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An Invisible Decade

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of the City College of the City University of New York.”**

*Can a beginning dictate an end?
Perhaps the ending is always the beginning.*

I simply know that I lived a beginning, an ending and everything in between.

DeLuna

.1

1990

“Look closely, what do you see?” she asked me that humid summer day in the Dominican Republic in her sanctuary. I ran out of there with images in my head that told me stories I was not supposed to know at the age of ten.

That summer like every other summer, I traveled to the Dominican Republic and visited Grandma Bella. I sat quietly next to Grandma in the white and pink stripe rocking chair made of thick rubber.

During a *Barceló* commercial she got up to check on the beans and oxtails, she was making for dinner. I followed her to the kitchen to keep her company. I loved to hear her stories of magic. I sat on a chair as she stirred the oxtails, my head perked up eager to hear a new story. I could smell the mixture of oregano, cilantro, red pepper, sour orange, and beef. I didn’t like oxtails very much but I loved anything Grandma cooked. That summer day I didn’t like the story Grandma told me, because the story was about me.

Today, I look back and the same feeling still invades me. That shadow of shame still whispers softly in my ear, “You can try to be like them, but you’re one of us.” I read the books at an early age and understood that people like us, *brujas*, had been rejected since the moon was placed in the heavens. We were not only living women but we were women of life. Women who could look into the eyes of strangers and see their past and future; women who knew that dreams meant more than an unconscious thought; women who saw the pain of love at the shore of the ocean and still jumped into the deepness of the waters without fear of drowning; women who

danced with sorrow and slept with laughter; women who dared to live beyond the limits of their time.

Of all the stories I read, there was one that stood out to me the most, ***El vuelo de una bruja joven.***

Once upon a time in the Dominican Republic there was a young girl named Isidra. Isidra and her twin sister were the spitting image of their mother. Their hair was a long wavy walnut color that shone from a distance. Their eyes were as blue as the sea and their skin the color of cinnamon. Their beauty and kind nature scared their father; he didn't want anybody to hurt them or to take advantage of their innocence. For this reason, he had them schooled at home and prohibited them from going out with friends.

Isidra spent those lonely years experimenting with the gift she had discovered in a state of boredom, magic. In the evenings, when everyone slept, Isidra and her sister grabbed a broom from under their bed and headed to the back of the house. Isidra would climb on top of the broom and take off flying as she sang a soft and melodic lullaby. She would fly to the highest plantain tree as she sang to the moon. She hid her beauty under the branches as she observed the moon with curiosity. Her sister watched her fly away in astonishment every night. Hoping that one day she could join her.

One cloudy evening Isidra took flight as she always did. One of the 'tumbadores,' who were responsible for catching, revealing, and killing the brujas, heard her song as he sat under the plantain tree. He climbed up the tree and grabbed Isidra before she could fly away. He was in shock, brujas were all supposed to be evil, old, and deformed women who cursed people and sucked children's blood. Brujas never revealed themselves. She looked at him with frightened eyes and he couldn't help but desire her.

The tumbador feared that she would put a spell on him and before she could speak he recited a special ritual. She collapsed in his arms as the broom in her hand slipped onto the softness of the green grass on the ground. He closed his eyes and kissed her gently on the lips, knowing that she would never feel his love for her.

Her twin sister waited up for her all night but Isidra never returned. Her father looked for her frantically to no avail. One neighbor entered the house out of breath that afternoon, “Isidra is being accused of being a bruja. They’ve taken her to the Indian River where she has been tied and is awaiting punishment.” Her Mom silently cursed the day she went to that witch and asked for a remedy to help her conceive.

The crowd of people stood at a distance afraid of the youngest bruja they had ever seen. They were confused by her beauty and her willingness to die. Her mother begged for mercy as the tumbador that found her covered her body with gasoline. He wanted to save her but he knew that they would find them and kill them both. He looked her in the eyes as he lit a match and threw it at her. His heart speeding as the flame traveled through her body.

Her twin sister, devastated by her sister’s tragedy, climbed to the top of the rock and jumped into the depth of the Indian’s River, knowing that she would never return.

“Come with me.” Grandma covered the pot with a bright yellow plate and walked past the kitchen, past the patio with the wild chickens and the dog missing an eye, and into the little room that had the shape of an attic, her sanctuary. Grandma’s sanctuary was about eight by ten. It was my first time inside. The smell of incense, burnt cigar, *yerba buena*, and mango candles gave the room a warm feeling. The first thing I noticed upon entering was an altar with Saints streaming from one end of the table to the next. There were so many saints that I couldn’t help but wonder if they were all really God’s angels. I recognized some of them. They were the ones

most Catholic households had at the entrance of their doors or hanging from the mirror inside their cars; *San Miguel, San Epedito, and Santa Clara*. I noticed *San Gregorio Hernandez*, the doctor who had been a teacher to me since I was five years old. He once told me to learn the value of silence because words were dangerous. I always felt protected because I knew that somewhere out there he was watching over me. I never told anyone about him because he only visited in my dreams.

As I continued to navigate the room with my eyes, I noticed the little papers underneath the bronze statues; the notebooks filled with random scribbles; the white, red, yellow, and black candles on the altar and on the floor. I remember noticing that the flame on the black candles danced from left to right instead of upwards like the other ones. To the left were two white rocking chairs and in between them an Indian statue with a bronze plate at its feet filled with water and coins.

I didn't like Indians very much, because an Indian had tried to drown me when I was nine years old. My family had planned a field trip to the *Ballacane* River a hot summer day in July. I loved the loud drums and rhythmic guitar of Spanish music; the soft bread and freshly seasoned chicken; and the room temperature water in the river. I didn't know how to swim but had decided to learn that day. I wanted to jump off the four-story rock that rose powerfully from the river. Little kids no older than six years old who were raised in that neighborhood jumped head in and landed victoriously as they swam from one end of the river to the other.

Grandpa showed me how to position my arms and how to move my feet. We practiced swimming that entire morning. The distance was only 40 feet or so. I must have gone back and forward a few times with Grandpa by my side. After lunch, Grandpa was floating in the middle of the river, in front of the mysterious rock. I began to swim towards him but as I reached him I

felt a hand pull my leg under the water. Before I knew it, the force of the hand began to pull me down and the rock and trees surrounding the river vanished before my eyes. I tried to free myself but it was too strong. As my body sank, I saw the image of an Indian sitting on a golden rock at the bottom of the river. I sat on a silver rock facing him; our hands held together, with a smile on our faces. I tried to move, to confirm that it was really me I was seeing at the bottom of the river but my body was frozen under water, staring at myself and the Indian.

Grandpa pulled me up after a few seconds. When I felt the sun against my skin and the beating of my heart, I closed my eyes in Grandpa's arms. I couldn't erase the image of the Indian man underneath the water, his calm smile, light brown skin, long black braids, and his eyes, which shone as bright as the sun itself.

"Luna, I told you to stay away from the Rivers! The Indians of the Waters collect magic. That's why they have so much power," Grandma told me later that evening when she stopped by to visit me.

"I didn't know," I told her confused.

"I know. You'll learn though, you will." She kissed my forehead.

I was grateful for her that day but the day at the sanctuary, I was scared.

"Sit down," she told me as we reached the altar.

"What's wrong, Grandma, are you okay?" I asked her unsure of why I was there. She never let any of us go in.

"You're one of us." She sat proudly.

"What do you mean?" An ant crawled up my ankle.

"You're a *bruja*."

“I don’t want to be a *bruja*. Give it to somebody else,” I told her with no hesitation or understanding of what I was doing.

“You were born this way.” She lit a candle. “It doesn’t matter how far you go, they will always be with you.” Grandma continued to stare into the candle.

“Who are they?”

“The doctor who visits you in your dreams, *San Gregorio Hernandez*. The Saints. The spirits. The world of shadows.”

“They’ve told me that you’re going to fall in love with a man as dark as me,” she added as I stood up.

“I don’t ever want to fall in love.” I began to walk towards the door.

“DeLuna, I love you,” she told me as I reached the door.

“I love you too, Grandma.” My heart was racing as I met her in the middle of the room and allowed her to embrace me.

I always knew that Grandma was different, but I didn’t love her any less for it, she was my Grandma. I had no idea how she knew that the doctor visited me in my dreams and I was too scared to ask. But I dreamt every night. And yes, we all do. However, I was blessed or condemned with the gift of remembering every dream I ever had. At times, I had trouble knowing when I had dreamt something or when it had really happened. Dreams had always been a part of me; an extension of my life. They were just there, sometimes a mirror reflecting what I felt; other times, a voice preparing me for what awaited me or those around me.

When I was twelve years old I visited the Dominican Republic. I spent time with Grandma Bella as I always did. But that afternoon, Grandma waited for Grandpa to leave the house. As soon as she saw him get on the motorcycle, she grabbed me by the hand and took me to her sanctuary.

“The time has come for you to learn. *Cierra los ojos.*”

I closed my eyes as Grandma instructed. I was twelve years old and was terrified, but part of me wanted to know what I was gifted with.

“In between your eyes, at the very center, you have a third eye. That eye shows you the things that you’re not able to see through your physical eyes. What do you see?” The scent of cigar crept out of her mouth into my nostrils as she blew smoke into my face.

“I see a young woman, wearing a green skirt and a white shirt. She has a young child in her arms, and she is crying hysterically as she walks past a *colmado.*”

A knock on the front door interrupted my vision.

“This is the woman you saw. She’s come for my help.” Grandma took the lady to the altar and left me in the living room to look after the baby.

I couldn’t help but wonder what was going on inside the sanctuary. I lay the sleeping baby in the bed and placed three pillows on the edges to make sure that the baby didn’t fall off. I went through the side of the house and found a small hole to the room. The woman sat quietly with her eyes closed as Grandma talked over her head in a language I’d never heard before but understood.

“What are their names?” Grandma asked as she danced in circles around the woman.

“Piero y Mariela.”

“You sure this is what you want?”

“*Si!*” The woman’s faced reflected anger and pain.

The woman sat in a white chair in the middle of the room as Grandma lit nine red candles upside down. She chanted a song of glory and victory as she played the drums. Grandma finished lighting the candles. In between the chants, she added their names, Punta and Piero. Punta sat surrounded by candles with her eyes closed. Grandma sat Indian style in front of the woman. She wore a yellow cloth around her head and had a dry coconut in her hand. She added sour ingredients inside the coconut, such as lime and spoiled milk, and thin strings of tangled hair, as she stirred the mixture in the coconut and mumbled words underneath her breath.

“Write his name and her name in this paper and tear it in half. On the other half write his name and your name.” Grandma continued to stir the mixture inside the coconut. She threw Piero and Mariela’s names into the mixture as she continued to mumble broken phrases. The woman, Punta, began to sweat and shake as Grandma stirred the coconut. The only thing I got to hear as she stirred the ingredients was, “That Piero becomes nauseated every time he sees Mariela.”

“Give me your hands,” Grandma told Punta. She covered her hands with honey and placed the man’s name in one palm and Punta’s name on the other.

“Clasp your hands together and in your head, say what you want from him.” Grandma inhaled short and quick puffs of her cigar and blew them into Punta’s hands.

“He will be in your house in less than twenty four hours. Now stop crying woman, and go get pretty for your man.”

I was scared. I had never seen Grandma look so mean. Her face transformed to a rounder shape, her shoulders became firmer and broader, her eyes shone brighter, and her voice sounded like a man. While Grandma rubbed oil in the back of Punta's neck and forehead, I ran as fast as I could. I took off my shoes and sat next to the baby pretending to watch over her as she slept. The sweat ran down my spine like a rock trickling down an Indian river. I had no idea what Grandma did for Punta, but she was smiling by the time she left, and so was Grandma after having received a few *pesos*.

“Go buy a *refresco*, *galleticas* and *queso de oja*.” She gave me her hard-earned money for snacks and I didn't protest. I didn't want her to suspect I saw what had happened. I brought enough snacks for both of us and gave her back the change. I wondered if she knew I saw her but she didn't say anything that day.

The next day I went to visit Grandma and sat in the rocking chair with my eyes closed; focused on the third eye that showed me things. I saw myself sitting in the rocking chair surrounded by saints. I opened my eyes, frightened, only to find Grandpa staring at me.

“What were you doing, Luna?” Grandpa asked in a suspicious tone.

“Nothing.” I got up to walk to the kitchen but he grabbed me by the arm before I could walk away.

“Luna, *ser bruja* is for illiterate and people with no class. You come from an elite family in the Dominican Republic. Leave that to your grandma, that's all she knows. But you, you were born for bigger things; to be a woman of wealth and status. You cannot be both. *Brujas* have power but they are feared and hated by all; they are considered superstitious fools by society. You were born into a rich family, educated people of class. That's who you are.”

“That's not my family.” I mumbled under my breath.

“Bella!!!” Grandpa called out to Grandma at the top of his lungs, ignoring my comment.

“What did I tell you about teaching Luna about magic?” I had never seen Grandpa so upset.

“I don’t have to teach her, Gumencido, the girl was born that way.” Grandma walked away from him as she winked at me.

“Luna, you listen to me, you stay away from that superstitious crap!” Grandpa stormed out of the house without looking back.

A week later, Grandpa, Grandma, and I sat down to eat lunch. I could taste the butter on the *mangu*, covered with fried onions, fried cheese, salami, and eggs. Every spoon was filled with a taste that danced at the center of my mouth.

“This is good, Grandma,” I said with my mouth full.

“Bella, did you hear the latest, Piero left Mariela and the kids. He moved in with Punta last week.”

“I didn’t know.”

“After 20 years of marriage, he just picked up and left her and the four kids at their mercy.” Grandpa shook his head in disbelief. But he had done the same to Grandma Pecuezo; left her with six kids to be with Grandma Bella. I knew because the grownups in the family always talked about it. Mom and her brothers and sisters loved Grandma Bella but they didn’t always like her. It took them time to forget the times when Grandma Pecuezo refused to leave the house and would lock herself in her room. Grandma Pecuezo thought she was going crazy. Grandpa thought she was delusional when she started saying that Grandma Bella’s spirit would visit her in the middle of the night and throw her off the bed.

