splotches of translucent skin bordering the area around it. The skin on her wrist and forearm was a burning, textured red while pulsing goosebumps flared on the entirety of her arm and hand.

She hesitated before she tilted the open bottle of rubbing alcohol towards the wound, turning her head away and clenching her teeth as she poured a bit of the contents into the bite.

She felt her shoulder twitch, but nothing else. A deep frown constricted her forehead, and she rubbed the skin around the wound with her left hand. The alcohol pooled and sizzled within the bite, white foam congealing into a dark brown before it squelched onto the floor. She quickly covered the arm with gauze and medical tape, tugging her sleeve to cover the entirety of the limb.

Her eyes persistently alternated between sharply focusing on the gauze and blurring it away, a hazy vibration mimicking thoughts in her head. She sunk to the floor, her throat closing before chills ran through her body. *I-94, Blue Water Bridge. I-94, Blue Water Bridge. Cálmate, está bien. Todo esta bien.*³⁷

Verónica counted down from ten, looking around the room as she tried to feel the fabric on her body, the weight of her shoes, and the coldness of the tile below her. She closed her eyes and took a few deep breaths, feeling her heart slowly constrict and expand along with her lungs. The expanding void within her stomach grounded her into the present, forcing her to drag the nearest basket containing food towards her. She opened a can of peaches, only to find the contents inside frozen solid, and threw the can down the stairs with a loud groan, quickly digging around the basket until she found two CLIF Bars. She tore the packets open and scarfed them down, but they did little to soothe her abandoned appetite—the stale, crumbly, four-hundred-and-eighty calories barely meeting the thousands she needed to make up for after days of borderline starvation.

A creaking door almost propelled the contents of her stomach onto the bathroom floor. Small, slow footsteps move around the bedroom she had investigated. She brandished her pocketknife, carefully walking towards the slightly parted door. She counted down from ten, then

³⁷ Calm down, you're fine. Everything is fine.

recounted again as slow as she could muster, but it did nothing to calm her anxious heart. Bile threatened to crawl out of her esophagus, and she couldn't help but hold her throat slightly as she opened the door.

A small, shadowy figure leaned over the consumed corpse, but the dull rays of a small flashlight incited rage within Verónica. She banged on the door, causing María to scream while she pulled her hand away from the corpse's torso.

“María, ¿qué carajo haces?”³⁸ Verónica mumbles between gritted teeth, not caring if her daughter could hear her or not. She stomped towards her, yanking her to her side as María's breath hitches. Verónica couldn't see her face, but she could already imagine how scrunched up it was. María probably expected her mother to slap her, she mused. Verónica sighed, letting her daughter go before her shaking body forced her to release her adrenaline in more harmful ways.

“What happened to her? Do you think a dog ate her or something?” María asked quietly, in that voice Verónica knew was a form of her testing the waters after doing something she wasn't supposed to. After moments of ongoing silence, her daughter asks, “Mami, do you think ella eran hermanas?”³⁹

Why her daughter thought that Verónica knew the answers to any of these questions was beyond her. She usually could bring herself to craft some form of dismissive or evasive answer, and she could already picture herself telling her that she didn't know and didn't care, but her anger tightened her lip. She couldn't bring herself to speak, lest it made the fiery pit within her stomach explode. She couldn't bring herself to think about her daughter's previous acts of

³⁸ María, what the fuck are you doing?

³⁹ Mom, do you think they were sisters?

rebellion, as it could force her to punish her in ways she had promised to never do. Two words were enough to add gasoline to her rage, “Abajo. Ahora.”⁴⁰

María ran downstairs, and Verónica was glad her daughter had some working brain cells within that tiny little head of hers.

Verónica sighed, closing the bedroom door as unfocused eyes simply stared into the air in front of her. Her heart boomed slowly within her chest, the air she breathed weighing down on her lungs. Her ribs contracted around her torso, slowly setting her lungs on fire. She was held in place by her raging body. The little bit of light left in the sky glimmered as her eyes began to ache. In the bedroom across from her, under the window parallel to the door, sat a white-bearded, bloated, bloodied corpse. His head hung to the side, a gaping hole sinking deep into his temple. Verónica lunged for the door handle, the revolver in the corpse’s hand winking at her before she slammed the door.

Once downstairs, she grabbed the can of peaches and placed it by the fireplace.

María sat stiffly where she should have been this entire time, her shivering hands clutched together tightly. She jolted when Verónica began to unwrap her bandages, staying still despite her manhandling as she checked to see if she was still bleeding.

The blood stuck to her thick curls, and she whined as her mother pushed the coagulated strands of hair apart. Verónica knew she was close to the wound when her daughter cried from pain at a particular tug. Blood trickled from it, but it was clear that it would not close on its own. As she leaned down to kiss the top of María’s head, she could smell how the metallic scent had a sweet, fruity aftertaste to it.

⁴⁰ Downstairs. Now.

Verónica used the last bit of mental energy she had to move the couch, pushing it a foot or two away from María's glistening body. She pointed at the couch, and guided María to lay on her stomach. She straddled her, using her body to pin her daughter down as she poured rubbing alcohol into the wound. She tightened her knees around María's jostling body, hissing at her to stay still as she began to stitch her head shut. Her daughter continued to cry and scream, but something snapped within Verónica in that moment. Perhaps it was annoyance at her daughter's constant disobedience. Perhaps it was the lack of consideration her child had for her sanity. Perhaps it was the tiredness she felt at it all.

She almost fell off the couch as she let go of María, her child sobbing as she hid in the corner nearest to the fireplace and dug through the bookbag.

Verónica had already laid down on the cold cushions of the couch, blanketing herself with her coat and underlayers. Her daughter's tear-stained cheeks looked paler then. "Vete a dormir. Comemo orita,"⁴¹ she ordered, closing her eyes, and letting her body fall asleep.

Verónica had never desired to have children. She didn't hate children, nor was she opposed to the idea of having her own, she simply never thought about what it would be like to raise a child. She couldn't remember much of the man who probably got her pregnant, as she was too drunk to remember most things that happened that night, and she fully intended to keep it that way. The few mistakes her friends wanted to partake in were supposed to end without any consequences, but she was forced to grow up when she found out she was pregnant. She had taken six pregnancy tests—five of them resulting positive, while one read inconclusive—and kept quiet about the consequence growing in her uterus until she began to show. Over the years, she forgot most of the thoughts that went through her head—if there were any at all—during her

⁴¹ Go to sleep. We'll eat later.

pregnancy, but she does remember how she felt the night María was born. Her mother stood outside of the lonesome, cold delivery room, and Verónica tore her body apart pushing the 10-pound consequence out of her body. Hours, days, months of pain had induced a numbness in her mind, a fog that only lifted once she stared into those large, chocolate-colored eyes.

A few weeks later, she spent her eighteenth birthday sitting in the living room with her child, her family, and friends drinking beers and blaring music as loudly as they could in the backyard. She made a promise to María that night, as her little hand wrapped around her pointer finger, that no matter what mistake she'd make, she'd never bear the pain of those consequences.

Verónica's body propelled her awake, her throat gushing out clumps of undigested pieces of her last meal. A deep screech rattled through her vocal cords, her neck cracking to the left before she continued to hurl thick translucent, chartreuse saliva. She brought her left hand up to claw at her throat, throwing her head back while she choked. Her eyes swelled within their sockets, pulsing as if they were about to pop out of her head. Her body convulsed so violently that she plummeted towards the wooden floor with a sopping thump. She tried to manipulate her body onto its stomach, clawing into the wood with her left hand. A final cough removed a small chocolate chip from her throat, and euphoria coursed through her veins while her body shivered intensely.

Her vomit-stained turtleneck stuck to her like a second skin, a sickly-sweet smell drenching her whole body before she threw it towards the kitchen. A thick layer of slimy sweat poured out of her pores. The gauze on the right arm oozed a petroleum-like substance, oversaturated with sweat and fluids from its wound. The skin on the right arm was smothered by black-colored veins, a paleness muting her usually tan tone. With the flickering flames in front of

her, the veins seemed to pulse and bulge as they pumped fluids toward the wound. A high-pitched squelch burst a bubble of fluid out of the gauze.

She scurried toward the bathroom, the flashlight's dull glow barely lighting the room after she set it to face up—towards the ceiling. She noticed, after ripping the medical tape and gauze from the arm, that the wound had begun to develop a muscular, deep green, velvet-like clot, a viscous fluid bubbling within the unhardened portions of it. The shadows within the room warped the arm's anatomy together, and the veins rippled the skin. Thick, cockroach-like masses moved throughout the veins before sinking deeper into the arm, making its surface look as if it concaved within itself before bulging with another mass. A subtle, wet clicking sound was produced by this involuntary movement, and she only felt the motile bumps when she placed her left hand's fingers on the arm. It felt like she was touching a cold, waxy candle, and she moved the right arm in hopes of gaining some form of feeling from it.

She dug the nails into its palms, nothing. She spread the fingers as far as they could, nothing. She rolled the hand on its joint, and she might as well have been unconscious of the movement. She felt a sharp prickling on her left hand once she closed her hand into a tight fist. The webbing between her fingers stiffened with a dull ache as she spread her fingers apart. The muscles surrounding her wrists tugged and stretched while her joint cracked with every circular motion. She felt dissociated from her body, selectively connected to it as if a shell had begun to encase her within herself.

Verónica looked into the mirror, noticing how her right clavicle protruded from her translucent chest. The arm's condition had spread throughout the right side of her torso, neck, and began to conquer the majority of her right jaw. Her face and the area surrounding the infection were inflamed, the skin below her left shoulder a healthy tan color. She felt

goosebumps protruding from every pore in her body, a shiver running through her as her stomach grumbled.

She appeared downstairs, mindlessly digging her fingers into the can of thawed peaches. The thick, warm, tacky liquid popped as she scooped a peach slice into the palm of her hand. Her tongue wrapped around the fleshy skin, vein-like structures shredding apart as she bit into the fruit. An acidic, overtly sweet fluid gushed within her mouth, and her throat secured closed the moment she thought about swallowing the contents. A spurt of saliva filled her mouth while she spat everything into the can.

Her stomach scratched at her esophagus, begging to be filled before it consumed itself. It screeched and spread acid throughout her abdomen, forcing her to hunch and scream. The skin on her abdomen pushed against her shriveling stomach while her muscles tore inside her. She compelled her lungs to breathe deeply, salivating as a succulent scent soothed her hunger momentarily. She floated towards the aroma, a soft smile caressing her cheeks before she inhaled feverishly for it. Her tongue slipped from her mouth, pools of saliva dripping into the ether in anticipation for a taste. Verónica had never smelled something like this before. The sweet, savory scent felt like a cool breeze in a hot, humid summer. It pulsed through the air steadily, delicately cascading through her body while she crawled closer towards it.

Dark, glimmering blue covered the entirety of her vision, soft breaths spreading through the right side of her face.

Verónica ripped herself off María's body and began to hyperventilate. The soft purrs her stomach made were cut by an animalistic shriek, her body shaking in desperation to *eat. Eat. Go on, eat.* The word coursed through her body—chanted and rallied in her mind—and roared for her to feast on the sweet nectar hidden within the daughter's torso. She could smell how the juicy

organs floated within it, infused and fermented, before they jostled with life. The more she focused on it, the more she desired to warm her abandoned body with the meat hidden underneath the daughter's skin.

No, pol favol... Me tengo que ir—⁴²

Upon rejecting her stomach's pleas, her body crumbled and wept onto the ground. Insistent shivers progressed in severity the more she fought against the hunger. Her veins constricted, her heart bloated up with blood, her lungs shriveled, her muscles flexed, her spine cracked, and her stomach heaved, all bodily processes halting in protest. She was lost in a dark, conscious abyss, her eyes squishing out of her sockets while her brain swelled up against her expanding skull.

She closed her eyes tight, begging the convulsions to take her soul away from her body.

*Follow I-95 toward Bluegreen... No, no. I-95, something bridge... ¿O era I-69? Verónica, carajo, no sea pendeja... Vamo, I-95...⁴³ She tugged at the strands of her curly hair, feeling her head stretch like heated plastic until it popped. Gushes of heated, sap-like blood oozed from her head and onto the floor as well as the splatter of tiny pieces of black matter. They piled up by her head, twitching as they congealed into solid chunks. Tears fell down her face before she sobbed, counting from ten repeatedly, only to forget which number fell after which. *Ten, nine, seven, eight... No. Ten, six—FUCK. Dies, nueve, ocho, siete, cinco, treh... Puñeta, what the fuck am I doing?*⁴⁴*

⁴² No, please... I have to go—

⁴³ Or was it I-69? Verónica, fucking, don't be an idiot. Come on, I-95...

⁴⁴ Ten, nine, eight, seven, five, three... Fuck...

“Bebita, por favor levántate. Mami wants to make sure you’re okay... Por favor, I know you’re awake. Stop being a bad girl and listen to me... Puñeta, levántate... ¡Hasme caso, carajo!”⁴⁵

“¿Mamá? You okay?” The child yawns, stretching slightly before turning to Verónica.

“It’s time to eat,” Verónica salivates, quickly forcing herself to walk towards her backpack. As she searched for another candy or granola bar for the child, she heard a moist plopping noise and turned to it to see the child popping a peach into her mouth.

“¡No te coma eso!”⁴⁶ Verónica screamed, afraid that the child would grow sick from the rancid fruits. The child kept eating, however, humming in satisfaction. This made Verónica seethe, “¿Qué te dije, coño?”⁴⁷

Verónica rose her hand at the child, slapping her across the face before she could bring herself to stop. The half-bitten peach was spat out onto the floor, and the child silently stared at it before tears spilled down her cheeks.

“Quiero mami back,”⁴⁸ the child whispered, but Verónica couldn’t bring herself to care. She couldn’t bring herself to care when the child laid down in front of the fireplace to sleep, back aimed toward her. She couldn’t care that the flames were probably a bit too close to the child. She couldn’t care about anything the child did right now. She was too fucking hungry.

The child steadily breathed, unmoving.

The edges of Verónica’s vision darkened, the deep ache within her stomach fogging up her mind. Consume, ingest, feast, it begged. It desired to be filled, it needed the child’s body rid of its agony. It needed it, the fruit that laid before her so deliciously—the fruit God had gifted

⁴⁵ Baby girl, please wake up. [...] Please [...] Damn it, wake up... Listen to me, damn it!

⁴⁶ Don’t eat that!

⁴⁷ What the hell did I say?

⁴⁸ I want mommy back.

her. That's right, God had given her a seed. She had sowed it within her delicate uterus, cultivated it, fertilized it, tended to it. She had spent years waiting to reap and enjoy the fruits of her labor, and God was rewarding her efforts.

María awoke to the sound of something heavy thumping onto the floor. She didn't want to turn around, as her cheek still burned from where her mother hit her. However, the rhythmic banging that followed struck fear into her gut. The sound was too loud, too consistent, and the growling and groaning only forced her stomach to twist into a secured knot.

She turned slowly.

Mamá convulsed against the floor, grey foam fizzling out of her mouth. She hesitantly shuffled to her mother, trying to hold her still despite fully knowing she was too small to do so. Her mother's eyes were shut tight, the pained expression on her face caused María to panic, "Mami, what's wrong? I'm scared, stop it!" She screamed, and her mother's body suddenly tensed.

Mamá slowly opened her eyes, a dull grey sheen covering her normally brown eyes. A soft, elongated hum vibrated the skin on her throat. Her eyes grew heavy and pointed, staring at María with a look she had never seen before. *Is Mamá mad at me again? What did I do wrong this time? Is her headache back again?* María wrapped her arms around Mamá's shoulders, "I'm sorry! I don't wanna be annoying again. Are you okay now? Are you hun—"

Mamá tackled her, tearing into María's body.

María screamed as her mother dug her nails into her skin, her nails ripping through like jagged scissors cutting through paper. "Mamá! Stop! Please!" She wanted to ask her mother what she was doing, ask her what she had done to make Mamá so mad, but her screams permanently locked her jaw. Tears flooded her cheeks as she realized that her mother was intentionally, excitedly hurting her. She tried to think of why her mother would do this to her, why her mother was tearing the skin on her torso to pieces. She pushed her body away slightly once her mother began to lick the blood off her hands.