“*La Pobre*. I’ll stop by to check on her,” Grandma said as she continued to eat.

Grandma looked at me and winked. She knew I saw everything; it was our secret, a secret I wished I didn't know. She did the magic so that the man could leave his wife for the crying lady, Punta. It was Grandma's fault that he left his wife.

"Luna, you're not going to finish your food?" Grandpa asked surprised that I wasn't asking for seconds.

"I'm not hungry anymore."

After that day, I stopped using the third eye and avoided looking people in the eyes because I didn't want to know their stories. I barely lit candles, although I loved their scent I hated the figures that I saw in its flicker. I didn't want to hurt people and I didn't want people to hate me. But I wasn't able to shut down my dreams. The dreams stayed with me.

A Dream with Bella

1993

I was having a conversation with a stranger in an empty kitchen. The wallpaper was a light lavender with tiny print designs of merging spoons and forks. The counter was spotless, the sink was clean, and so was the stove. The oven was opened but there was nothing inside. I glanced around the room casually looking for the dishes that left a lingering scent of cake. I had no intention of offending the stranger with whom I was speaking, who happened to be very engaged in our discussion. The scent was so strong. Discretely I lifted my left shoulder in an attempt to check if I was who smelled of cake, but I wasn't.

The charming young man moved his hands as he told me a story. I had never seen him before but suddenly I couldn't stop listening. He was telling the story of the missing rose in a garden and how it had been swallowed by a tree. I had no idea what he was talking about.

“What will happen to the rose?” I asked curiously.

“It will grow its own roots, until it is so strong that the tree will have no choice but to open its mouth so that it can blossom.”

Suddenly the young man froze and Grandma appeared in a light blue gown, swaying with grace as she laughed aloud at having scared me.

“What are you doing here Grandma?” I felt fear.

“One day my sanctuary will be yours.” She winked and vanished into thin air.

The frozen guy crumble to pieces before me as the spoons and forks of the wallpaper closed in on me. I woke up in tears that night, screaming at the top of my lungs, “I don't want it! I don't want the sactuary!”

Josefina:

October 1998

Luna was a simple girl for the most part but her mind was a web of complications that could torture even an insane person at times. That fall day she made me her victim, by no means did she do this consciously. I knew her better than anyone else in her life, sometimes even better than herself. Jazz would be someone that she would have said no to, I knew this, but deep down inside, I knew she really wanted to say yes. He was everything she wanted to stay away from; a young boy that would distract her from school, cute, Black, and older. She wasn't born afraid of boys or of the color Black, circumstances taught her to fear such things at an early age.

I spent every weekend in her house. We were the same age and were best cousins, and still are. We sat in her room watching cartoons during those weekends when her father was supposed to pick her up. She learned to sit still every time the phone rang as we watched The Smurfs or Thundercats. There were no tears or even a flinch from her when Aunt Petronila walked into the room to announce that he wouldn't be able to make it.

I remember the last time she cried for him, it was a sunny day in June and she was five years old. But it was also her favorite birthday. He called early that morning to wish her a happy birthday.

“Happy birthday, my love. I have a surprise for you and I'm going to pick you up before noon,” her father told her.

“Okay.” Luna tried to hide her excitement.

It would have been her second time spending her birthday with her father and the best part of it was that her sister and I were invited.

“He has a surprise for me!” Luna said.

“I know what it is. It’s probably a surprise party.” I loved cake, even though I never got one for my birthday because Mom never had any money.

“Or maybe we’re going to PlayLand,” I added eagerly. All our friends had gone there with their families except Luna and me. You needed a car to get there and our Mothers didn’t know how to drive.

“That’ll be fun.” Luna drifted into a daydream.

Noon came and the doorbell didn’t ring. We waited anxiously in the bedroom with our shorts and bright shirts on. Luna loved bright colors so we figured we would all wear a bright shirt for her birthday. I wore pink, her sister wore yellow and she wore orange. Two in the afternoon and no phone call or knock on the door. At two thirty, we heard Aunt Petronila screaming at the top of her lungs as she spoke on the phone.

“She’s been waiting for you all day. The least you can do is tell her yourself! ”

“What do you mean?” Aunt Petronila asked.

“Do you know how many times she changed her outfit today? Eight times!” she said as she hung up the phone.

Aunt Petronila sat in the burgundy red flower sofa covered in plastic - Her big hazel eyes filled with sadness for her middle child. She lit a cigarette and took a sip of her coffee.

“Okay girls, go put on your shoes. We are going to Coney Island,” Aunt Petronila announced.

Luna walked over to the sofa and sat next to her Mom. Her steps seemed as light as an ant. She lowered her head and sat quietly for what seemed like a very long time. I was hoping she wouldn’t say no. I really wanted to go to Coney Island because we had never been there. It was going to be tons of fun to get on the tea cups and ride the bumper cars.

“It’s okay, *Mom*. It’s not your fault.” Luna’s eyes remained focused on the floor.

“I don’t need him,” Luna added as a tear rolled down her pale face.

Luna got up and walked to her bedroom. I stood behind to witness the tears that escaped my Aunt’s eyes. I walked to the room to find Luna sitting on the bed. Her tiny chubby hands covering her face as she cried.

“I’m so stupid.” I sat next to her on the bed.

“No you’re not, he is.” I rubbed her back softly in an attempt to console her.

“You still want to go to Coney Island? We’ll have fun!” I said in a cheery voice as I got up from the bunk bed.

“Okay.” She ignored the tears that lingered on the sides of her cheeks as she put on her shoes.

It was one of her favorite birthdays. We ate pink and blue cotton candy, got on the bumper cars three times, took tons of pictures in our bright shirts, and it was the day she stopped waiting for him. It was more perfect than a surprise party.

But bright shirts, cotton candy, and bumper cars wouldn't do the trick that day. Maybe grandpa was right about Black people and maybe Jazz was one of them, but maybe he wasn't. I can still remember the first time Grandpa Gumencido spoke to Luna and me about Black people.

We were only five years old and were visiting the Dominican Republic for the summer.

Grandpa Gumencido arrived at Grandma Pecuezo's house early that morning. The roosters had just finished singing their morning song. The aroma of fresh coffee still lingered in the air and the fresh baked bread invited us to get out of bed. The warmth of the sunrays tried to creep in through the *persianas*.

"Girls, your Grandpa is here and he has a surprise for you." Grandma Pecuezo opened the window as we rushed past her in a sprint.

"Grandpa," we screamed as we ran into his arms.

"I bought my favorite girls a guava." Grandpa handed each of us one.

"You want to go to the Capital with me?" he asked us.

And of course we did. We got on a public bus with Grandpa that was so crowded that you could barely squeeze out a fart. It was stuffy and windy because there was no air conditioner and the window was pulled down. Luna didn't mind the window being down. She loved the smell of burnt trees and rain. Grandpa sat Luna by the window, me in the middle and him on the edge. A dark skinned Haitian man sat next to him but Grandpa forced him to go somewhere else.

"Take your black ass somewhere else," he told the young black man with tired eyes and dirty clothing. His eyes were black and its surrounding, were a very light yellow.

“What’s your problem, old man?” the young man asked grandpa in a broken Spanish mixed with Creole.

“You are.” Grandpa pushed him and folded the seat so that he couldn’t sit back down.

“Asshole,” the young man whispered under his breath as he got up and looked for another seat.

“Never trust Black people!” he told Luna and me that morning.

“Why?” I asked.

“They’re all lazy and bad people. They’re ugly too. Look like monkeys.” Grandpa rolled his eyes at the young guy.

“Grandma Bella is dark and I love her. And Josef’s Mom. And Anna.” Luna looked at Grandpa confused.

“That’s your family, you don’t have a choice. You girls stay away from them, they’re no good.”

Luna turned her attention back to the window and didn’t say anything, neither did I. We spent most of the three-hour trip staring out the window. Contemplating the Haitian women with the colorful baskets over their heads with ice cream and sugar cane inside; the small motorcycles with four to five passengers passing the bus at full speed; the man in the motorcycle that had six chickens on each side plucking away and tied by their feet upside down; the children playing with dirt in front of their little houses; the lopsided houses made of cans and zinc; the teenagers bathing in the rivers with a little canteen; the women on the side of the road selling art, ceramics, mango, guava, and cherries; the men in front of their houses drinking beer and playing

dominoes; the women in front of their houses sweeping the front yard; the chicken; the pigs; the mountains; the green grass that spread for miles; the cows, the horses, and the dried rivers with many rocks.

We went to a neighborhood called *El Millon*. He said we were there to visit friends. The houses were huge. The streets were clean and each house had its own little park inside. All the houses were pretty. Some were pink, others yellow, blue, green, purple and orange. It looked like a paradise. Nothing like the dusty roads or houses made of wood and *zinc* around where Grandpa lived. Grandpa was addressed as *Don Gumencido* because he had a two story house made of brick and cement and owned land with a few pigs and cows in the country side. But *El Millon* was like nothing we had ever seen before. Luna and I looked in awe at all the two and three story houses. One house took up the entire street. It looked like a palace with its bridge over a small pond. The house we went to was a green two-story house. It wasn't like the palace but it was very nice and big. They greeted us pleasantly. And as they escorted us to the living room, I saw Luna's picture hanging on the wall next to two boys that looked like her. All our family members had the same photo in their house. She is four years old and is talking on an old burgundy phone. It appears to be a deep conversation. She was wearing a white and red stripe dress. She loved that dress so much, that Aunt Petronila had to buy it for her three times. That's how many times she outgrew it.

We were in her father's house in the Dominican Republic. His mother lived there and looked after the house while he lived and worked in NYC. He was a wealthy man and Grandpa took a liking to wealth. They had been close friends before he got Aunt Petronila pregnant and ran off to marry his rich flat butt girlfriend in the Dominican Republic. The old lady offered us

cake and lemonade but we said, “No thank you.” Luna sat quietly next to me, not knowing what to say or do.

“Grandpa, we want to leave,” I said in front of the wrinkled old woman.

“We just got here.” Grandpa rubbed Luna’s shoulder.

“I want to leave,” Luna agreed without looking at Grandpa.

“We want to leave now!” I said again in a squeaky tone as I crossed my arms and got up.

“*Ca-lla-te!* Sit down. We leave when I’m ready to leave.” Grandpa pointed his tensed finger at the red sofa.

Many strangers came to see Luna that day. One of them was a painter who brought her a painting as a gift.

“Luna, I made this for you, it’s a picture of *el campo de tu abuelo.*” Her cousin the painter placed the painting in front of us to show Luna the details of the big blue house surrounded by orange and mango trees. There was a barn with horses, cows, and chickens and a dog sitting under a tree.

“*Gracias.*” Luna placed it next to her feet and left it against the sofa when we left the house.

“I’m *la Doctora Lucy.*” Luna shook her hand but the lady gave her a tight hug.

There were many books in a bookcase behind the sofa. The living room had very large windows with bright green curtains hanging from them. I could see part of the pool from the window next to the bookcase. There were two girls and one boy playing with a volley ball. Luna

looked at the pictures on the wall. She had never met her brothers. She sat like a statue as the doctor, the painter, the writer, the grandmother, and all the other people that stopped by analyzed her.

“She has our big eyes and thin hands.” the old lady told the Doctor lady.

“She even has his same toes,” the writer said.

We didn't say much to any of them. Luna had never seen her father's toes but after that day she didn't like her toes very much. Luna sat next to me, quietly refusing the fruits, cake or lemonade they offered. I was hungry but refused everything she refused. Eventually Grandpa took his two-spoiled American granddaughter, back home, to La Vega.

October 1998

Josefina, Leslie, and Naomi rushed into our dorm room with great news to tell me on that chilly October Thursday afternoon. They were so excited they were all talking at once and I had no idea who was saying what; it sounded like a hurricane of words slamming against my ears.

“He’s tall.”

“Has nice curly hair.”

“Has a car.”

“He’s black but I approve of him so you know he’s cute!” Josef said sarcastically.

I sat on the top bunk bed quietly as I took a bite of my cracker with ketchup.

“Are you serious? You’re eating crackers with ketchup for dinner again? That’s disgusting!” Josef climbed up the stairs and grabbed the ketchup from the bed before I could grab it.

Most freshmen gained 15 to 20 pounds their first year of college. I had managed to lose 15 pounds in a month and a half. *Mom* who had not been to church since I was baptized was beginning to pray every day. I wasn’t a fan of fast food. I lived for the rice, beans, and *compana*.

“I agree,” Naomi seconded.

“I happen to think it’s delicious. Uhmhhh. Taste delicious.” I took two big bites and licked the ketchup off my finger.

“Anyways, we met the perfect guy for you. He is tall, brown complexion, nice curly hair, can dress, handsome, a sophomore and drives a nice car.” Josefina was excited.

“Great, but no thank you.”

I had never had a boyfriend before and wasn't interested in one. I had kissed two boys when I was fourteen who happened to be twin brothers. They found out and were mad at each other for a month. I liked the nice twin brother. His kiss was soft and gentle with no tongue. But the bad ass twin brother kissed me by force and ended being my first kiss. His tongue moved fast inside my mouth. It felt like a water hose with sharp teeth had gone loose inside my mouth. The twins asked me to choose one and I chose neither one. That was the extent of my dating. And I made the right decision: they both ended in jail for trafficking drugs. One of them committed suicide and the other one was deported to the Dominican Republic. Besides, boys only caused pain, and pain was not part of my plan.

"I have never met a woman who was not hurt by love, why should I be different? I don't ever want to fall in love," I told Grandma Bella when I was 14 years old.

"Not all men are bad, Luna."

"If my father doesn't love me, what makes you think a stranger will?"

"Your father loves you, Luna."

"He doesn't and its okay, he doesn't have to."

"I've seen you cry for Grandpa because he had other women." I lowered my head.