Mamá's claws pushed her down, and María's body stiffened. She tried to arch her back, tried to use her hands to push her mother's bloody arms away. Thin lines and large splatters of blood stained her face as her mother bit and tore into her chest. María tugged against her mother's hair, only to rip large chunks off Mamá's scalp.

Mamá began to slam her fists onto her torn chest. María felt her sternum vibrating against the fists, the bone cracking after a few slams. A loud, moist snap tore more screams out of her throat. She could feel her already raw vocal cords strain, high-pitched shrills becoming the only thing she could voice after minutes of continuous screaming.

María gave up fighting, understanding that Mamá was killing her—eating her. Her arms fell onto her sides, too weak to fight against her mother. This was it, and she accepted that, wishing she could see her mother one last time.

Faint groans of pain vibrated out of María's open chest as the woman's translucent, pulsing, slimy hands brought the bone towards her mouth. She sucked the marrow out of the bone, throwing it aside while she dove headfirst into María's body. Her teeth munched loudly into her abdominal muscles, a persistent, clicking purr accompanying the wet smacking of lips. When the woman pulled away, large chunks of flesh wetly plopped onto the floor.

María's vision darkened, fading away as a numbness took over the entirety of her body.

The last thing María saw was the woman sighing euphorically, her mouth full of bloody meat as she smiled. Right then, finally, she looked like Mamá again.

Huesitos Cristalinos⁴⁹

A wave of calm settled in Marina's gut once her taxi drove into Guayama, and she smiled at the sight of the earth-toned, tiled welcome sign. She was finally home. She reminisced on her childhood while looking at the sign even when they had driven far past it, her neck straining as she struggled to read out the time displayed on the monument. Her mother laughed at the sign when they were first building it, giggled at how the mayor refused to fix the potholes in the roads around it but continued to state that the sign would make visitors feel more welcomed to the dying town. Her mother was lively back then, staring at the lone digital clock that was fused to the base metal structure so people could not steal it. The road turned, and buildings suddenly blocked the sign.

She sighed as she turned to sit properly in her seat. They passed her childhood cemetery, where they had buried her grandfather and, she thought, where they would bury her mother once she passed. Her eyes began to pulse and shiver tears that she quickly wiped away with the back of her hand. The black ink on her wrist caught her attention and stared at the simple outline of a butterfly tattooed onto her clammy skin—the driver refusing to turn on the air-conditioning out of fear that his car may overheat.

The already thin, humid air flattened, and she gasped for it as her head whirled her thoughts into a cyclone. She lost herself to her subconscious, trying to find her way out of the whirlwinds of her mind. Would she be okay? Would Mamá die like this? Would this be the last time she'd ever see her again? Her body was mere gas to her senses, and she floated inside until an unrecognizable voice thrummed in her ears.

⁴⁹ Small Glass Bones

“Señorita, ¿eta bien?”⁵⁰ The taxi driver, an older man, spoke in a raised tone, his eyes darting back and forth from the door to the rearview mirror.

Marina tried to speak, but her throat closed around the syllables as her tongue shivered within her mouth. She felt it twitch further into the back of her mouth, and she worried that it would force itself down her throat any second if she didn’t calm herself down. She breathed deeply, sweat continuously draining from her skin as her heart punched at her sternum. She clutched her chest as she spoke in between heavy breaths, “Toy bien. Gracia.”⁵¹

She had forgotten to tell her aunt when she was coming home, so the money she saved from her almost overweight bag was used to pay for her hour-long taxi drive home.

The house loomed over her, and despite feeling relief that she was finally home, she could sense her impulsive scratching coming back after years of calming it down. Her shoulder was bright red when she knocked on the door, and her aunt’s eyes immediately traveled to it before stepping aside.

“Yo no sabía que benías. Te podía haber bu’cao en el aeropuerto. Tu mai eta en su cualto—”⁵² Her aunt began to speak, only to be interrupted by Mamá’s loud shuffling and groans.

“Andrea, ¿dónde eta mi celulal?”⁵³ Mamá asked with an already lit cigarette in between her lips. It fell onto the floor with a muted sizzle the moment her eyes met Marina’s. She sobbed so loudly, so suddenly, that she almost lost balance and ended up throwing herself onto one of the kitchen chairs before screaming in pain. Tears burst down her eyes like the overflowed Guamani river during a storm, and Marina could only imagine the number of houses those tears could devastate. “Mami, etamo bien, con calma,”⁵⁴ Marina tried to soothe, a punch of guilt

⁵⁰ Madam, you alright?

⁵¹ I’m fine. Thank you.

⁵² I didn’t know you were coming. I could’ve picked you up from the airport. Your mother is in her bedroom—

⁵³ Andrea, where is my phone?

⁵⁴ Mommy, we’re okay, calm down.

settling into her bones as she saw how skinny her mother had gotten. Last she'd seen her, she had looked healthily thin, but now her clothes looked like they had been given to her by an overweight man. She remembered this dress on her, it had fit her snugly before. She wondered what the fuck happened while she was gone.

“Bueno, para de ser tan dramática. Tu hija eta aquí pa yudalte,”⁵⁵ Andrea rolled her eyes, sighing as she went over to the rice and pink beans she was cooking over the opposite end of the kitchen. “Las dos tubieron un día lalgo so vayanse a dolmil,”⁵⁶ her aunt ordered, returning to pick up the lit cigarette from the ground before going back to work at her computer.

Mamá was still shuffling to her bedroom when Marina carried her suitcases into the hallway. A spike of pain shot to the base of her spine as she watched her mother struggle to open the door and keep herself balanced against the wall, and Marina wanted to help, but her mother had managed on her own. Mamá closed the door behind her, and it reminded Marina about what she used to do growing up as a teenager. She would close the door behind her to tell her mother that she needed some time for herself, and her mother respected the boundary she placed between them by not entering until an hour or so later.

So, Marina walked into her old childhood bedroom and threw her suitcases onto the bed before opening the closet and crawling in, situating herself under her senior year prom dress. The door squeaked closed, and her body shivered as adrenaline began to pump through her body.

She thought about how her day had started. Back in Colorado, she had woken up after hearing the front door slam open, and immediately used her dried-out pen to scratch at the gravelly paint haphazardly speckled on the thin wall separating her closet and living room. She had been shaking then too. She had tried to ignore her ex-boyfriend's yelling from the living

⁵⁵ Well, stop being so dramatic. Your daughter is here to help you.

⁵⁶ You both had a long day, so, both of you, go to sleep.

room. She had tried to ignore how John's screams seeped through the walls and onto her makeshift bed.

Three bedsheets were stuffed into the small closet, and that is where Marina had slept ever since she had moved into the Colorado apartment in late August. The bedroom outside was filled with unemptied boxes and messily opened suitcases—deprived of any furniture but an old, small bookshelf that acted as a dresser for her barely folded underwear and t-shirts. Clothes were spread all across the floor, and she had gone to pick up the nearest bra before a bang distracted her from putting on the nearest, random articles of clothing. She had sworn the chair she had lodged under the doorhandle had begun to slip with each bang.

“Marina, stop being so dramatic and open the goddamn door!” John had shouted, and she had already braced herself for the chair's impact. She squeezed her eyes shut, and her lungs began to shrivel and beg for air. Her chest hurt, and she had to dig her fingernails into the palm of her hands and press her fists against her eyes to stop herself from breathing out. Her lungs constricted, shriveling into raisins as her abdomen began to shake. Her throat began to hurt, and everything in her body was begging her to breathe, but she couldn't, not while he was there.

She just needed to wait a little longer, she knew he never stayed for long—perhaps too frustrated with her dramatics to hope for anything different.

This was all supposed to be different. She was supposed to be in the amazing relationship her mother wished for her, she was supposed to be happily entering her senior year of college, and she was—most importantly—supposed to have her mother for a little bit longer.

John had interrupted her pity party, or so he would say, as he stomped away from the door toward the living room.

She had looked back at the wall, realizing how millions of butterflies covered the lower portion of it. The butterflies on the lower right corner, right by her pillow, were smooth, flat, solid black, and carefully drawn to look like exact replicas of her tattoo. However, the further away from the pillow they were, the grayer and rougher, they looked. The tip of her pen was covered in white dust, and she ran her fingers over the wall to feel the jagged wings that she now knew by memory. She saw them in the perhaps three hours of sleep she managed to get every night and watched them flutter and sparkle behind her closed eyes. There were times that she could see them move on the wall, only to fly away once John banged his fist against his desk.

That morning she had thought about how tired she was of everything. She had sighed quietly as she carefully opened the closet door so it wouldn't squeak as loudly as usual. A loud shriek sounded, and she cursed. No matter how careful she was, the closet door always fucking squeaked.

She stilled, waiting to see if John was going to come back to bang on her door like he usually did when she made a noise loud enough to show that she was awake. Tears dropped from her chin onto the ground as she started shaking. She heard nothing, and she continued to open the door shakily, intermittently, until the opening was big enough for her body to crawl out of. Her swollen eyes grew heavy, and she shuddered as the cold consumed her tired body. The floor vibrated against her temple as the person below began to shower, and the soothing hum calmed her hammering heart.

Then, her phone began to vibrate against the floor. She lunged for it quickly to stop him from hearing it ring.

“Hola Mami, ¿cómo eta—?”⁵⁷ She whispered, cupping the space between her mouth and the phone’s microphone. The phone’s speaker was warbled and full of static before a loud voice triggered her into lowering the phone’s volume.

“Tiene que venir pa ca y cuidal a tu mai,”⁵⁸ her aunt spoke angrily, her mother screaming something unintelligible in the background.

“¿Dónde eta Mami?”⁵⁹ Marina asked a bit louder, hoping to understand what the hell was happening.

“Etá aquí, pero tiene que venir. No la puedo cuidal má. Arranca pa ca o se queda sola,”⁶⁰ before Marina could ask for clarification, the call dropped.

Now, in her childhood bedroom, Marina tried to breathe as the red tulle under her prom dress scratched at her forehead. Something in her back pocket vibrated, and she shot her hand toward it to stop the incoming call that she was expecting. She gagged as John’s messages covered the entirety of her screen, “Where are you? Where is your stuff? Did you fucking leave without telling me? I’m contacting the landlord if you don’t message me right now.”

She threw her phone at the wall, hoping it would break.

The closet door, thankfully, made no noise as she opened it back up again. A hiccupped sob muffled from her mother’s bedroom, and she felt the nerves in her legs set alight in flames. She shook her leg, trying to wake it up before the pain subsided.

She knocked on her mother’s door, announcing her entry before she allowed herself to look into the bedroom. The furniture was rearranged, which wasn’t a strange sight for Marina as her mother seemed to do that every month since she was a child. However, this time, there were

⁵⁷ Hi Mom, how are—?

⁵⁸ You have to come here and take care of your mother.

⁵⁹ Where is mom?

⁶⁰ She’s here, but you have to come. I can’t take care of her anymore. Hurry up or she stays alone.

two plastic tables next to either side of the head of the bed. On one table was presumably that evening's dinner, only partially eaten. On the other table was a mess of medications, she decided to stop counting after the twelfth bottle, and documents. She walked up to the papers, the jumbles of colloquial Spanish failing to decipher themselves in her head. She then picked up a pill bottle and examined it before realizing half of the bottles were empty Acetaminophen bottles.

Mamá cleared her throat, and Marina looked up to watch her open her mouth to speak, only to break into a loud sob the moment they locked eyes. Her mother's face was pale, and her cheeks and nose were as red as her eyes. She wiped the snot dripping from her nostrils with the back of her hand, rubbing it against her bedsheets after a moment of consideration. She was looking away from Marina, sniffing as she seemingly tried to calm herself down.

Marina looked down at the hand with wide eyes. Her mother absolutely despised when Marina did that as a child, regardless of whether she was sick or not. She then noticed the empty wrist, where their tattoo should have been, and immediately searched the desk for a pen.

Upon finding a sharpie, she began to draw an exact replica of the butterfly tattoo on her mother's wrist.

Her life was truly flipped upside down, she realized. As she drew the body of the butterfly, she recalled the moment she had booked the tattoo appointment with her mother. They had arranged for it to happen at the end of her stay that summer before she had to go to school in August. Despite the heat that stuck the tips of her hair to her skin, Marina hugged her mother so tightly that day. A groan forced its way out of Mamá's lips, and she laughed about how excited

her daughter had seemed to be. “¿No eta excited?”⁶¹ Marina asked, pulling away from her mother.

“Claro que sí, mi amol. Pero ya etoy biejita so que trátame con cariño,”⁶² Mamá joked, caressing Marina’s right cheek softly.

That July, on the day of the tattoo appointment, she had tried to open her mother’s bedroom door only to find it locked for the first time in her life. “Mamá, ¿etá bien?”⁶³ Marina had called out, only for her mother to text her, “No me siento bien. I get tattoo next time,”⁶⁴ with a smiley face emoji attached to it. Marina frowned, about to ask her what was wrong, but then she heard her friend’s car horn honking repeatedly outside.

She got the tattoo that day, hoping her mother hadn’t canceled out of fear of the pain and would truly get it done another day.

After the appointment, Marina could not stop herself from impatiently tapping her foot. She smiled so widely that her cheeks hurt, but she couldn’t stop herself. She was excited to show Mamá how perfectly the tattoo artist had replicated her mother’s drawing. She was fully intending to run inside, but her energy sizzled out once she heard her mother’s car horn evenly blaring. Marina hesitantly walked to the car, confused, only to find Mamá clutching the steering wheel with her head pressed against the horn. She was shaking, her shoulders were twitching.

Marina immediately grew worried, tugging on the car handle before banging the window. Mamá looked up in shock, visibly sniffing before unlocking and opening the door.

“¿Qué pasa? ¿Etá bien?”⁶⁵ Marina asked in quick succession, pulling her mother into a hug. She had never seen her mother cry, despite fully knowing she would do so while she was

⁶¹ Are you not excited?

⁶² Of course, mi love. But I’m old, so please treat me with care.

⁶³ Mom, are you okay?

⁶⁴ I don’t feel well. [...]

⁶⁵ What’s happening? Are you okay?

asleep—call it intuition or perhaps projection. Mamá groaned, pushing her daughter away as she murmured something about her chest hurting. Marina apologized, waiting patiently for an explanation. In her memory, words meshed together, time stood still, and nothing made sense except the word “cancel.”⁶⁶ At first, she thought she had misheard, but once again, in a clashing of vowels and consonants, “cancel.”

Mamá sobbed, crying into her hand before looking away.

“Vamo a etal bien,”⁶⁷ was Marina’s immediate response, her wide eyes filling with tears as she tried to make an immediate plan of action. Her thoughts raced, thousands of possibilities popping into her head before she settled, “Me puedo quedad—”⁶⁸

“NO,” Mamá shouted, hesitantly stepping out of her car as she harshly rubbed the tears out of her eyes. “Te va pa la uni y ya. Puedo lidial con eto sola.”⁶⁹

“Pero Ma—”⁷⁰

“Puñeta, ¿no entiende que te dije que no?”⁷¹ Mamá sniffed, grabbing her keys from her purse before walking inside. Not another word was shared between them that day, and Marina cried as she tried to tell her boyfriend-at-the-time, John, about her mother’s diagnosis.

He had yelled at her for wearing makeup to the tattoo appointment without telling him.

Now, months later, Mamá whispered, “Gracias... pol etal aquí,”⁷² and Marina had to shake her head to center herself. “Peldón pol velme tan mal—”⁷³

⁶⁶ cancer

⁶⁷ We’re going to be okay.

⁶⁸ I can stay—

⁶⁹ You’re going to university and that’s it. I can deal with this on my own.

⁷⁰ But Mom—

⁷¹ Fuck, did you not understand that I said no?

⁷² Thank you... for being here.

⁷³ I’m sorry for looking so bad—

“Mami, no,” Marina interrupted, “stop that. You’re fine.” She expected her mother to double down on what she said, as she was as stubborn as a Latina mother could be, but she didn’t. There was a long silence between them, one that made Marina shuffle her feet back and forth before she looked away from her mother. She blurted out the first thing her mind told her to speak, “Eta llorando má que cuando me aceptaron en la uni.”⁷⁴

She looked up to watch Mamá smile, mumbling something about her being her Boulder girl before tearing up again. At this point, Marina worried about how dehydrated she could be, so she grabbed the full cup of water that was next to her food on the table and tried to hand it to her.