"What other women, Luna?"

"The tall lady with the red hair, and the light skin lady with black hair."

"How did you know?" Grandma asked intrigued.

"I saw it in the water of your eyes."

"You're too young to understand all the things a woman deals with to keep a marriage working. But Luna, you'll fall in love, my dear. You will," Grandma confirmed that summer day.

I figured that if I stayed away from all the boys I didn't have to worry about falling in love with any of them.

"His name is Jazz, he likes you, and wants to meet you. I gave him your number and told him you would speak to him. Yes, I made an executive decision, so you have to talk to him." Josef gave Leslie and Naomi a high five.

"You're such a nutcase; I'm not speaking to that instrument guy." I climbed down the bunk bed and put the can of crackers in the closet.

"Too late, he really likes you and you need to start dating or you're really going to become a nun." She was being worst than a *callo*.

"What's wrong with that? Nun for me, nun for them."

"Not if I can help it," Josef exclaimed in a brisk and annoyed voice.

The girls left the room and Josef dropped the topic for an hour before she started talking about him again.

"Luna, you should give it a shot, is not like you're going to marry the guy."

"I marry a Black guy and Grandpa would disown you and then hang me."

"Grandpa would have a heart attack if he knew you even kissed a Black man." Josef thought aloud. We both laughed.

"NO!" Luna said in her serious tone.

"Whatever. You're still talking to him." Josef grabbed her towel and walked to the corridor bathroom.

The next evening we headed to dinner. It was windy and the leaves on the ground swirled around as if running away from my little feet. The combination of the yellow, green and reddish leafs on the trees reminded me of a nature calendar picture. It brought peace to my heart.

It was missing the joy and sweet smell of the Dominican Republic, but it felt like we were in the right place at the right time, a confirmation that life was indeed a precious gift.

I wished everyday that I attended Americana College in Upstate New York that the food was as good as the scenery was beautiful but my wish never came true. Josefina, Leslie, Naomi and I were sitting at a round table by the entrance to Humphrey's Dining Hall. Josef's friend walked in with two guys. Suddenly I felt air being blown into my ear. I got up and left in a hurry. Unsure of what that meant. There were no words, only air.

An hour after we got to the room, Jazz called and Josef answered the phone.

"*Ello,*" she answered with a strong Spanish accent.

"Nice to hear from you Sir Jazz, so..." She put him on speaker phone.

"So, how old are you?" she asked him as she blew kisses in my direction.

"I just turned 21 years old," he said.

"Do you live on campus?"

"Yes, in Mercer Hall," he said sounding tense.

"Are you a nice guy? Can I trust you with my cousin?"

"Yeah now's a good time." Josef hung up the phone.

"You want me to talk to a music guy. You know I'm always off beat. That's already a bad sign."

"Whatever silly." She lay in her bed like a dictator with both her arms under her head.

I grabbed my jacket and walked out of the room and into Naomi's room across the hallway. I tried to convince her to let me stay in her room until Jazz left but she was fully supportive of Josef's plan. I could have left the building and gone to the library but I figured I would have to face him eventually.

Twenty minutes later, there was a knock on the door. I wished my ass were smaller so that I could hide under the bed or hide behind the flower patterned curtain. I prayed to *Nana* (*this was my personal name for God*), “make a hole for me to hide, now would be perfect timing.” I was not smiling. My face was as stiff as a block of cement. I had no idea how to act. Until I saw him and realized he was one hundred times more nervous than I was. So much so, that he introduced himself twice to me.

His smile extended from ear to ear. I couldn’t help but smile. His eyes were bright and when they looked at me, they had a warm feel to them. He was very tall and well-dressed, the portfolio of the perfect pretty boy. I didn’t like pretty boys but he seemed nice.

“Hi, I’m DeLuna, Luna for short.” His hands were soft, gentle, but big.

“Nice to meet you.” I walked towards the desk.

“Have a seat, Jazz. Make yourself com-for-ta-ble,” Josef said as I pulled a chair out for him.

I wanted to strangle her with every *corta de ojo*.

“Would you like to see some pictures?” I asked shyly.

“Oh yes, I love to see pictures,” Jazz said as he gently rubbed his right hand through his curly hair and smiled nervously.

“You look beautiful in that dress.” Jazz pointed at the picture with the long navy blue dress.

“Thank you.”

“I study photography,” Jazz added trying to keep the conversation going.

“I love taking pictures, especially black and white pictures. Their texture is so delicate and original,” I shared with him.

My left hand was resting on my lap. I noticed the image of *San Gregorio Hernandez* reflected on my hand. I was perplexed. That was the first time I had seen him outside of my dreams. I glanced at the clock and back again, but he was gone. After we were done glancing at the pictures or pretending like we were, Jazz found the courage to ask me, “Would you like to go out for a walk? I promise not to keep her long, Josef.”

We walked around the lake behind our building for a few minutes and sat on a bench by the lake. He picked the same bench I usually went to when I felt sad and needed to be alone. It was my first time sharing my private place with someone else. It was a beautiful night. We were sitting close enough that I could smell the scent of his cologne.

“What type of photography are you studying?”

“I’m very interested in portraits. What’s your major?” He smiled playfully.

“I would love to see some of your work sometime.” I looked at my wrist hoping to see what time it was but I never wore a watch. I never understood what was the point of obsessing with time if we couldn’t stop it? I wanted one really bad at that moment though.

“Of course. I was working with my uncle in New York. He owns a studio and works with a lot of celebrities.”

“Where are you from in New York?”

“Brooklyn Baby!” He stood up and put both his hands up in the air.

“HaHa. Whatever,” I teased.

“Where are you from?”

“Born and raised in Harlem. Say something.”

“You’re beautiful.”

“Thank you. It’s getting cold. I’m ready to head back,” I said abruptly in a shy tone. I noticed a dark shadow behind him. So thin, that it looked like a piece of paper stuck to his back. Maybe *San Gregorio Hernandez* was trying to tell me something, I thought. But despite his darkness, I felt comfortable with him and I didn’t like that. I didn’t want to like him and I didn’t want to see him again.

“So, what’s your major, shy girl?” he interrupted my thought as we walked towards the building.

“Not sure yet, I love to write but my Mom says I’ll be poor forever, so I’m thinking of majoring in International Business. I love to travel and love languages.”

“That’s impressive,” he said with a boyish smirk.

“So you’re a sophomore.” I lifted my head to look at him.

“Yeah, I completed two years at LaGuardia Community College in New York. I was not able to transfer all the credits. So, I had to come in as a sophomore,” Jazz said.

“You know, I tried to talk to you on two occasions but you turned me away,” Jazz confessed a bit embarrassed but playfully.

“I didn’t mean to. I can be a little shy, especially at parties.”

“Well, you’re definitely not shy about dancing.” Jazz teased me as he stopped on the sidewalk and began shaking his booty.

“I am so. I totally am.” I shook my head as I blushed.

“Would you dance with me sometime?” He extended his hand.

“That’s random.”

“You make me random. From the moment I heard your laughter I knew I was in trouble.”

“Trouble? I’m a good girl.”

“I know.”

“That’s my car over there,” he said pointing straight ahead.

“Nice.”

He had a two door black Acura, four cylinder, 1995 model. I didn’t know all these facts because I was far from being a car expert. He volunteered all the information. I wasn’t sure if I was supposed to be excited or concerned that he cared so much about his car.

He was an easy-going funny guy. And on top of that was handsome - very handsome and the chemistry was definitely there. I was fascinated by his smile but terrified at the same time. Grandma’s prediction kept haunting me, “You’re going to fall in love with a guy as dark as me.” And I couldn’t help but wonder if she was referring to the color of his skin or the nature of his heart.

“Can I see you again?” Jazz asked softly, almost worried to be rejected.

What was I supposed to say? No. The truth is that I wanted to see him again but something in me kept telling me to stay away. It was probably Grandma’s voice and Grandpa’s voice having a full blown battle in my subconscious about ruining the race and falling in love with a Black man. Maybe it was the memory of Luron telling me I wasn’t good enough.

“Okay.”

“I will call you when I get back from the city,” he said as he walked me back to the room.

“Okay. Have a great weekend.” I wasn’t sure if I should give him a hug or a kiss on the cheek.

He leaned over and gave me a warm hug and a kiss on the cheek.

“Try not to party too much,” he mumbled as he walked away.

“But of course I won’t.”

I couldn't believe it. I was openly flirting with him. It wasn't like me but I loved every bit of it.

I felt as if my lungs had been compressed my whole life and all of a sudden they had been released and I was finally breathing. The feeling was so familiar I could have sworn I had felt it before.

The weekend passed and I didn't hear from Jazz. Part of me was hoping he never called again. On Sunday evening, the phone rang. Josef answered the phone and motioned that it was for me. It was the instrument guy calling for some more off beat conversation.

"Why is he calling me? What am I supposed to do now?" I mumbled under my breath. Josef shook her head and laughed aloud.

"Hello."

I could tell he was smiling as he replied, "Hi Luna, I just got back and couldn't wait to see you. I'm at the back entrance of Malcolm Hall, can I see you?"

Who does that? Wasn't he scared of appearing desperate? He had just arrived from the city and had not even stopped at his room. He came straight to Malcolm Hall to see me. How sweet and crazy of him. I wasn't sure if that was a good thing. It was very cute but it was a little too much. I had only spoken to him once. How could he want to see me that badly already? But I had trouble telling him no.

"Sure, I'll be down in a few minutes."

I did not look in the mirror to make sure I looked okay because I did not care to impress him. His car was parked on the side of the road. How cocky of him to assume that I would get in a car with him, I thought. I didn't even know his last name. He gave me a hug and asked if I was okay with talking inside of the car because it was a little cold outside. I agreed. The car

smelled of fresh leather. The black leather and black tinted windows gave it a trendy and edgy look. He was listening to Dru Hill's song, 'how deep is your love for me.'

"I thought about you over the weekend and couldn't wait to get back to see you."

He held my thin and fragile left hand in his hands before I could say anything. He began to kiss it gently. Suddenly he placed one of my fingers in his mouth and started sucking it. I tried to pull away but he was holding on to it with his life. I wasn't sure what I was supposed to do or feel. Wasn't he supposed to try kissing my lips first? I felt inadequate. I didn't know what girls did with boys because I had only kissed two boys and one of them was a tap kiss. I didn't even know fingers were supposed to be licked or sucked. I use my hands for so many things, how did he know my fingers were clean? That I had not scratched my ass as I walked down the stairs? The smelled of the saliva made me nauseas and the look on his face made me uncomfortable. I wanted to leave and never see him again. I wasn't ready to date. Two minutes into it, I was finally able to pull my hand away from him. He was already on finger number two. Before I knew it, he would have been licking my bony toes.

"Are you okay?" he asked concerned.

"I've never had my fingers sucked," I replied shyly.

"Are you?"

"I think is better if I leave."

"No, please don't. I had no idea you were a virgin."

"I am." I adjusted my jacket as I looked at the door to make sure it was unlocked.

"I am so sorry, Luna. I didn't mean to scare you. I promise it won't happen again," he responded with a worried look on his face.

"Would you like to go for a ride – it's beautiful tonight?"

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Please. Let me make it up to you.”

“We can walk.”

“Okay.”

Something inside of me felt at ease. As disturbed as I was, I wasn’t scared. We walked around the campus for a few minutes as we made small talk. I was a little tense and wasn’t sure if I wanted to see him again. We arrived at a park on campus that had swings and walked over to the swings. He sat in one and I sat on the other. I swung myself gently, feeling the light breeze against my skin.

“I hope I didn’t make you uncomfortable with what happened earlier,” he said in an apologetic tone hoping to break the ice.

“You did to be honest. I’m a virgin and I intend on keeping it that way until the time is right.”

“What is the right time?”

“Marriage. I want to wait until I get marry or until I meet the right person.”

“You’re special. Girls nowadays don’t think like you.”

“Most guys are not okay with dating a virgin or girls that want to wait until marriage.”

The truth was that I wasn’t sure that I wanted to get married either. I had no idea what I wanted.

“I’m okay with it,” Jazz said, as he looked me in the eyes.

“So, how many boyfriends have you had?”

“None, to be honest. I’ve kissed a boy here and there, but I’ve never had a boyfriend.”

“Why, if you don’t mind me asking, you’re beautiful, smart and funny?”

“Most guys want to have sex and I don’t want to get attached. I’m too young to have my heart broken.” I looked into the sky filled with stars.

“Not all guys are the same. Not all of us are heartbreakers. My parents have been married for 30 years. I intend to follow in their steps,” Jazz said proudly.

“That’s nice.” I hated to have conversations about relationships.

“Luna, I won’t break your heart. Give me a chance,” he said as he got up and pushed the swing gently.

I didn’t say anything, I just smiled. I also hated promises, especially the ones that were easily broken.

At ten in the evening, he walked me to the side entrance of Malcolm Hall and said good night with a hug. That was a relief. The finger sucking was enough action for one evening.

A Dream of Darkness

October 1998

I lay on the green grass by the pool, my bare feet feeling the tingling sensation of the warm wind. The sun was beginning to set as my eyes navigated the pink and blue sky. There was complete silence; I existed in that moment for no reason at all. My body stood still, observing a small object as it descended from the sky, floating gently towards the center of my face. I panicked. "Don't be scared. It's okay," a voice told me in a soothing tone.

A needle stopped three inches away from my forehead. I stared at it for a few seconds, unsure of what to do, suspicious of what it would do to me. I grabbed the needle, once I felt it between my fingers; I lifted my body to a sitting position. I examined the needle, inspecting every inch of it, waiting for it to do something different. But it was just a needle with no thread.

I remember asking myself so many questions in that dream; where did the needle come from? Why did the needle come to me? Why didn't the needle have thread? Was I not meant to use the needle? Was I to find my own thread? What did this mean, that life is what I made it or that life was already made?