Only, her mother refused to look at her, refused to even acknowledge her.

“You okay?” Marina asked, hoping her voice would be enough to have her look at her. She asked again after what felt like a minute of silence, then again after a couple of seconds. She sighed, turning to leave—as her mother clearly didn’t want her to be around—before a cold, bony hand wrapped around her fat wrist.

“Quédate... please,”⁷⁵ Mamá whispered shakily, looking to the far end of the bed as if a dangerous snake was hidden beneath her bedsheets, “No quiero dolmil sola. Tengo miedo.”⁷⁶

“Okay, bu’co el matre inflable ahora,”⁷⁷ Marina smiled, petting her mother’s forearm for a few seconds before walking back into the kitchen to ask her aunt if she knew where it was.

Her aunt’s computer was shut off, close to a medium-sized suitcase, but Andrea was nowhere to be seen. Marina walked toward the living room, but she once again found it empty. A car horn made her jump, and she looked out the window to see her aunt chucking a large suitcase

⁷⁴ You’re crying more than when the university accepted me.

⁷⁵ Stay... please.

⁷⁶ I don’t want to sleep alone. I’m scared.

⁷⁷ Okay, I’ll look for the inflatable mattress.

into the trunk of the car. “No vamo ahora,”⁷⁸ she told the driver, a man Marina had never seen before. Marina walked into the kitchen as her aunt picked up her computer and suitcase.

“¿Pa dónde va?”⁷⁹ Marina asked hesitantly, scratching her cheek.

“Pa Maryland. Me tengo que il etoy de prisa,”⁸⁰ Andrea walked up to her and pressed her cheek against her own, making a kissing sound before she pulled away.

“What the fuck, ¿te va?”⁸¹ Marina couldn’t believe it. She had barely gotten home.

Andrea sighed, setting down her suitcase and computer to put her hands on her hips.

“Mira, e tu turno. No puedo paral mi vida pa cuidal a tu mai. You got this—”⁸²

Marina couldn’t believe it. Her nails dug into the palm of her hands as she closed them into tight fists. She looked away, trying to stop herself from crying in frustration or desperation, she did not know. She wanted to beg her aunt to at least stay a couple of more days, she wanted to ask her to show her what to do. She barely booked her own appointments, so she had no idea how all of this worked. She opened her mouth a couple of times to speak, but her aunt had already picked up her belongings as she muttered an apology to her.

Marina slammed the front door shut, locking it before she removed the couch cushions and threw them onto her mother’s bedroom floor. If her mother asked her something, she did not hear it, and she threw herself onto the cushions before closing her eyes tight, begging her mind to let her sleep.

The cool air in the oncologist’s office was infused with a pungent smell of artificial fruits. Marina could almost imagine the spray bottle—bright orange with the words “Tropical Paradise”

⁷⁸ We’ll leave soon.

⁷⁹ Where are you going?

⁸⁰ To Maryland. I gave to go, I’m in a hurry.

⁸¹ [...] you’re leaving?

⁸² Look, it’s your turn. I can’t put my life on hold to take care of your mother. [...]

or “Hawaiian Breeze” plastered on the front. She turned to her mother just in time to catch her eyes tearing up as she covered her nose.

“Cristina, I understand how emotional this all should be,” the oncologist softly spoke, offering her a tissue that she refused to accept before continuing, “Multiple myeloma is incurable, but many patients live beyond five years with this cancer treatment. It is also the reason for the lesion in your femur. Your bones are going to be fragile, almost like glass, so please be careful so we don’t end up breaking that bone before the surgery.” The oncologist continued rambling on, but a sharp pain in Marina’s left leg drew her attention away from the conversation to the numbness overcoming her brain.

She was in a cloud, thunder striking her leg in persistent strikes. They seemed unending, and all Marina could think about was how eternal the pain felt. She tried to hold in her groans and dug her nails into her right thigh to distract herself, but the only thing that remedied her agony was time. After what felt like thirty minutes, the pain had thankfully subsided.

Once she came to, Marina grabbed another tissue from the almost emptied box, sniffing quietly into the tissue before adding it to the collection on her lap. She wondered what her mother was thinking, noticing how distant she looked. It worried her, seeing her like that, as she was the first person to reprimand Marina for going off into space whenever someone was talking to her. It seemed like she had been stuck in this state ever since Marina got home.

“Mamá, vamo a etal bien,”⁸³ Marina spoke softly as she placed a careful hand on her shoulder. She smiled through her heavy eyes, swollen after days of crying and inconsistent sleep.

She avoided her mother’s eyes even as she turned the car on.

⁸³ Mom, we’re going to be okay.

The forty-minute drive from Cayey to Guayama was quiet. The old car shook violently as the winds whistled and blew through the opened windows. Marina wanted to speak and felt she should've spoken to her mother about what was going on, but Mamá's tendency to avoid direct questions from her made her stop and articulate her thoughts in her head. She wondered if her mother was okay and told her mother in her mind how much she loved her. She teared up as she prayed to the God she was raised to believe in not to take Mamá away from her. She didn't even believe in God anymore, but she would pay anything to help her mother survive.

She wanted to be useful for something.

"Me levanta si necesita algo, okay?"⁸⁴ Marina cupped her mother's porcelain, veiny legs once Mamá had sat down on the bed.

"Lento, please,"⁸⁵ Mamá whispered, her knee cracking the moment Marina began to raise her legs. She slowly began to maneuver her mother into a lying position, holding her breath as she felt her legs tense. "Vamo bien,"⁸⁶ Marina attempted to reassure her, disappointed that her delivery was shakier than she would've liked. Once she guided her legs down to the bed, she combed Mamá's hair back. The tips of her fingers traced a path from her mother's temple to the back of her ear, and she finally released her breath.

Marina waited for Mamá's breathing to level before sitting on the air mattress in the corner of the small bedroom. She wanted to—no, she needed to—keep her mother company, lest she wanted to be woken up in the middle of the night to a loud crash or screams from her mother falling, or so her aunt described to her when Marina and Mamá arrived home.

⁸⁴ You wake me up if you need anything, okay?

⁸⁵ Slowly, please.

⁸⁶ We're going good.

Marina felt lost. How could she take care of her mother when she barely knew how to take care of herself? She swallowed down her medication, hoping the antipsychotic her psychiatrist had recently prescribed her would be as helpful as she implied. Her hands shook as she reached for the aged rum bottle hidden behind the air mattress, taking a few careful swigs so as to not wake her mother. She knew she shouldn't drink; she knew she shouldn't act on her impulses, but alcohol became liquid Percocet—and she knew she couldn't bear the pain without something to relieve it.

She was woken up by her mother shuffling her way to the bathroom, her clenched teeth, scrunched up face, and forced, shaky breathing making Marina sigh, “¿Pol qué no me levantate?”⁸⁷

“Polque necesita dolmil,”⁸⁸ Mamá responded with a groan, her unstable leg forcing her to lean against the wall for stability. Another small shuffle made Marina stand up, which elicited a raised hand, “Marina, vete a dolmil. Yo puedo sola.”⁸⁹

Marina watched her continue to shuffle her legs, the constant pained expression worsening to a contorted hiss. The groans that escaped her lips grew into loud curses, and after Mamá lost her footing and almost fell onto the tiled floor, Marina took two strides toward her.

“Mami, déjame ayúdarte pol favor—”⁹⁰

“¡No entiende que puedo sola, carajo!”⁹¹

Marina sighed loudly, dramatically rolling her eyes as she wrapped her arm around the back of her mother's torso. “Pendeja, etoy aquí pa yudarte. Arranca y pon tu mano encima e

⁸⁷ Why didn't you wake me up?

⁸⁸ Because you need to sleep.

⁸⁹ Marina, go to sleep. I can do this on my own.