I walked aimlessly with the needle in my hand, looking at it as an abstract painting that expresses nothing but reflects a million things. Suddenly, I found myself in an empty room with no furniture. The floor was made of thick gray glass; portions of it had openings with rough dark blue water in it. The rest of the floor was covered with navy blue tiles. Five walls, I thought that was odd. All the walls were white, with the exception of the fifth wall, which was a dark royal blue with five dark red stripes running along the wall horizontally. Hanging from it was a piece of art. As I got closer to it, I noticed a picture of Jazz on the frame. The picture looked like a

miscommunication between the canvas and the painter; his eyes were covered with a green cloth, smile was frozen in time, and tears rested on his collarbone like an abandoned lake.

The red wall began to fill with nails and Jazz's picture crumbled into thin pieces of paper that fell to the floor and vanished without a trace. Standing next to me, holding my hand, as I stood in shock was *San Gregorio Hernandez*.

October 1998

Josefina:

She tried to tell that fool about the dream, but he laughed, and she never tried again. The day after she had that dream I remember she was distracted and absent from her surroundings. I was used to her weirdness so I left her alone. That's just who she was, different. It was almost as if the spirits took turns in guarding her and their shadow and energy transferred into her being; spilling into her character and actions. When she was sexy, charming, charismatic, and irresistible I knew *Anaisa* was with her because she drank like a man but dressed like a woman. The warrior and righteous one was the reflection of *San Miguel*. *San Gregorio Hernandez* increased her senses in detecting who was sick around her. I hated *Metresili*; she would make Luna cry over everything and nothing, over things that had not happened yet. In college, she used to sit in the bench by the lake, late at night, crying for hours. I used to make fun of her and tell her that her personality was like languages, one day it was French and the next it was Chinese.

For a long time I didn't believe in all that supernatural power business. I mean really. I knew Grandma was a *Bruja*, but I didn't always believe her, especially after she told me at the age of twelve that I would be fat when I got older if I didn't control my mouth.

We were fifteen the first time I believed Luna was different. We were visiting the Dominican Republic and I had left for the Capital to visit Mom's best friend and her daughter. I was so busy having fun that I had not spoken to Luna for nearly a week. The water parks, beach, and pool had my full attention.

During my stay in the Capital, I received heartbreaking news from New York. I called Luna to tell her what happened. When I called Grandma Pecuezo's house, Luna answered the phone on the first ring.

"I'm sorry *Mama*. I'm so sorry he died." Her voice cracked as she cried.

"How did you?" I couldn't finish the question.

"They told me, but I didn't know how to tell you. I'm sorry."

They were just they and I had learned not to ask and just accept it.

"He was hit by a truck as he was skating."

"We'll take him flowers when we get back to New York. I'll come with you," Luna said softly. She remained quiet, sharing that intimate moment with me.

Luna was supposed to come to the Capital with me that week, but she couldn't. Aunt Petronila and Grandma Bella wouldn't let her out of their sight. Right before I left she had two days without eating. She refused to speak and kept her eyes glued to the ground. I thought she was just being a bitch to me but Grandma believed she was being surrounded by evil spirits. Yeah right, I thought, and I was Howard the Duck.

"I'll be back in a week, call me if you need me to come back and beat these *viejas* up for you." I hugged her and did not speak to her until that morning.

"I have to go *Mama*," I said interrupting the silent.

"Come back." It wasn't a request or a demand. It just was.

Mom's friend put me on a fancy bus to La Vega the following day. Things had really changed. They had the big fancy buses with decent air conditioner. It cost an arm and a leg but it beat the *grajo* and unbearable heat of the shitty '*no cabe otro*' mini buses. I slept through most of the three hour ride. The little time I was awake, I spent staring out the window and replaying my first kiss with Josh, the 16 year old dead boy. I had only known him for two months, seen him twice, and kissed him once. But he was my first kiss. How depressing was that, the first boy I ever kissed, hit by a truck while skating and eating cheese doodles. We didn't get a chance to go on a first date. Yet, I wore black for months, took flowers to the cemetery for three years, and cried as if I had lost a lifetime love.

Grandpa picked me up at the bus stop that afternoon. He was so distracted that he didn't notice I was wearing all black in 99 degree weather. We got on a *motoconcho* and headed to Grandma Bella's house where I found Aunt Petronila pacing back and forward as she bit her nails.

"*Bendicion Tia*. Where's Luna?" I asked.

"*Dios te bendiga*." She walked away and didn't say anything else.

"Where's Grandma?" Silence.

"*Tia*." I called out to Aunt Petronila but she kept walking towards the kitchen.

I ran past her towards the sanctuary. Aunt Petronila tried to get a grasp of me but I was way ahead of her. I opened the door and found Luna drinking rum out of a *barcelo* bottle like it was water. She had a cynical expression to her, a roughness, an anger that I had never seen before. I froze. Unable to move, react, or understand. Her arms were bruised from people

trying to hold her down, but she was too strong, which didn't make sense; she had trouble opening a Snapple bottle. Grandpa, Grandma and two other men couldn't keep her down, so they let her go.

"Luna!!!" She didn't turn around. The smell of *yerba buena*, rum, flowers, candles, and cigar made me nauseous. I felt sick to my stomach.

Luna began to whistle the tune to a Spanish song I had heard before but couldn't remember where.

"Luna doesn't know how to whistle." The tears filled my face.

"*Hola JoJo*," Luna said laughing out loud taking bigger gulps of rum.

"Piero?" I asked confused. He was the only one that called me by that nickname.

Piero had passed away a month earlier. He found Punta in his bed with another man and was blinded by fury. The fight ended with Punta's lover stabbing Piero three times, Punta shouting and running in the streets while wearing nothing but some victoria krikets underwear, and Piero bleeding to death on top of the unfaithful blanket that kept his blood from dripping to the floor.

Grandma's eyes widened as her head shook nervously.

"Piero, she's just a girl. Use me."

"Tell Mariela I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt her." He sobbed uncontrollably as he spoke the name of the mother of his children.

“You have to go Piero, this is no longer your world; you have to go back to where you came from.” Grandma got closer with a bottle of *agua bendita* and *ruda*.

“I don’t know how to.”

They began to pray as Luna sat on the floor; three empty bottles of rum by her side. Grandma sat next to her with her right hand on Luna’s forehead and her left hand behind her neck as she recited verses from a psalm. After an hour of prayer, Luna’s body collapsed to the floor like an orange falls off a tree. Aunt Petronila gave her water as she held her in her arms. Everyone was afraid to sleep with her that night, I was too. But I knew that if Piero were to return, Luna would be somewhere in there, and she wouldn’t let him or anyone hurt me. I didn’t sleep that night. I lay next to her, my eyes opened the entire night, making sure she was breathing, living, just being Luna. She opened her eyes to the cry of the rooster.

“You’re okay?” she asked me as I stared at her trying to confirm that it was really her.

“Yeah. You?”

“My head and body hurts. What happened to my arm?” Luna inspected her body confused.

“You don’t remember anything?” I sat up in the bed.

“No. What happened?” She asked again as she pressed the black and blues on her hands, arms, and legs.

Grandpa walked in with scrambled eggs and toast, freshly squeezed orange juice, and a mango for each.

“Grandpa, what happened to my arms?” Luna asked him.

“Nothing, you were just a little sick. You fainted and hurt yourself. The doctor said you are going to be just fine. The virus should be gone before you know it.”

Luna looked at me for confirmation and I said nothing. How could I explain to her what I saw? Who she was? It would break her heart to know she was a *bruja*. She didn’t want to be different and that was definitely different.

When Luna told me about the dream with Jazz, I encouraged her to tell him.

“Bring it up in a casual way.”

“You think? Maybe I should just stay away from him.” She sat on the bed in our dorm room and got up five seconds later.

“Don’t be silly Luna, just be cautious is all.” I turned on the radio to play some R&B.

“So you think I should tell him?”

“Yes Mam. Again, don’t be creepy about it. Just tell him, ‘Hey, I had the strangest dream about you last night.’”

“Okay.”

She told him and he laughed.

“It’s just a dream, pretzel. Look, look, check my ears. See, they’re not backwards or upside down.” Jazz hugged her as he laughed.

“I know your ears are not upside down silly. I just thought I’d tell you it’s all.”

That night she told me how he had laughed. She wasn't mad and neither was I. He didn't know she was different. I would have laughed too if I didn't know better. I knew that she would never stop worrying about him, "He's in such a dark place, Joseph. I feel like I've been here before. I'm not sure if I'm supposed to stay or leave," she confessed that night after their conversation.

October 1998

“Would you go on a real date with me?” Jazz asked me that night during our phone conversation at one in the morning.

“When?”

“Friday. Neither of us has class.”

“Okay. Where are we going?”

“That’s a surprise.”

I had never been on a real date before, mainly because I had no interest. At a very early age I discovered that I wasn’t pretty enough. As a kid I was called ‘*la gordita*,’ and I couldn’t be mad at the nickname because I was truly a fat little girl. I loved to eat, especially junk food; Nacho and cheese doodle chips and of course twix, snicker bars, white Hershey bars, and doughnuts. Doughnuts were my favorite. Especially the ones Mom made during the weekends from scratch. She would fry the dough, throw them in a brown bag with tons of sugar and placed them on a plate. Although they called me ‘*la gordita*’ I didn’t know it was a bad thing. I was a happy kid until I was twelve years old. The baby fat was not going away and the boys liked all my friends and cousins except for me.

The only boy that always liked me was Ezequiel. He was a skinny little boy my age that lived next door to Grandma Pecuezo. His older sister was my best friend in the Dominican Republic and I spent most of my childhood summers playing jacks, cards, *mariquita*, and *gomitas* in their house. He used to get red like beets when his brother, sisters, and parents mocked him about liking me. He would look at me shyly and run off to hide somewhere safe. Every summer night from the time I was seven until I was eighteen he would wait for me to go to

bed and would stand by the window in my room and whispered to me *‘que sueñes con los angelitos de los cachitos rojos.’* Wishing a girl to dream with red horn angels was not the most romantic but he was the most loyal pretender I ever had. He didn’t care that I was fat or that I sweated a lot in all the wrong places. He loved me through every stage of my life, from a little fat girl to a pretty young woman. He always saw something in me that I couldn’t see in myself; that sparkle a beautiful friendship between us even when our worlds were so different. I was the American girl and he was the Dominican guy that had never left that small town. And deep down, I always found comfort in knowing that his sparkly eyes would always be waiting for me when I arrived at the Dominican Republic.

Mom also saw more potential in me than I cared for. Everyone advised her to put me on a diet. Although she wasn’t the type of woman to give importance to what others thought, she was very much a fan of looking great and being beautiful. I mean, ‘Iris Chacon’ had nothing on her, well, except the money.

It all started with the black and purple plastic sweat suit and a black plastic bag wrapped around my waist underneath the suit. In July, Mom decided I needed to do something about being overweight, and she bought me an exercise bike from the super. The bike was so old that it was probably the first sample they ever created. The chain made a horrid sound every time I peddled, as if it were meeting death with every stroke. Her exercise plan for me consisted of 35 minutes of bike and 20 laps around a two block radius. It may not sound like a lot but let’s just say that I had to go up a hill that was as intense as a mountain, twenty times. And let’s just say that I was the ONLY person running in a black and purple suit while everyone stared at me. I looked like a fat Barney running in circles in a sauna. The cool kids teased me while the drug dealers cheered me on. The tears would get lost in the sweat as I ran and walked. After two

weeks of being embarrassed I chose to stop eating food and limited my diet to one cheese doodle and one snicker bar a day; my pride was more important than my love for food. Mom had no choice but to stop the madness and start praying.

“I’ve never been on a real date,” I heard myself tell Jazz.

“I’ll make it memorable. No finger sucking though.”

“Whatever silly.”

“Luna. Thank you for giving me a chance!”

“You are very welcome.”

Friday evening was a cold and clear night. I waited for Jazz on the side entrance of Malcolm Hall as I marveled at the sky filled with stars. That’s one of the few things Upstate NY had in common with the Dominican Republic, the stars. You could actually see tons of stars at once. The difference was that it was cold, the food sucked, and the people were not as friendly. But just for that moment I looked up at the sky and disregarded the chill that crept through my skin, and imagined that I was sitting in Grandma’s steps staring at the stars as she cooked rice with stew beef and fried yellow plantain. And I was happy.

Jazz got out of the car to open the door for me.

“Good evening my shooting star,” he said as he gave me a hug and I smiled. “That was too cheesy?” he asked as he put on his seatbelt.

“A little.”

“See what you do to me.”

“Sounds like I’m transforming you into cheese man.”

We drove to town which was less than ten minutes away and parked in front of Hulligan Kuddy's restaurant. The environment was hip, fun, and filled with young laughter and conversations. Although it was a Friday night it was not crowded, there were a few students sitting by the bar, a few students playing pool, and a few others eating at the booth by the windows. The hostess grabbed two menus and sat us on the last booth on the far left hand side. The menu sat on the table unopened as we made small talk. I was starving because I had only eaten breakfast and I had brought cash in case I had to pay for myself.

"So, do you have any siblings?" Jazz asked.

"I have two sisters from my Mother's side and two younger brothers from my biological father's side. And you're an only child."

"Yes I am. How long have your parents been divorced?"

"They were never married. I was the consequence of a one night stand."

"Sorry, I had no idea." Jazz stroke his hand through his curly hair.

"Don't be. I have my Mother and Grandfather's last name. I'm proud to have their name."

"Do you have a relationship with him, your father?"

"Not really. He's always been like a shadow in my life. Always in the background but never present, if that makes any sense."

"I'm sure you have at least one nice memory of him."

“I do. When I was thirteen years old he took me to Disney World. It was such a magical place. I felt like a princess who could conquer the world. He gave me everything and anything I asked for. That was a good week.”

“What about you?” I asked trying to shift the attention from my morbid truth.

“My parents are cool. They had me when they were a little older but they’re cool. I have a good relationship with both.”

“Are you the oldest?” Jazz asked me.

“No, I’m the middle child.”

“I always wanted brothers and sisters growing up but it never happened. I got everything I wanted but I had nobody to play with. I remember one Christmas when I was twelve years old I asked my parents for a video game and they bought me a different one because it was the latest edition. I was so bitter! All my friends had the older version because their parents couldn’t afford it and I had to play by myself. I would have to be player one and player two, running back and forward across the living room by myself. I was super bitter growing up. I used to beg my parents to move to the projects so that I could live near my friends.”

“That sucks. I always had to share with somebody, a sister, a cousin, or a friend.”

“By the way, the projects are not a fun place.”

“I know that now, smart ass.”

“Mommy, I want to go where they have shootouts, piss in the elevators, and have dirty needles in the staircase. PLEASE! Please Mommy! Your friends probably thought you were crazy.”

“Okay. Okay. Very funny Moon!”

“Whatever instrument guy. You made my night. I never met anyone that wanted to live in the projects. I’ve spent my whole life promising myself that I would get out of the ‘hood’.”

“Here I am thinking you’re the nice one and Josef is the mean one.”

“We’re both very very VERY nice.”

“You and Josef are very close from what I can tell?”

“Yeah, she’s my other half.”

“I’m starving!” Jazz opened the menu.

“Me too. What do you recommend from here?”

“It’s my first time here but I’ve heard the food is really good.”

Fifteen minutes passed with our menus facing down and none of the waitress came over to offer water or to take our orders. I was starting to get upset but didn’t want to be rude to a random waitress on my first date with Jazz.

“I’ll walk over and let them know we’re ready to order,” Jazz grabbed the menus and walked towards the waitress.

The waitress took the menus and shook her head as Jazz spoke with her.

He came back to the table and said that she would be right over. But another twenty minutes passed and she didn't come over. She waited on two White couples that came in after us and left us sitting there. Jazz was so embarrassed that he didn't know what to say.

"I think we should go somewhere else." We got up from the table. I shook my head at the hostess and the waitress as I walked out tempted to tell them, '*fuck you bitch.*'

"I'm so sorry Luna!"

"It's not your fault. Let's just go somewhere else."

We drove in silence for the first few minutes before Jazz broke the silence.

"It's so sad that racism still exists." Jazz shook his head disappointed. "I grew up only around White people until I was ten. I had no idea I was Black until I went to public school."

"You thought you were White?"

"I just didn't know there was a difference. They treated me like everyone else. It wasn't until I got older that I realized that not all White people like Blacks."

"You should read the *Isis Paper*, it's a great book. All we can do is educate ourselves and not go to that restaurant again, Mr. Jazz White."

"You got jokes."

"Always. Where are we going anyways?"

"We're going to Poughkeepsie, the town over. They have a place where we can eat and shoot some pool. You know how to play?"

"I'm a pro."

“Is that so, Miss Moon.”

“Yup.”

The radio played Kelly Price and Monica’s music as I sang the words under my breath so that Jazz couldn’t hear me. As I looked out the windshield at the bright white lights of the cars coming from the opposite direction and the darkness outside, I double checked to make sure my door was locked. And it was.

Jazz began to say something but I became distracted by an image I saw on the glove compartment. First it was the image of *San Gregorio Hernandez* with his head down but a few seconds later images began to form next to him. There was a small room with bars and a man sitting on a bench with his hands over his head. Next to that image was an empty street with nice houses and parked cars. Next to a car was a puddle of blood, but nobody was there. My eyes filled with tears. Jazz was suddenly standing in front of the puddle of blood but there was nobody in the other image. I rolled down the window as I took a deep breath.

“Pretzel, you’re okay?” Jazz asked concerned as he slowed down.

“Yeah, I’m fine, it felt a little warm in here. You’re okay with the window being down?”

He rolled down his window too and smiled.

I didn’t tell anybody about the images and tried to erase them from my memory, but they stayed there like a photograph that challenges you to depict its meaning.

We arrived at the place and had a great time. Jazz teased me about being eighteen and not being able to drink. He had just turned twenty-one but he wasn’t a drinker so he settled for a Pepsi. We played three rounds of pool and I won all three rounds or maybe he just let me win.

The score was three to zero. We ate hot wings, French fries, and for the very first time I tried mozzarella sticks, which I immediately fell in love with.

On our way back, the images on the glove compartment had faded, and all that was left was the soft wind, the R&B music, and his hand holding my hand.

Friday, November 1998

Joseph and I decided to go to an off-campus party with Leslie. Leslie was one of the first friends we made in college. The party was in town. Town was like any other suburb; quiet, clean, with one and two story houses on both sides of the streets. After twenty minutes of walking, we found ourselves in a street that had no lights. I was able to see the shadow of the pretty houses but couldn't really determine their color until I got in front of them. We were so lost that I was almost tempted to turn back.

“Are you sure you know where we're going?” Josefina asked frustrated.

“Yes, this is the address she gave me.” Leslie brought the paper closer to her face to confirm the address.

“Girls, I don't know about this, it's kind of dark out here. Maybe we should ask somebody.” I looked around hoping to see somebody.

“Who, the invisible man standing in the middle of the street?” Josefina said with an attitude.

“No, the *cuco* behind the tree, smart ass.” I smacked her shoulder and she rolled her eyes at me aggravated.

“Okay girls, no arguing, we're going to find the place.” Leslie said as she looked around.

After walking aimlessly, we ran into a nice looking guy.

“Excuse me, can you tell us where we can find Ogden Street, house 44?” I asked

“Sure, Ogden, is the next street to your left, the house should be on the right hand side of the street.” He pointed towards the street and smiled as he walked away.

“Thank you.”

“No problem, you girls have fun.”

The blue and green house was located in an isolated street. The only noise I heard came from distant cars in the main streets and the rhythm of leaves bumping against each other. The lights were on but there was no music. At least not music we could hear from the doorway. What type of party was it, a spin the bottle type of party? We walked in and found a crowd of girls and boys drinking Miller Lite and Budweiser beer. There was only one person of color there. Great, right in my comfort zone, the only thing I needed to fit in was long silky hair, color contacts, an ass reduction and one full year of anorexia, I thought as I stood next to Leslie and Joseph. Leslie had the nice silky hair and Josef had the light eyes. I had none of the above.

“Hi girls, would you like something to drink?” a girl asked. “Miller Lite or Budweiser?”

“Miller Lite for me,” Josefina said.

“Me too,” added Leslie.

“Budweiser,” I added without knowing the difference. I only knew of Corona, Heineken, Presidente, *Barcelo* and *Brugal*.

“Good choice. I’m sorry, I didn’t introduce myself. I’m Amber.”

“Nice to meet you, I’m Leslie; this is my friend Luna and Josefina. Kim told me about the party. Is she here?” Leslie looked around looking for Kim.

“Yeah, she should be around. Make yourselves at home and have a great time. The beers are in the kitchen to your left. Help yourselves.” Amber pointed to the kitchen as she gave us the beers.

“Okay, thank you.” Leslie took a sip of her beer.

“Girls, do you want to stay?” I asked.

“After all the trouble we went through to get here, we are staying!”

“Let’s stay for a little bit, is not like we have anything more exciting to do.” Leslie raised her beer to cheer with me.

A 5’2 girl with black hair was walking towards us. She had a huge smile on her face.

“Hi Leslie, I’m glad you made it,” Kim said as she opened a can of Budweiser.

I couldn’t get a word to come out of my mouth. I pretended to bend down towards the wooded cherry table where a plate of chips sat. There was a sofa behind the table. I sat in the sofa next to some girl and boy that were talking loud. They introduced themselves and went back to their conversation and I pretended to be interested. The walls were white and had black and white tree paintings hanging from them. There was a staircase by the entrance that led to a second floor. Students sat on the staircase as they talked and drank beer. There were two black couches, one facing a 27’ TV and a bookcase. And the other was facing a window that was decorated with a blue curtain. The kitchen had a black four-person dining table and new appliances. The rug was an ocean blue. And the candles, positioned on the table, by the chips, gave off an aroma of vanilla.

I was enjoying the music, but had never heard it before. I wished it were a little louder. The volume was high enough to hear the lyrics but low enough to allow students to talk. I was used to listening to music at a high volume. The louder the music, the more I felt it. Finally a song that I knew, "I'll never break your heart" by N Sync and after that one followed 'Getting Jiggy wit it'. A guy walked to the middle of the floor and started dancing. His body looked like a robot trying to move like a snake. I felt bad for him. After that song, they played another ten songs I didn't recognize.

"Excuse me; do you know who sings this song?" I asked Ashley.

"It's "Iris" by the Goo Goo Dolls." She had a confused look on her face.

"It's a beautiful song." I said aloud at nobody in particular.

"You've never heard it before?" Ashley asked surprised.

"No. I listen mostly to Hip Hop and Spanish music," I replied honestly as I took a sip of my beer.

"Oh okay. It's a very popular song. You would probably like "Thank you" by Alanis Morissette." Ashley grabbed some chips.

I walked over to the kitchen but couldn't find Leslie or Josef. I walked back to the sofa and took a sip of the beer. I felt a soft hand caress the back of my neck twice. I looked back but nobody was behind me. It happened two more times. I heard a whisper of distant drums, growing louder and louder in my ears. My whole body felt a chill that forced me to shake slightly.

“Are you okay,” Ashley asked as she tried to touch my shoulder. As her hand touched me she trembled slightly, and her frightened expression made me feel like she had seen a ghost.

I walked out of the house in a rush, my entire body filled with goose bumps and shivering. I paced back and forward up and down the same street. A shadow taller than me walked behind me, when I looked back, nobody was there. After what seemed like a long time, I sat on the steps of the house with my hands over my head, remembering what Grandma had told me when I was sixteen.

I kept having the same recurring dream. *San Gregorio Hernandez* held me by the hand and walked me to a river surrounded by many rocks and trees. The current was soft and the water was a clear dark blue. I walked towards the water, but the closer I got to the water, the more people appeared inside the river. They stood there smiling, waiting for me, but I turned around and ran. The rocks on the ground cut the edges of my feet and the tears in my eyes made everything blurry. I fell. And when I fell, I woke up.

“What does this mean Grandma?” I asked her confused.

“People like us, Luna, we’re surrounded by both good and evil spirits. In order to protect ourselves, we must be baptized in the rocky rivers where the waters never stop running. Afterwards, a ceremony and a feast will follow, where you will dance, sing, chant, and become one with them. First you must accept them. Once you accept them as your guardians only then can they protect you. If you refuse to accept them, the good and evil spirits will begin to battle over your spirit and your gift to help others. You will begin to lose control.”

“That’s not fair.” I shook my head as Grandma watched in silence.

“Luna, you can’t run forever.”

“I have to go.”

Ezequiel waited for me by the steps. His scooter parked outside. He turned on the scooter when he saw me storm out. “Want to go to your favorite place?” he asked as the wind brushed my tears in different directions. “Yes.”

I left Grandma’s house that afternoon and never thought about it again until that evening at the party, when I started having trouble controlling the energy rising through my body. Part of me was scared. Grandma was so far away from NYC and I had no idea what losing control meant. I felt like I was caught between two worlds that were foreign to me and feared that I could get lost in either one.

When I went back in the house, I found Josef sitting on the couch with her head on the arm of the sofa. Her arms were wrapped around her head.

“Josef, are you okay?” I tried lifting her head.

“Yup, I am purfuctlee fine. You okay?” she responded as she lifted her head.

“Sure you are, woman. Stay here okay. I’m going to find Leslie.”

“Owokay. I’ll be right here,” she shouted as I walked away.

I found Leslie mingling. She looked like she was having a great time. Her hands moved in motion as she spoke. She fitted in. Her petite frame and silky dark brown hair made her look like one of them even though she was Dominican.

“Excuse me, Leslie; can I speak to you for a second?” I said in a low voice.

“Hey, what’s going on?”

“Josefina is drunk. I’m going to take her home.” I whispered in her ear.

“I didn’t see her drinking that much.”

“She’s a lightweight.” I walked towards the sofa.

“Okay, I’ll leave with you girls.” She walked over to the two students and said goodbye.

We walked back and found Josefina talking to a girl whose hair looked like it had been electrocuted. She had five piercings on each ear, one in the mouth and two in the nose. She was wearing black clothing and heavy looking black boots. They were talking so loud that I doubt that any of them were able to understand what the other was saying.

“Luna, come here, I want you to meet my new friend. What’s your name again?”

“Christine,” the girl replied as she hugged Josef and gave her a sip of her beer.

“Yes Luna, this is my new friend Christine. Christine this is my cousin Moon.”

“Nice to meet you, Christine.” She stared at me but didn’t say anything.

“Josef, Leslie and I are ready to leave.”

“Why? We’re having so much fun,” she asked bewildered as she threw her arms in the air.

“Come on. Get up. It’s already two in the morning and we’re going to another party tomorrow.” I held her hand to make sure she didn’t fall when she tried to get up.

“Yuupeeee. I like parties!”

“I can tell,” I replied sarcastically.

“BuhBye Christine.” Josefina said as she waved and walked towards the main door.

Soon after we left the house, Leslie grabbed her by one arm and I grabbed her by the other. She was tripping on her own feet.

“Girls, I love you. I love you very much.”

“Thanks honey,” Leslie replied smiling.

“We love you too, Josef.”

“Oh, thank you!” She giggled.

She started repeating her last words until she found other words that rhymed. Before we knew it, Josefina was trying to compose and sing a song as we walked down the campus.

“Thank you, Thank you for loving me. Thank you for loving you. Thank you for everything that you do. Thank you for eating bananas and for drinking grapefruit juice. Thank you for loving waffles, cause I love waffle and eggs too. Yeah, go eggs and waffles. Throw your hands up. Throw your hands up if you like rice and beans. Yeah. Just like that, Just like that. Drink some soda eat the pork chops too.”

Leslie and I looked at each other and could not believe our ears. We had to let her go to stop and laugh. Josefina felt to the grass as she mumbled some more lyrics under her breath and laughed aloud.