⁹⁰ Mommy, let me help you please—

⁹¹ Do you not understand that I can do this on my own, fuck!

mí,”⁹² without waiting for her to do the action on her own accord, Marina took Mamá’s arm and wrapped it around her shoulders. This seemed to do the trick, her mother allowing herself to be dragged along to the bathroom. Marina knew where her mother’s resistance came from. She was a single mother who raised a troublesome child without allowing herself to show her insecurities. The only insecurity she knew her mother had was her excess weight, but that was fixed a couple of months ago when she finally reached one hundred and twenty pounds after following the keto diet. The last time she weighed her since arriving, however, she stood at below a hundred pounds. The lack of body fat worked against her as her cancer progressed, and Marina knew she had to somehow make her gain weight healthily.

As Mamá tried to sit on the toilet, a scream blared into Marina’s eardrums. Marina tried to bring her up but was interrupted as her mother pushed her away and lunged her body toward the wall for support, “¡NO ME TOQUES!”⁹³

Her mother’s voice echoed into John’s, and she found herself unable to stop the onslaught of screams pulsating through her ears. She covered them, looking down at the floor for a second as she squeezed her eyes shut. His screams muffled into incoherent shrills, his banging sending booms of pain through her head.

“Carajo, ¿no viste que tenía dolol? ¿Qué carajo te pasa?”⁹⁴

Marina stepped back, tears funneling through her eyes as she clutched her chest. A sudden pain stabbed at her ribs, cracking lesions into them as guilt settled into her gut, “Peldón, Mamá, solo quería ayudar—”⁹⁵

⁹² Dumbass, I’m here to help you. Hurry up and put your arm around me.

⁹³ DON’T TOUCH ME!

⁹⁴ Fuck, did you not see I was in pain? What the fuck is wrong with you?

⁹⁵ I’m sorry mom, I only wanted to help—

“Lo sé mi amor pero necesito que me escuche y me deje sola,”⁹⁶ she hissed softly through the pain, urinating in interrupted streams over the toilet seat as Marina looked toward her.

“Mierda,”⁹⁷ she whispered as she looked down, trying to shuffle further back to the toilet.

“Marina, you know I can’t handle you going out all dressed like that without telling me. My brain doesn’t take it well,” John’s voice made her shiver. She’s been here before—felt this before, the guilt. She did something wrong, and here they were belittling her to a stupid idiot for it. She knew these things, she just wanted to live her life the way she wanted. Before, she wanted to help John see that she wasn’t going to cheat on him, and now, she wanted to help her mother see that she was there to help her.

“Fine, te dejo sola,”⁹⁸ Marina scoffed, the rum finally making a visit to her neuropathogens as the world warbled slightly.

She stumbled a bit as she headed to what should have been her bedroom. She had to brace herself against the wall a couple of times before she realized how stupid of a decision she had made. “Don’t mix this with alcohol,” the psychiatrist had repeated multiple times throughout the session as if knowing of Marina’s secret history of alcohol dependency. She had only taken some little swigs, not even enough to normally get her tipsy. “I guess this is what I get, so estúpida,”⁹⁹ she thought to herself.

Her suitcase was still on the bed, opened with clothes pouring haphazardly out. Some shirts were severely wrinkled, but she couldn’t bother to iron them out or hang them. She shoved the suitcase to the edge of the bed before crawling on top of her clothes, sitting on them as she stared away from the floor-length mirrors on the closet doors. She undressed, hissing as the

⁹⁶ I know, my love, but I need you to listen to me and leave me alone.

⁹⁷ Shit.

⁹⁸ Fine, I’ll leave you alone.

⁹⁹ [...] fucking idiot.

fabric marred her skin, leaving a burning residue behind. She accidentally caught a glance of her bruised torso when she looked into the dresser's mirror. She shut her eyes tight as she ran to chuck one of the neatly folded bedsheets on the nightstand over the mirror.

The fabric failed to catch itself on the furniture, the hiss of it mocking her as she stared blankly into her own reflection. There she stood; her chubby body riddled with splotches of black, red, purple, and blues. She would do anything to go back to the way she was before when she only worried about covering her stomach, and tears pricked her eyes as she mapped the bruises that bloomed over her torso, down to her left leg. They had first appeared there once she found out about her mother's cancer, and they had continued to spread and worsen as the days went by. She hoped no one would see them, lest they get the wrong idea that someone had purposely done these to her. Then again, she wasn't sure anyone could actually see them, as John had never commented on them. Perhaps he didn't care. Nonetheless, she didn't want to test her theory.

The bruises were tender to the touch, and they ached as she traced them with the tips of her fingers. She pressed into them, feeling nothing but sharp shocks of pain. There were no bumps, no coagulation, they almost seemed tattoo-like with how smooth they felt. Her ribs suddenly began to hurt, her hand clutching at the bones in an attempt to support them. It only seemed to increase the pain, and she bit her bottom lip as hard as she could to stop herself from screaming. Her brain only registered two things: her mother in the room opposite to hers and the feeling of sharp claws ripping through her skin and etching themselves into bone. As if on instinct, for no reason that she could recall, she began to cover the mirrors in the bedroom, hoping the sheets wouldn't fall again. Each inch of covered glass seemed to apply vaporub to her aches and pains.

“Marina, ven pa ca por favol,”¹⁰⁰ Mamá whimpered loudly, her voice echoing throughout the house.

Marina ran, tugging her shirt on haphazardly as she tried her hardest not to fall. After she tripped on her last step, she slowed her pace and walked toward her mother with breathlessness in her voice, “¿Sí?”¹⁰¹

“Perdóname mama, I didn’t mean it,”¹⁰² Mamá mumbled as intelligibly as she seemingly could before extending a hand to Marina.

“Esta bien Mami, solamente quiero ayudarte,”¹⁰³ Marina forced a smile as she sat on the edge of the bed, careful in her moments out of fear of hurting her mother and revealing her current mental state. As she held her mother’s hand, she could already hear John’s screams and see him attempt to slit his wrist after she messed up. She could feel him, right outside the bedroom, looming in the corridor as he asked in the sweetest voice, “I brought you your favorite, sweetie.”

“Lo sé mi amol,”¹⁰⁴ Mamá sighs.

Marina noticed how the tattoo on her mother’s wrist had faded, and she grabbed the sharpie and, once again, drew the butterfly onto her skin. The shading was off, and the ink spread around the loose skin on Mamá’s wrist, but it was enough to get the message across. Looking up, Marina saw Mamá’s eyes tearing up before looking away.

“Etoy bein,”¹⁰⁵ Mamá spoke in a hushed tone, her bottom lip quivering as her pale face grows flushed with color.

¹⁰⁰ Marina, come here please.

¹⁰¹ Yes?

¹⁰² Forgive me, darling [...]

¹⁰³ It’s okay mom, I only want to help you.

¹⁰⁴ I know, my love.

¹⁰⁵ I’m fine.

“It’s okay if you’re not though,” Marina replied, cupping her mother's hand into her own before bringing it to her lips.

“Lo sé, gracias mi amol. Gracias pol todo,”¹⁰⁶ Mamá smiled softly through the standing tears, the sight reminding Marina of the overflowed gutters that flooded her town during hurricane season.

“No me tiene que dal la gracia, solamente déjame yudalte,”¹⁰⁷ Marina begged, her eyes stinging with tears as she felt useless in this situation. She wished she could do something to take the pain away, something more than giving her the acetaminophen the oncologist recommended. She wished she could just take cancer into her body and rid her mother of the torture of it all.

“Trataré... Ahora, ¿cómo etan la cosa con John?”¹⁰⁸ Mamá inquired, shuffling slowly in bed. She bit her bottom lip, muffling whatever noise or complaint was going to come out of her body.

“Etan bien,”¹⁰⁹ Marina humed, trying to cover the distance she wants to maintain from this topic of conversation. She could see John in the corner of her eye, watching her, and she tried to ignore it by clearing her throat and pulling her phone from her pocket. There they were, fifty missed calls, over one hundred text messages, and around forty messages in different social media apps—all from him.

“Nunca te e vito feli en una relación y no te veo feli ahora, so que no me mienta,”¹¹⁰ Mamá spoke in an almost scolding tone, raising her eyebrow as she crossed her arms over her chest. If Marina weren’t so preoccupied with the anxiety spiking in her spine, she would have found the pose comical—her mother crossing her arms and trying to look intimidating despite

¹⁰⁶ I know, thank you, my love. Thank you for everything.

¹⁰⁷ You didn’t have to thank me, just let me help you.

¹⁰⁸ I’ll try... Now, how are things with John?