“Luna, your cousin is hysterical.”

“Yup, she sure is. We should sign her up for the Apollo. Lil Kim has nothing on her.”

“You’re not even lying.” We picked her up and put her arms around our shoulder. To her luck, we were a lot shorter than she was.

We kept walking and laughing as she sang about salami and plantains this time. She must have been hungry or delirious. Thirty minutes later, we arrived at the room. I tried to be as quiet as possible but Josefina kept talking loud.

“Luna, the room is spinning. Make it stop.” Josefina blurted out.

“Here, put your arms up so that I can take off your shirt.”

“Luna, but close your eyes, you can’t see my raisins.”

“No, look, I’m covering you.”

“Okay.”

She took off her jeans and I made sure she went to bed. She lay in bed with her hands over her forehead.

“Luna, the room is still spinning really fast. Make it stop.”

“You want some water?” I covered her with the blanket and put a bucket next to the bed in case she needed to throw up.

“Yes.”

She drank some water and felt asleep.

The next day she was ready to party again.

Saturday, November 1998

The following evening we listened to music before heading to another party with Leslie; my favorite songs were 'The boy is mine' and 'Doo Wop' by Lauryn Hill. We also listened to Usher, 'My Way' and Janet, 'Go Deep'. I wore a pair of dark denim jeans with a dressy three quarter sleeves black shirt and black boots. The party was being held on campus, in the Student Building, which was better than walking for half an hour like we had the night before. We waited in line for ten minutes before we got in. The space was huge. If divided appropriately it could be converted into five to seven NYC apartments. When we walked in, it was not that crowded but the good music and the dim lights made it perfect.

We did what most girls do. We formed a circle and began dancing amongst us. The few guys that had arrived were already standing by the wall. An hour later, the place was filled to capacity and guys were going around trying to find a girl to grind on. But as I already knew, nobody there was going to rub his or her 'thing' against my booty. We all went crazy when they started playing one of the hottest songs on the radio. We threw our hands in the air and shook our bodies to the beat. You could hear everyone singing off key. The guys followed along as they dropped their shoulders slightly and moved their hands to the lyrics. I nearly went crazy when they started playing Reggae. My body began to move as if it didn't have one bone or rib in it. Guys were trying to dance with us but we pushed them away.

"Excuse me, would you dance with me?" Jazz asked with a big smile.

"Let me think about it," I said as he pulled me towards him.

Our bodies moved to the beat, my hips ticking to the drums, inching closer towards Jazz and pulling away before he could get comfortable to the heat of my body. His hands sat comfortably around my waist as I moved swiftly from left to right, following my rhythm, as his eyes gazed into mine.

A *Merengue* came up. He took a blue folded handkerchief from his back pocket, wiped the sweat off my forehead and face, and gently kissed my forehead afterwards in the middle of the dance floor.

“Teach me how to dance this.” His arms raised and ready to learn.

“I’m not a good teacher.” I tried to get him to move but he wouldn’t.

“I don’t mind as long as I’m close to you,” he whispered in my ear.

I didn’t mind that he was off beat or that he danced like he was killing cockroaches. His right hand pressed against mine, his left hand around my waist, the scent of his cologne, his sparkly eyes, and big smile were enough to risk having his big feet stepping all over mine.

I was having such a great time. I knew the lyrics to the music. I didn’t feel like an outsider. The crowd was mixed with students of different nationalities. I did not stand out in this crowd – I blended in. I was able to dance and have fun with my friends. I didn’t have to sit down with a warm Budweiser pretending that I was interested in a boring conversation. I didn’t have to feel awkward about not being able to start or sustain a conversation. All I had to do was dance and sing.

After dancing to a few more songs, I excused myself from Jazz to go spend some time with the girls. He walked over to the back of the room towards his friends and I stayed in the

dance floor. We took a break during an R&B set, grabbed some water, and stood by the wall. Jazz did not notice that I wasn't on the dance floor anymore; he was speaking with a girl. Hip Hop came back on and the girl turned around and began to shake her behind against him, he backed away, but she moved towards him again, grinding on him. Another song and she was still dancing with him. I felt the blood in my veins traveling at a faster speed, the back of my neck felt heavier, and an electrical sensation ran through the edges of my scalp. Something stronger than me took over, I stomped my right foot three times as I mumbled under my breath, "*alejala, alejala, alejala.*" The girl walked away, which is what I had requested, and Jazz instantly looked around for me on the dance floor.

A guy that was standing across the room walked over and stood next to me. He leaned over and whispered in my ear.

"Hola Pitiza."

"Is nice to know I'm not the only one. Don't worry. Your secret is safe with me." He walked away without letting me say a word.

"Girls, I'm ready to leave." I was angry with myself for losing control and scared of what this stranger knew about me. It wasn't hard to recognize those that were 'different'. The energy surrounding us alerted us and connected us in some strange way. He also had a brighter light on the right side of his eyes. I should've never looked him in the face. I wasn't prepared, he caught me off guard, and I didn't know how much he saw through me. But I knew that he saw me distancing that girl from Jazz.

We left the party at two in the morning and walked for fifteen minutes to the convenience store in town. We each bought a bagel with butter and a juice and sat in front of Leslie's

building as we ate and joked about the guys that couldn't dance and the ones whose breath smelled like the Hudson River. As we headed to our dorm room, in front of the building, we found Jazz sitting on the steps.

"Hey you," he said as he got up.

"I'll leave you two love birds alone. I'm off to bed." Josef gave me the Mom look, the 'don't take long is already late' kind of look.

"Hey, what are you doing here?" The anger had past. All that was left was the conversation the stranger had with me and Grandma's voice, "You can't run or hide from them Luna, they will always find you, they are part of you."

"I wanted to make sure you got to your room okay and I wanted to say good night." He sat back down.

"Can you stay a little longer?" he asked as he held my hand.

"Not too long."

He inched closer to me and hugged me. We stared at the sky filled with stars like two fools waiting for a shooting star. He was determined to help me find one. We talked about our childhoods, our dreams, and life. The sunrise greeted us with its warm light and fresh air.

"I have to go." I got up and smiled at him.

He got up, embraced me in a hug, and gave me a soft kiss on the cheek.

"Have a good morning." I walked inside the building.

That morning I lay in bed excited about Jazz but devastated by the interaction with the stranger. I had no idea who that guy was or what he wanted from me. But he knew who I was and I knew that we were cut by the same knife.

December 1998

I felt a rush in my veins. The need to dance, drink and celebrate that we had survived our first semester. Every cell in my body was filled with excitement and pride; we were the first generation to attend college. I was actually the first in the family to be born in the United States. The day of our last final I agreed to have a few drinks with ‘the guys’ as I called them. I met them on my first day of Critical Thinking class and became very close to them, especially Ercules.

The first day of class had been nerve wrecking. I felt the sweat in the palm of my hands. My forehead felt greasy from the August humidity. My eyes were opened so wide that I thought they were going to pop out of my head. I had a frozen smile on my lips that made it look like my teeth were glued together. I couldn’t believe I was in college.

After breakfast, Joseph and I headed back to Malcolm Hall to pick up our book bags. I had a navy blue bag and Josefina had the same one in green. I wore jeans with a yellow t-shirt and sneakers. I wasn’t sure if we were allowed to wear shorts or sandals to classes.

“Have fun,” Josefina shouted as she walked away.

I walked into class. The lights were off and the three wide windows were opened. The board was to the left of the room and took three fourth of the wall. The chairs were horizontally facing the board. There were six chairs per row and a total of four rows. In the first row, by the window, a Spanish girl was sitting down and talking really loud on her cell phone. In the middle of the second row sat a white guy with shorts, sandals, a shirt and an opened book and in the middle of the last row sat a tall guy with potential curly hair. You could tell from afar that he

had used half a bottle of gel to make his hair curl. The students were coming in but I could tell that it was going to be a small class, no more than fifteen students.

I wasn't sure where to sit. After what felt like the longest minute of my life, I decided to sit in the last row next to the tall and skinny guy. A Latin guy sat to my right.

"*Dimelo, Flaco,*" the Latin guy said to the tall guy sitting to my left.

"*Dimelo, Raymond.*" The tall guy gave him a pound.

"Arh yuu smarht?" Flaco asked me.

I was puzzled by the question and by his Spanish accent. I wasn't sure what to say. Was I smart? I didn't know. I guessed so. I made it to college.

"I'm Raymond. *Ete e Ercules.* What's your name?" Raymond asked me as he smiled.

"DeLuna, but most people call me Luna." I shook his hand.

"Don't pay my friend any mind, he's kidding," Raymond told me.

"No, I'm not. We need to make sure that one of us is smart so that we can pass this class." Ercules laughed. "Its okay, stay there *de la luna.*"

I should have known that he would become one of my closest friends. He had given me a nickname within five minutes of knowing me.

"Don't worry *De La Luna,* the loud girl on her cell phone is sixteen and in college. We'll have her sit next to us on test days." Ercules pointed to her.

"Sounds like a plan." The professor walked in the room.

The day of our last final Ercules and Raymond waited for Josef and me in front of our class with a small bottle of rum.

“Take a sip, girls!” We took turns taking sips of *Barceló*. Raymond had brought three bottles from his house after the Thanksgiving break. We grabbed some food and headed to the dorm rooms to continue the party.

Raymond and I drank a bottle by ourselves. Joseph had taken a break because she was starting to feel sick and Ercules wasn't much of a drinker. The other guys and another girl I didn't know were drinking beer. We opened a second bottle and continued to drink as we listened to music and made Dominican jokes about *va-calao*.

Another guy walked in and came directly to me.

“Hi, I'm Elias.” He smiled and gave me a hug.

I wanted to run out of the room and never look back. He grabbed a chair and sat next to me. He didn't mention anything about the party or that we had met and exchanged unspoken introductions. He filled my cup with rum and handed me one. He placed the bottle on the floor between our chairs.

“*Salud*. To being different!” I drank half the cup in one sip before he could say anything else.

“*No ombe*, tell me the truth, your mom gave you rum instead of milk when you were little?” Ercules said throwing himself on the floor as he laughed.

“She's not even tipsy yet.” Raymond raised his cup against mine to cheer.

“Cheers, *Pitisa!*” Elias whispered in my ear.

“There’s a party tomorrow at one of the frat house. You should come,” Erculses said. Elias grabbed another bottle, filled my cup and placed the bottle on the floor.

I stayed quiet. I wasn’t sure what to feel. Part of me wanted to be around Elias because he understood me but part of me never wanted to see him again.

“You’ll like it, Luna.” Elias took another long sip of his drink.

“I’ll try no promises though.” I took another sip.

“I know how much you hate promises.” He winked as he got up to dance by himself.

Two hours later Ercules and Raymond had fallen asleep, Josefina fell asleep in one of the guy’s bed, and Elias and I were still drinking and listening to music.

“Until you figure things out, I’m here if you ever need me, but don’t expect me to keep your secret forever.” Elias got up, put on his jacket, and gave me a hug.

“Thank you,” I whispered in his ear. I woke Josefina up and dragged her to the room.

When I arrived at the room, I had three voicemails from Jazz. He had stopped by with dinner and was hoping to hang out before I left for Winter break. I was moved by his gestures and wanted to call him but it was too late so I figured I would call him the next day. I really liked him but couldn’t remove the doubts that the dreams, visuals, and Grandma’s words left in me.

1998

The next day Josef and I woke up at 11am with a headache. There was a knock on the door but neither of us paid it any mind. We were too busy goofing around and playing around with a tickle me Elmo I had hung from the curtain string because it had stopped laughing.

“Come in,” Josef shouted from the floor as I adjusted the string around Elmo’s neck.

Jazz walked in with a bag. He gave Josef a hug and than walked over and gave me one.

“I brought you ladies lunch, hope you’re hungry.”

“Oooohhhh, I love you boy, fingers crossed, fingers crossed,” Jess shouted as she crossed her fingers.

“BI-N-GO!!! Pancakes!!!” Jess did the running man as she stood in front of the bag.

“That’s so sweet of you, thank you!” I said as I pulled a chair out for him.

“You’re very welcome.”

We ate and joked about the hanging elmo and about my funky socks with bananas, cherries, and monkey designs. I loved those socks, they were super comfy. I grabbed my jacket to walk Jazz to the side of the building.

“What are you getting into tonight?” Jazz asked me.

“I’m going to a party off campus. It’s a Spanish party but you’re welcome to come.”

“You go have fun. I’ll see you tomorrow then before we leave for the break?”

“I’ll call you.”

After the finger incident the only moved he had made on me was holding my hand in the car.

“So did he kiss you?”

“Nope. My breath stinks?” I opened my mouth and put it closed enough to Josef’s face.

“It’s not that bad. You may need to make the first move girly.”

“Yeah right.”

“I like him for you, he’s a sweetheart!”

“You only like him because he brought you pancakes.”

“*Aha* Luna, what better reason than that?”

“I like him a lot too. I feel like such a punk. I’m scare to get hurt.”

“I know you are. He won’t hurt you. I’ll rip his balls off if he does.”

November 1998

I agreed to go to the Frat party off campus with the guys, Josef, and Leslie that evening. You could hear the drums to the song playing around the corner from the house. Elias was waiting for me in front of the door as Raymond parked the car. He stood behind the door until everyone went in. When I was getting ready to walk in he stood in front of the door. I noticed that he was smoking a cigar and the music that was playing was *lo palo*. Grandma danced to that music when she had parties in honor of the spirits. The loud drums and the chanting voice filled my spirit with nostalgia and exhilaration. Every inch of my body had goose bumps. I felt heaviness in the back of my neck and an excitement that I was having trouble controlling. Elias removed the cigar from his mouth and blew the smoke in my face. He hugged me, “Don’t be afraid, come in.”

“I forgot something in the car, I’ll be right back.” I pretended to walk towards the car and sat on the steps in front of the house when I saw him go inside.

“What are you doing out here, is cold.” Josef sat next to me trembling.

“I can’t go inside, I feel too weak, the music, the cigar, the energy. I’m afraid. I can’t.”

“Can you ask Raymond to drive me home? Tell him I’m not feeling well.” I got up.

“You girls stay, have fun.”

“You sure?” Josef got up confused about what to do.

“Don’t be silly, I’ll be fine.”

Elias sat next to me. He had a red cloth around his head and was drinking rum from a royal blue plastic cup.

“You can’t run from yourself forever.”

“Is not who I am.” I kept my head down.

“Is not all bad, Luna. Stop running from it. You’ll end up hurting more in the long run. If I protect you, I’ll pay for your mistakes too.”

“We’re still friends?” Elias raised his hand and placed it in front of me.

“We’re still friends.” I shook his hand. He pulled me towards him, hugged me and gave me a kiss on the forehead, “You’re special.” He walked away and I stood outside looking at the stars while I waited for Raymond to come out. I reminisced about the good old days, when innocence only captured what it saw; innocence never learned to read between the lines.

I called Jazz when I got to the room and he met me at the basement lounge of Malcolm Hall. He sat up straight at first but as time passed he asked me cordially if he could hold me close to him and I agreed. It felt nice to be in his arms. He was tall, handsome, and he smelled good. He was a Polo and Iceberg guy, image and cars were his motto. That night he was wearing a red sweater, blue jeans and his super clean timberlands.

“I like the color red on you,” I told him as I walked him to the door by the side entrance to say goodnight.

“Thank you, I don’t wear it much.”

He held my hand as we approached the door. I lingered by the door hoping that he would kiss me but he hugged me instead and whispered good night.

“Night.”

I stood by the door, playing Josef’s words in my head, “You’re going to have to make the first move.” I wasn’t sure why I always listened to her; she was younger than I was.

“Come here,” I told him as he was getting ready to walk away.

I looked him in the eye and leaned into him. He looked me in the eyes and smiled. His lips met me half way. His touch was soft and gentle, as if he had an eternity to wait for that moment. His lips tasted like something sweet and familiar. I pulled away and smiled at him.

“Good night.” I began to walk away.

“I’ll walk you to the elevator,” he said as he held my hand.

We kissed while we waited for the elevator. He then offered to ride the elevator with me to the third floor and we kissed until we got to the third floor. When we got there he pressed the button to the basement floor and we did this at least three times before we parted ways. I had not imagined what his kiss would be like but it was everything I would have wanted.

As I walked to the room, I thought about the rush I was feeling and than about Grandma, “You’ll fall in love with a man as dark as me.” I thought about the image on his glove compartment, the dream, and what Elias told me, that it wasn’t all bad. And Grandma wasn’t all bad, at least, never to me.

It was a perfect summer day in the Dominican Republic. The sun was beginning to set and the fresh air brought relief to the old women fanning their thighs and legs with their flower patterned skirts in front of their houses. The sun felt no remorse for old age or hot flashes. I sat on the last step to the entrance of Grandma Bella's house, waiting for the electricity to come back, anxious to watch TV and sit in front of a fan; electricity and water were so absent in the Dominican Republic, that you would have thought they were tourists.

I had a *menudo* notebook and pen on my lap as I ate cherries from the neighbor's tree. She liked me a lot. She used to give me as many cups of cherries as I wanted because she preferred to see me eating fruit to junk food. I was '*la gordita*' or so they used to call me. She used to worry that I would become a spinster like her daughter if I didn't lose weight. I was very pleasantly plump but I could still beat all the broom stick looking girls in any dance contest. Even though I wore a size 14 in woman clothing at the age of nine my body felt as light as a feather.

Two weeks earlier, they had a dance contest in front of Grandma Bella's house. Grandma was the one responsible for teaching me all the *golpe e barriga* I knew. They played '*a sobar el pompo, a sobar el pompo, a sobar el pompo.*' My thick waist moved in slow, fast, and faster motion to the music as I went down to the floor and came back up with flexibility. The sweat ran down my face as the crowd shouted, "*haci mimo gordita!*" "*Huespa, la gordita takes the price.*" When the song was finished and the toothpick looking girls stood with their hands on their knees trying to catch their breath or drink water, I stood proudly with both my hands on my

hips as Ezequiel and his sister sat on Grandma's steps clapping and the crowd shouted, "*la gordita, la gordita, la gordita!*" It felt good to be me that day.

As I sat in Grandma Bella's steps, I observed the dust on the unpaved streets, the old blue wood doors in the *colmado*, the old men playing dominoes and drinking beer, the little girls dancing hula-hoop, and the dog *velando* the ice cream of a 4 year old girl wearing a purple dress. I noticed that there weren't many trees; poor old ladies had no choice but to spend the rest of their days fanning themselves with their skirts and drinking lemonade.

I wanted to write a poem for Grandma Bella to let her know how special she was to me. I thought of writing about so many things; her food, but I always told her how good it was, her beauty, but she wasn't that pretty on the outside, her cats, but I didn't like them much, and her hugs. The lines didn't rhyme. It didn't make sense. "Grandma you're so special." That was such a tacky line. It had to be special. I walked to the rocking chair and sat with my notebook hoping to find the right words. Instead, I dozed off.

I woke up to a woman knocking on the door looking for Grandma. She was carrying a bouquet of flowers and a black bag.

"Is Belliria here?" The woman searched the living room.

"*Mujer*, is so great to see you." Grandma walked towards the door and hugged the lady.

"Come, come, and sit down. Let me get you some fresh lemonade and a piece of chocolate cake." The woman sat with the flowers in her right hand and the bag by her feet.

"You look too beautiful. How are the kids doing?" Grandma sat next to her.

“I brought you some flowers. And some fruits for you and Gumencido.” Grandma rubbed her shoulder as she looked at the lady humbly.

“You didn’t have to.”

“I know is not much. I just wanted to let you know that I haven’t forgotten what you did for me and my family.” Tears rolled down her eyes.

“*Hay Mujer*, anything I can do to help.” Grandma smiled. “This is my grandchild, Luna,” she said proudly.

“Whose daughter is she?”

“Petronila, but she looks just like her father.”

“Your Grandma is a great woman. She saved my son and provided for my family when I had nothing. I owe her a lot.” I stood quiet, unsure of what to say.

Grandma and the woman left to the kitchen to talk in private. I stayed behind trying to write the poem. “A great woman,” I wrote. That was it. I was going to write a poem about how nice she was.

“Grandma, I wrote a poem for you,” I announced in front of Grandpa, *Mom*, Josef and my older sister Irma later that evening.

“Read it my love.” I stood up in the middle of the living room with the wrinkled paper in my hand ready to read it.

*“Great woman es mi abuela,
de eyes big y magical.
Great woman es mi abuela,
Que helps la gente poor.
Great woman es mi abuela,
always simple y contenta.
Great woman es Dona Bella,
mi favorite abuela.”*

I had never seen Grandma’s eyes get watery, that day they did. They all clapped and I bowed. After my performance, I walked over to Grandma and gave her a hug.

“Thank you my love.”

“Thank you, Grandma. I love you.”

That day I knew nothing about magic or Grandma’s secrets. All I had been was a little girl who loved her grandma and who had nothing or no one to hide from.

Valentines Day was a few days away. I had never been a fan of love or Valentines Day. I was never the one getting the flowers, balloons, chocolates and cards with the cheesy hearts and the 'I love you' teddy bears. Then again, I was also not the one wasting my time talking to boys. I just wasn't the type. I also wasn't the type who asked Jazz, "So, what are the plans for Valentine's Day?" I assumed that if he were interested in doing something he would let me know. Not sure if it was right or wrong but that's how I felt. Certain things were supposed to happen organically and that was one of them.

I would admit that in a very deep place inside of me, probably in a corner of my little toe, I was hoping that Jazz would surprise me with a romantic dinner, roses and a gift. But the little voice inside my head kept reminding me, "Remember what happened the last time you got your hopes up." I was fifteen years old when Luron, my father, promised to cover all the expenses for a trip to the Dominican Republic that summer. I was so excited that I convinced Josef to travel to the Dominican Republic too. We made lists of all the things we needed to buy and wanted to do during those weeks. One evening he called to tell me that he would only be paying for the flight and that Mom would have to cover clothing and spending money while I was there. I knew Mom didn't have the funds to provide for a capricious trip. Disillusioned and heartbroken, I told him, "It's okay, I'll go another time."

"Your Mom can't help out with this?"

"Forget it. I'll go another time. I'll talk to you later. Bye."

"Luna, are you mad?"

“I’ll be fine.”

A few weeks later, Luron called to wish me a happy birthday. I was still disappointed about the Dominican Republic trip. I can’t recall how, but suddenly we were arguing. I remember him telling me, “You will never amount to anything.” I responded in a moment of rage, “You’re dead to me, Luron!”

We didn’t speak for three years after that incident. I was exhausted of being disappointed and had not bothered to hope before but that Valentine, I did.

Instead, I got my dearest Jazz, holding my hand and looking me in the eyes as he told me,

“Pretzel, I’m not going to be here on Saturday for Valentine’s Day.”

“Okay.” I flipped the channel on the TV.

“Are you upset?” He took the remote from my hand and turned off the TV.

“Nope.” I looked around the basement lounge and found no comfort in the orange and blue chairs, the table on the far end of the lounge or the burgundy carpet. Something in my heart dropped, like a person being thrown off a plane with a parachute that wouldn’t open.

“Let me make it up to you. Let me take you out to dinner on Thursday evening. I really have to be in the city on Saturday for business. I would rather be here with you, but I really can’t. So, what do you say?” He kissed me on the forehead and held my hand close to his chest.

“You have a business in the city?”

“My best friend and I, we buy and sell cars. We’re trying to start our own car dealership one day.”

“Cool, Thursday’s fine.” I took the remote back and turn the TV on. I rejected feeling disappointed. I didn’t want to feel sad when it wasn’t my fault, it didn’t make sense. I wasn’t sure if something was wrong with me or if I only deserved the least.

Every other girl in the United States would have been upset. Perhaps they would have given Jazz the silent treatment and declined the Thursday dinner. But whoever said I was every other girl. I lived in the United States but was not of the United States, bet you forgot I was of the moon. Yes, a place that was unfamiliar to me too.

What did I do instead? I planned a mini surprise for him on Wednesday evening. I didn’t have money to buy him anything so I had to get creative. I was going to cook him dinner but Josef felt he didn’t deserve a warm meal. So, on Wednesday afternoon I bought two mini boxes of cereal (Pop and Frosted Flakes) along with two mini orange juices and one mini 2% milk. Later that evening, Josef helped me carry the cereal, milk, juices, bowl, spoon and one red candle to the basement lounge. There were three students watching TV because it was only 7:30 pm. I walked over and asked them to leave politely; they didn’t mind. Josef watched the cereal boxes in the lounge as I waited for Jazz to call me and let me know he was heading over.

“Pretzel, I’m on my way.” Jazz confirmed.

“Okay.” I left the room and ran down the stairs.

He didn’t know I had anything planned. He thought we were going to hang out in the basement lounge as usual. I ran down the steps as if *el cuco* was following me. Josef was so great, she had turned off the lights, put the plates, cereal, juice, milk in place and had positioned the candle in the middle of the table and lit it as she saw me walking in the lounge out of breath and saying, “heee is. On . his way.”

“Have fun.” Josef walked towards the door. She was still mad that he was going to be in New York City on Saturday. According to her, Americana College was only two hours away. He could have gone to the city and come back.

“Where did you get these strawberries from?” I asked confused but grateful. They gave it the final touch.

“Naomi brought it down, she got it from Humphreys.” Josef winked.

“Thank you! It looks great. I hope he likes it.”

“He better. He doesn’t even deserve this much,” Josef said.

“Josef, be nice.”

“Why? He’s an asshole. Out of all the weekends? How convenient for him to pick this one. He’s suspect and I don’t like his stupid ass anymore.”

“He has to go away for business.”

“Yeah right. And I’m Cinderella.”

“Bye grouch, thank you again, you’re the best!” I screamed as I glanced at the big bulky black clock on the wall, 7:56 pm.

That was my first official valentines date. And although it was far from perfect, I was happy to be with Jazz. He always made me laugh. I knew that he would appreciate the gesture and the humor to the evening. Most guys would have found it cheesy and stupid, but not Jazz; he would see it for what it was, an intimate moment.

Jazz walked in the lounge and walked towards me in a rush. He held me by the waist and lifted me off the floor as he swirled me around in his arms. He put me down and kept his arms around my waist. I grabbed him by the hand and sat him on the chair. I was heading to the other chair when he sat me on his lap and gave me a tight hug and a soft kiss on the lips.

“Thank you, this is very sweet of you.” Jazz kissed my neck.

“You’re welcome.” I stood up to pour the cereal and the milk into his bowl.

I could have said something nicer, but I didn’t know how to. I feared romance and love. Josef words kept replaying in my head. Maybe he had a girlfriend in the city. He probably didn’t deserve that small gesture.

We watched TV and lay in the sofa in a comfortable embrace. BET was playing Aerosmith’s song; *I don’t want to miss a thing*. He sang the words in my ear. And he wasn’t the best rock singer, but it was the sweetest melody I had ever heard. I turned around to thank him and he kissed me softly on the lips. He pulled away and caressed my face.

“I am so glad you’re in my life, I love you,” Jazz said.

“Thank you.”

I panicked. I totally panicked. I had never said those words to anyone before. A man had never said those words to me before. I didn’t know if I loved him back? I wasn’t ready to say those words. I smiled and gave him a kiss on the cheek. I wanted to run to my room. I was scared of what that meant. What did ‘I love you’ really mean? At 18, the words meant a world of possibilities and uncertainty.

“What type of business are you doing in the city this weekend?”

“I’m trying to start my own business with my best friend, selling cars. We’re trying to buy two cars with our savings so that we can sell them at a higher price. I really want to own a business some day.”

“I’ve told my best friends all about you,” Jazz said changing the topic.

“Hopefully good things.”

“Only good things.”