¹⁰⁹ Things are fine.

¹¹⁰ I’ve never seen you happy in a relationship, and I don’t see you happy now, so don’t lie to me.

her laying down flat on the bed. However, the anxiety was there, and it made it difficult to concentrate.

She didn't quite know where to start. Marina and John had arranged to move in together three months into dating each other. She didn't have a bed, as he had insisted on sharing one together and she didn't have enough money to buy her own after the expensive move.

However, she had convinced him that she needed to stay for a couple of days in what should've been their guest bedroom, her own personal jail cell.

She recalled the day she had moved in every time she heard John banging on his desk—usually because of some videogame, other times because of her absence—before stomping and screaming around the semi-spacious living room.

Marina's voice shook as she softly spoke, "Can we have a break? Y'know, mom's... I can't even say it. It's hitting me pretty hard, and I don't think I can be in a relationship right now—"

"What did you say?" John raised his voice, his hand closing into tight fists. Marina stayed quiet, her body beginning to shake as she glanced at the discolored carpet below them. "Marina, did you just break up with me?" He growled, his fists turning white. It seemed like the longer the silence became, the angrier he got, and she shivered as she prepared herself for whatever would happen. She expected him to yell at her, tell her she was being a "selfish bitch" or accuse her again of cheating. However, she jumped as he shoved his left fist into the wall next to her face, white dust covering his forearm as he pulled his hand out of the drywall. After another moment of heavy silence, he turned to the door, "Fine. I'll just kill myself. Not like my life has any meaning to it anyways."

“NO! Please don’t,” Marina cried, instinctively running to the door. She held it shut before he could try to open it. However, he just turned around and headed to the kitchen, and it took her a second too long to realize he was going for one of the kitchen knives that was set on the counter. As he just began to cut his wrist, she screamed and cried to beg him to stop, rushing toward him to pull the knife away from his grasp. “I’m sorry just give me some time we’ll get back together I swear!”

Suddenly, the force against her hands ceased, and he smiled softly as he let go of the knife, “Promise?”

The minute it took for him to trap her slowed in her mind as she replayed them over and over and over again, trying to slow them into seconds as she continued to etch butterflies into the spackle, but there was a lag in her memory—much like an old computer trying to play a high-quality video game—and it made it impossible for her to make sense of how she ended up where she currently was. She was stuck. They had already signed a lease together, and she couldn’t afford to live elsewhere. She didn’t want John to die. She didn’t want to lose another person in her life, so she did what she thought was best: make it work. He would eventually get better, and she would grow to love him. I mean, wasn’t that what everyone wanted for her? Didn’t they want her trauma to be fixed by love?

The shaky butterfly her pen drew into the wall fluttered in her imagination before blurring, a sob shaking her core before she could muffle it. She laid down on the floor as his rage seemed to settle, and she cried into her hand as she attentively listened to his movements. Anxiety spread through her body as she heard him walk into the kitchen, but it somewhat settled as he stomped out the door, the floor vibrating with how hard he slammed it shut.

She slumped onto the sheets with a loud sob, her body quivering as she cried her vocal cords raw. The closet door shrouded her in darkness with only a line of sunlight telling her what time of day it was. A headache stabbed at her skull, her pulsing brain banging a hole into it and threatening to pop out of her eardrums.

“Marina,” Mamá interrupted her recounting loudly, holding Marina’s hands. “A que lo mato,”¹¹¹ her mother spoke evenly, her eyes staring off into the empty space in front of her.

“Hey, ma, it’s fine, calm down—”

“No, dame su teléfono que le boi a decir una cosita,”¹¹² Mamá moves to sit up, only to scream as an audible crack sounded through the room. “ÑETA,”¹¹³ her back arched in an uncomfortable position, and her hands dug into the white sheets below her. “Ñeta, ñeta, puñeta,”¹¹⁴ she began to bite her bottom lip until it turned a pale pink color under her teeth, tears flowing from her eyes as she maneuvered herself back down in a shuffling motion.

“Mami, ¿ta bien?”¹¹⁵ Marina asked, fully aware that the answer was, in fact, no.

“¿Qué tú cre? Con ete cuelpo to jodio no puedo hacer nada. No valgo ni un centabo,”¹¹⁶ her mother replied, a deep frown settling into her features.

“Ma, para con eso. Tú sabe que pa mi ere mi mundo,”¹¹⁷ Marina spoke softly, holding her mother’s hand before rubbing her thumb in hopefully soothing circles around the back of her hand.

Marina couldn’t remember how that ended up turning into an argument about her past suicide attempt, but it did. It seemed that this was the beginning of an endless cycle. They would

¹¹¹ I’m going to kill him.

¹¹² No, give me his phone number, I’m going to tell him some things.

¹¹³ FUCK!

¹¹⁴ Fuck, fuck, fuck.

¹¹⁵ Mommy, are you alright?

¹¹⁶ What do you think? With this body all fucked up I can’t do anything. I’m not even worth a penny.

¹¹⁷ Mom, stop that. You know that you mean the world to me.

argue over something trivial or monumental, one of them would break down, and the other would apologize, but Marina couldn't find it within herself to blame her mother. She was feeling more and more of herself wither away as she drank away the flashbacks, fighting against the voices in her head telling her how terrible of a daughter she was. Here she was, perfectly healthy, yet complaining about not being able to put up with life.

She retrieved her phone from the closet, hoping to find some form of escape through a YouTube video of some kind. However, after she saw how often John was trying to contact her on every social platform available, she turned off the phone altogether.

Later that night, she awoke to the sound of her mother groaning. Marina's muscles ached; the cushions weren't nearly as comfortable as the mess of blankets she had used in Colorado. She turned to her mother just in time to see her shove five pills into her mouth.

Despite how many times she had asked the oncologist for any kind of pain reliever, she was always met with the same response, "Acetaminophen should be enough." No matter how much she had told her about her mother's restless nights filled with groans and, sometimes, yelps of pain, nothing convinced the doctor to change her mind.

Eventually, she just begged one of her estranged friends, the only one she knew would sell her pot purely for the extra cash, to help her out. She walked outside of her house, tired eyes from weeks of little sleep forming sickly bags under her eyes. Her hair was messy, knotted after days of tying it up into a scrunched-up bun. Eventually, the knots had grown so severe that she had just cut them off completely, her hair cut into unattractive chunks that she hid in a low ponytail. Her mother might fight her about it, but she didn't care, she knew eventually she would just shave the entire mess off. After a short conversation with the friend, she felt relieved. There she was, edibles in hand, finally being able to do something about her mother's pain.

Only the edibles didn't work very well.

Mamá's frustration built, and she was very vocal about her anger toward the ineffectiveness of the weed she was using. It only allowed her a couple of hours of sleep, and Marina knew that sleep deprivation made her pain worse. Marina remembered how sensitive she, herself, was to the world when she had spent hours of wakefulness in that damned closet, and she could only imagine what her mother was going through.

Once again, she failed.

Marina couldn't understand why she kept failing everyone over and over again. A repulsion began to bubble in her gut, a deep hatred spreading throughout her body. She wished she were better—more equipped to take care of her mother. Why couldn't she simply return the favor to her mother? She raised her alone—sacrificed her comfort and art for her daughter. While her daughter dressed in the latest Marshall's fashion, Mamá had efficiently sewn underwear, suits, and jeans. Marina knew this, as she had seen her mother sew holes shut while they watched TV on the weekends. Mamá's only vice—her only cope as far as Marina was aware—was smoking, an addiction that began in her early youth.

While Marina had been mocked for her ineptitude by everyone around her, her mother had uplifted her—told her she was destined to do what she struggled to believe she could do: write. While she was mocked for her imperfect language skills in both Spanish and English, her mother believed that one day within her lifetime she would see her daughter's books on a store shelf.

“Hace calor... Y tiene manga lalga y mahones pueto,”¹¹⁸ Mamá started, and Marina had heard this before when she was a teenager. The back of her neck began to sweat, perspiration

¹¹⁸ It's hot... And you have long sleeves and jeans on.

seeping into the back of her sweater. “Lo sé pero etoy bien,”¹¹⁹ she was quick to respond. There was silence as if her mother expected her to continue talking. She caught her mother glancing at her arms, and she sighed as she pulled the sleeves up to her elbows, “¿Ve? Nada.”¹²⁰

Her mother inspected the skin of her arms, and if she noticed the healed, white, scattered scars, she didn’t say anything. Mamá sighed, nodding to her—which Marina took as an invitation to cover her arms again—before pointing and asking, “¿Pol qué tiene lo epejo cubielto?”¹²¹

“Ma, ya, no etoy in the mood pa eto,”¹²² Marina stated in a frustrated tone.

But her mother continued, “Y el rón eta a punto de acabarse—”¹²³

“Okay, vamo a dolmil. Etoy demaciao cansá pa lidial con eta mielta,”¹²⁴ Marina grabbed her mother’s legs, beginning to move them upward toward the bed as she normally did. She didn’t care if her mother was shifting to aid in the process, she was done with this conversation and needed to put her mother to bed as soon as possible—before her bones began to ache.

“¡Marina, para!”¹²⁵ Mamá begged, “¡Me va a rompel la pielna! ¡Marina! ¡MARINA—!”¹²⁶

A loud snap broke time’s ticking clock.

Loud, banshee-like screams tore through the air, the gravity around Marina’s ears vibrating so intensely that they began to ring. Her mother’s screams unlocked her jaw, and her back arched enough for her to look possessed. She struggled to pull her leg up to the bed, banged her head against the headboard before her eyes rolled to the back of her head.

¹¹⁹ I know but I’m fine.

¹²⁰ See? Nothing.

¹²¹ Why do you have the mirrors covered?

¹²² Mom, stop. I’m not in the mood for this.

¹²³ And the rum is about to be empty—

¹²⁴ Okay, we’re going to sleep. I’m too tired to deal with this shit.

¹²⁵ Marina, stop!

¹²⁶ You’re going to break my leg! [...]

Marina ran around the house trying to find her phone, only to find it on her bedroom dresser. She struggled to turn on her phone as John's messages began to insistently ring one after the other. Her entire body shaking as she read the final message, "Fine, I'm going to kill myself now, have a nice life." Life became a blur, and she called 911. She remembers telling the operator that someone had died, and when asked for a name, she began to bawl and pace around the room. On autopilot, she answered the questions that were asked by the responder, teleporting from the bedroom to the ambulance, then to the hospital.

Her mother slept soundly once a heavy dose of morphine was administered, yet her screams still echoed throughout Marina's head. She almost forgot they weren't real, and she failed to remember when was the last time she had taken her antipsychotics, but she couldn't bring herself to care. Who knows, maybe she had an entire bottle back home that she could swallow. "No, Marina, not now," she reminded herself, knowing that if she were to die now, her mother might be left alone.

She was about to utter her hundredth apology when she heard her mother groan, her eyelids fluttering. Marina rubbed her swollen eyes, dried and wet tears covering her cheeks. She stood up, walking straight to the bathroom to clean her face.

Upon entering the sterile yet warmer bathroom, the glimpse of her widened, red eyes sent a pinch of pain to her right femur. She looked down at the silver handlebars by the toilet, her warped reflection making her buckle to the ground. Her head banged against the door as her plasma cells began to multiply, flooding the bone with red marrow. The bone swelled, pulsating until it burst. With a loud snap and bang, she screamed, her throat burning and her vocal cords ripping apart. The pain conquered every nerve of her body, pure fire burning through every nerve. Magma seeped through the break, shards of bone cutting through her restricted muscles.

Marina's fingers froze as she dug them into the tiled floor. Her back contorted extremely, the top of it inches away from pressing against the base of her spine. Her spine had become flexible, plastic-like, but the pressure against her ribs cracked at their surface. Her scream remained a constant, shrilling note, her jaw unlocking and dislodging itself as it pressed against her neck. An increasingly violent earthquake shook her body, intensifying the pain by the second.

She begged adrenaline to infect her body, but her brain failed to produce it.

Bang after bang, she began to numb herself as she hit her head against the door.

Her brain lost consciousness, and a temporary relief seeped into her lungs and body.

When she came to, she felt more tired than she ever had before. Her body refused to move, locked on the bathroom floor until a muffled beeping brought her back to reality. "Ayúdame,"¹²⁷ she croaked, feeling her muscles twitch. Her right arm stiffly began to push her up into a sitting position, her freezing cheek pulsating. However, the moment a nerve sent a signal to her right leg and a cell proceeded to shift in response, her throat sucked in all the air from outside her body and trapped it in her lungs. A vicious tingling of pain shot through her body, but her numbed brain struggled to keep up with the feeling.

She dry-heaved as gravity pushed against her in waves. She was pulled under, rolling in the undercurrent as she struggled to figure out which way was up. She tried to stand, tried to order her body to move the way she wanted it to, begged it to, but gravity would push against her every time she did. Eventually, she resigned herself to staying on the floor, helpless within her body.

¹²⁷ Help me.

Marina struggled to turn toward the door handle. She reached up for it a couple of times before wrapping her fingers around it. It vibrated after she shoved it downward, releasing the door from its locking mechanism. It swung open, hitting the wall as her body toppled to the ground. She tried to stand, but her leg overwrote every message her brain attempted to send.

Marina pulled against the tiled floor, her skin sticking to the frozen tundra that stood between her and her mother. One point five meters, five feet, sixty inches, a thousand five hundred and four millimeters, it took an eternity to crawl to her mother's side. The closer she managed to get, the more she could focus on her mother's even breathing. She was asleep, finally, and Marina's eyes grew tired as her brain was allowed to finally rest.

As she situated herself into a sitting position against her mother's hospital bed, she hoped her mother had not heard her screams as Marina had heard hers.

As Cristina awoke, the clock above her ticked inconsistently, and the simple, wooden cross beneath cast a cold shadow over her body. She shivered, her bones tingling as muscle and blood flow failed to shield them from the freezing air. The beeping of machines next to her reminded her that she was at the hospital, but she groggily tried to remember why she was there in the first place. A knife dug into the nerves within her femur as a violent shiver attempted to keep her warm, and she groaned as her thumb impulsively, repeatedly pressed the button clutched in the palm of her hand. The machine remained as it was, with nothing changing in its processes.

“Puñeta,”¹²⁸ she thought as it failed to administer any morphine. She pressed the call button, on the hard-plastic barrier on the bed. The button above it blinked a muted red. She knew no one would come, the nursing staff dwindling as more medical professionals fled to the US mainland to escape the failing economy on the island. Years of working in the medical industry taught her this, and she sighed in frustration as she tried to stay as still as possible.

Her body betrayed her, and she shivered again, the knife repeatedly stabbing her right leg.

She looked around the room. The door was closed, the lights were dimmed, and the couch on her right side was vacant. Anxiety fought against her tiredness, her thoughts warping into frantic jumbles of chaos. She couldn't piece out what she was thinking, just that Marina wasn't there when she needed her by her side. Tears burned her cheeks, a loud sob shaking her entire body. Her eyes darted to the opened, empty bathroom, and her stomach began to twist into butterfly knots. Her lungs shriveled, refusing to take any amount of air as long as her daughter wasn't there to give them a reason to. Her brain revolted against her, sending memory after

¹²⁸ Fuck.

memory of her being abandoned and discarded. Her husband cheated on her decades before, her friends grew distant as she focused on her daughter, and her sister left because of her. Did she drive Marina away too? Was she not good enough? Of course, she wasn't, not with how she treated her. She couldn't move without Marina's assistance. Every time she did move without her, she just brought more pain to both of them. She knew that Marina slept on the ground beside her to keep an eye on her. She knew she was a burden, and it angered her that she couldn't be anything else.

It angered her that she was worthless.

The machine next to her sighed as she pressed the button again, and she watched as a clear, cold liquid traveled from the bag labeled, "Morphine Sulfate," through a small tube, and into the needle situated in her left arm. She sighed as a numbed coolness soothed the sharp vibrations into muller waves.

When she looked around to locate her daughter again, she noticed the top of someone's head next to the edge of the bed. Cristina struggled to shuffle to the edge, the numbness intensifying as her world began to blur.

"Marina," she called, weakly petting the top of her head. She shuffled her body downward, twisting as best as she could to kiss her daughter's head, "Gracia por estar aquí."¹²⁹

¹²⁹ Thank you for being here.