February 12th was a beautiful cold morning. It wasn’t just any Thursday. It was my first ‘real’ Valentine’s Day dinner. I woke up with the desire to whistle, but that was impossible, I didn’t know how to. I settled for singing off tune. Jazz called me before I left for class. Josefina answered the phone while I got dressed.

“Luna is prince charming calling you,” she said sarcastically as she put the phone on top of the dresser and walked towards the closet to grab her coat.

“Hey you,” I answered the phone.

“Hey pretty girl.” I put on my construction timberland boots.

“Just wanted to confirm we were still on for 7 pm. Our reservation is for 8 pm,” Jazz said as I motioned for Josef to wait for me with my right hand.

“Yeah, 7 p.m. it is. Don’t make me wait, okay. Where are we going again?” I put on my coat.

“You’re not going to trick me into telling you, it’s a surprise.”

“Okay, okay, I’ll see you at 7 pm.” I blew him a kiss.

“Have a great day, can’t wait to see you!” Jazz said softly, causing my heart to dance salsa.

“Bye, pretzel.” I hung up.

He picked me up and the date was great with the exception that he didn’t leave the waiter a tip and I thought that was rude. He held my hand during the ride back and opened the door to the car when we arrived, he was a true gentleman. As we always did, we hung out in the basement lounge, watched BET comedy and the midnight love videos.

“Thank you for being understanding, pretzel,” Jazz told me as he kissed my lips.

“I’m an only son and my parents are not used to me being away.”

I was fine on Valentine’s Day until girls started receiving chocolate and roses from an ‘angel delivery program’ one of the sororities had put together. Josef received roses and chocolate from the guy she was dating. I didn’t receive anything; I received a voicemail from Jazz at around 10 pm. It was the first time in a long time that I had allowed myself to get sad over a man and it made me angry, not at him, but at myself for caring.

“He didn’t even send you an angel delivery?” Josef asked me as she held three in her hand.

“Nope.”

“He’s a fucking prick. He’s probably cuddling with some other jefa right now, business my ass.”

“Josef, I’m good. Relax.”

“Relax. You better get rid of him when he comes back. You know what? don’t even answer his calls anymore.” A knock on the door shifted her attention.

One of the ‘angels’ had a special delivery for me.

“Please sign here.”

“Thank you.”

The small gift, which had the form of a pen, was wrapped in pink rose pedals and had a red ribbon in the middle. It was a cigar! The note read, “*Piti*, would you join me for a walk today? Meet me in the back of Malcolm Hall at 8:15 pm.”

It was one of the most personal gifts I had ever received.

“Josef, I’m going for a quick walk, I’ll be right back.” I grabbed my coat and headed towards the door.

“*Ahan*, a walk. Find yourself a new boyfriend while you’re at it,” Josef shouted.

Elias was waiting for me by the door and laughed aloud when he saw me shaking my head as I held the cigar in my hand.

“Thank you, *Cabellero!*” I gave him a hug.

“Anything to make you smile.”

“So, your boy went away during Valentine’s day weekend?”

“Yup!”

“Why are you with him?” I shrugged my shoulders unsure of how to answer as we walked along the campus.

“You should already know the answer,” I replied mockingly.

“Come I want to show you something.” Elias grabbed me by the arm and walked me to his dorm room, which was five minutes away. He had his own room. It was nice and neat. In the corner of the room, he had five saints, a white and yellow candle, three white roses and a glass of water.

“That’s all they ask for Luna, acknowledgement.”

“It’s not who I am.”

“They’ll punish you for denying them.” I stood quiet. “They’ll take from you what you love the most.”

“Why are you with Jazz? You can’t protect him forever. It doesn’t matter which path he takes, the ending is the same.”

“What about you? Why are you always alone? How does it feel? Huh? You cursed the gift as much as that world.”

“You’re right is not easy, but it’s better than being afraid.” Elias sat down on the bed.

“Luna, only because you know something it doesn’t mean you can change it.”

“I know, but I have to try.”

“You’re a messenger not an angel.”

“I didn’t mean to be hurtful.” I looked at the table with the saints.

“You did, but we’re still friends.” Elias held my hand in his as we sat in silence.

16.

A Dream of Reaction

1996

I walked down my old neighborhood in Washington Heights. The loud music playing from the cars sounded distant and ageless. The grocery store was on the corner of the block and the drug dealers wore their big gold chains and watches. They smiled and grinned as they saw the young girls passing by in their uniforms. I was one of them. I wore a navy blue jumper dress with a light yellow shirt underneath the jumper and a jean jacket. The stockings were navy blue and the shoes were black. I must have been nine years old in the dream because I was wearing four pony tails and was eating nacho chips and an ice cream sandwich at the same time.

The buildings were decorated with graffiti and loud people sitting in front of them talking about *la farandula*, the new pregnant girl on the block, the latest drug dealer to get caught or get killed, or domestic and foreign politics. I continued to walk down the street as I said a shy hello to those that shouted hello or good afternoon to me. Mom was sitting on the steps in front of the building, waiting for me to come home from school. Her eyes were still bright, her skin seemed as soft as cotton, and her hair was a flawless auburn. She didn't have wrinkles then.

As I got closer to the building her image disappeared, the street became silent, and the sun felt closer to me than it ever had before. I climbed up the four steps as the sweat ran down my stockings. As I entered the building, I noticed the mailbox straight ahead, there must have been between nineteen to twenty-one mailboxes. The lights were dimmed and the walls were an old fading gray that needed to be painted desperately. In the middle of the hallway was a sitting

area with two big columns on each side. A short woman, wearing bright pink high heels, was standing on top of the bench. She was hiding something on the edge of the right column.

She didn't notice me standing there. Once she was finished, she climbed down, and headed towards the staircase. I placed my red and navy blue book bag on the bench, climbed on top of the bench and my book bag, and grabbed what the lady had left there. I looked to the sides to make sure nobody was watching.

I sat down on the bench, my dark brown hair loose and below my armpits. Suddenly, I was sixteen years old, wearing tight Levi jeans, a red and yellow stripe shirt with construction timberlands. I was already 5'5 and had managed to lose most of the fat I had gained from eating junk food. Mom would have been relieved that I only weighed 130 pounds. She worried too much that I would stay pleasantly plump forever.

I held the paper in my hand and opened it with the tips of my fingers, afraid of what I would find. Two tears rolled down my eyes, "a *spell*." It was a curse for mom. I remember the last time someone did that to her. Her name was Vilma. Mom used to play cards with her and other dirty looking women. They would sit at a table for hours and sometimes days and play cards for money, drink coffee and smoke cigarettes, and reminisce about their past. Once, two of the women had a heated debate about who had slept with more men in one day. They almost hit each other as one shouted, "30 men!" and the other shouted back, "you may know about numbers but I know about cock." Mom made me go to the store for an errand so I never found out who won. But I do remember that I must have been fourteen the day I visited the messy apartment with mom that winter.

As we walked in, Vilma asked me to sit down in the dark brown and beige flower sofa to watch television. Children and teenagers were not supposed to listen to grown folk

conversations. The furniture and the apartment smelled like old cigarettes and stale bread. I walked to the kitchen where Mom sat at the dining table, which looked like it wanted to collapse instantly, with a lady by the name of Sarah. Sarah was wearing a red and green cloth around her head and a red shirt with no bra. Her breast hung loosely as she rested their weight on the table.

“Luna, my love, come give me a hug. I didn’t know that was you out there.” Sarah opened her arms as I walked towards her.

“You’ve grown to be such a beautiful young lady.”

“Thank you.” I sat on the spare seat.

The owner of the house, Vilma, grabbed a red candle that was sitting on top of the off white refrigerator. I couldn’t take my eyes off the candle that Vilma held in her hand, ten feet away from me. Around the candle was an image of *Mom*, her body was tied from head to toe to a chair, and her eyes were closed. Vilma tried to light the candle but every time she lit it, I blew subtle air in its direction and extinguished it. She became frustrated with it and threw it in the garbage as she left the kitchen and headed to the bathroom.

“Before they get to you, they will always have to get through her first,” Sarah told *Mom* that day as she took a sip of her coffee.

“Mom, I’m ready to leave.”

“Bye, Sarah.” I hugged her as mom put on her jacket.

I closed my eyes as I sat on the bench. Suddenly, I was no longer inside the building; I was walking through a narrow and dark hallway that looked like a cave. There was a hint of light through a doorway. I walked towards it, but had to bend down because the doorway was too small. At the entrance of a room with no door, I came across a five by six room, filled with

nails pointing upwards. At the center was a picture of Mom surrounded by black lit candles and dead fish. I didn't have on any shoes and began to feel helpless and nauseas.

Unable to cross to the middle of the room, I opened my eyes, the paper still in my hands. I heard the footsteps of people approaching the hallway inside the building. As I stood up, mom was walking down the stairs with one of her closest friend, Stephanie. She was wearing the pink high heels. As they approached me, I took the paper in my hand and gave it to mom's friend, "I wish for you 20 times what you wished upon her."

I woke up feeling angry and guilty. Not understanding why people chose to be evil and not knowing what the consequences would be. But despite the guilt I was relieved that mom was going to be okay. A month later the lady lost her house, her husband, and her job. She went crying to our house to share her misfortune with mom. I never told mom anything and I'm not sure that her friend ever found out that I had turned her own evil against her. I remember I prayed to *Nana* to forgive me for a very long time. I had nightmares of the room with the nails and the crying lady for many years. I waited for *Nana* to punish me but eventually I let it go.

I thought that if I could protect Mom, maybe, I could protect Jazz too.

December 1999

It was our first Christmas in the Dominican Republic; a warm Christmas for a change. Josef and I were so excited that we packed a week earlier and left the day after our last final, December 21st.

I knew I was home when the wheels to the plane scratched the ground and the passengers applauded animated. The scent of rain and burnt trees crept into my nostrils and skin forcing me to smile at how lucky I was. I was in my second home, the country that owned my roots but still considered me a *gringa*. Not because I was pale but because I was born in the United States. Sometimes I felt I didn't belong in either country. In the United States I was a *minority* and in the Dominican Republic I was a *gringa*. I was a foreigner in both countries: a root that stemmed from culture but was growing on the edges of thin air. The huge suitcases with their three big fancy belts revolved around the baggage area as we waited for our luggage to come out. And for that instant, everything in me felt one hundred percent Dominican. Not a modern Dominican born in the city type of Dominican but a *muchachona* from one of those hidden mountains that Dominicans themselves never heard of.

The scent drowned the voices of the fast speaking employees going through the travelers' suitcases and the hustlers trying to get tips for walking the suitcases five steps to the taxi cabs. An old woman cursed at the employees, "*ustedes son unos corruptos todito,*" for opening her suitcase, taking everything out, and throwing it back in the suitcase like it was the drawer of a messy teenager. The crowd outside, waited anxiously for their relatives. Grandma Bella never came to the airport but Grandpa lived for the moment of visiting the airport because one of his five sons had become one of the top ranked politicians assigned to oversee the airport. It didn't

mean much to me, he was an arrogant *campesino*, whom I had met only twice. But to Grandpa, it meant status and respect, and he lived to pronounce his name since his son was named after him, Gumencido Lopez.

“Luna, look at that lady’s fantabulous hair style, you’ll think she’s getting married as soon as she walks outside.” Josef blew kisses in her direction when the lady turned the other way.

“Check out the glamorous leather shoes and print jacket the one behind me is wearing.”

“*El pipo, acabando!*” Josef grabbed her navy blue suitcase.

The heat of the afternoon sun reflected on the sweat that ran down my face. Grandpa stood proudly waiting for *Mom*, Josef, me and my two sisters. *Mom* hugged her father, the tears rolled down her eyes. It had been nearly a decade since she had spent a Christmas in the little island with family. That old man meant everything to her. I envied that about her, her relationship with her father. I could never know what it felt like to miss a father because a father was never there.

I sat quietly in the back seat of the car the whole ride. Smiling at the newly paved highway and the ocean that stretched from horizon to horizon; the houses under construction and the land for sell; the fruit ladies selling apples and grapes, which was a delicacy in that part of the world, only available during the holidays. The sun was beginning to set and our stomachs were starting to growl. We stopped on the side of the road by an old man selling pig feet, goat, the greasy and crunchy *chicharron*, *lengua*, *molsilla*, *casave*, *yucca*, and plantain. I settled for the crunchy *chicharron* with plantain and a passion fruit juice.

We arrived that Thursday evening to music, food, older folks sitting in front of their houses, and adults and children dancing in the middle of the streets. The men played the drums,

guitars, and the accordion as they sang Christmas songs and sipped from their dark rum. The women moved their waist sensually to the rhythm of the instruments. Grandma sat on the steps as she clapped her hands and sang the lyrics to the song that was playing. I ran to her as I got out of the car, excited to feel her arms around me.

“You look so gorgeous.” She spun me around as she took a close look at me.

“Thank you, Grandma.” My hand touched her right cheek, tracing the extra wrinkles that had grown over the years.

“A grown and beautiful woman,” Grandma said again.

“Jolsefisna, look at you, just lovely. You’re a heartbreaker, I bet,” Grandma told Josef as she looked at her.

“Who? Me? No way.” Josef winked.

Our cousins, Darwin and Wellington, greeted us with a cold beer. We drank a few beers and danced in the middle of the streets along with the crowd.

“One hundred pesos to the woman that moves her waste faster than the beat of the guira!” shouted a man wearing a tank top and blue jeans.

“Hand it over, nobody moves it like me.” The woman with the yellow shirt and the white shorts stood in front of the drummer as she looked around at the other woman defiantly with a hand on her hip.

“We all have waist and feet, right?” shouted an opponent.

“*Dale*, let me show them a thing or two.”

The women moved their bodies to the rhythm of the *guira* and the drums. Their bodies moved so fast that I had trouble believing they had bones. Grandma tried to get Josef and me to go, but Josef was too tired and I wouldn’t go alone.

At midnight, we were so drained that we couldn't get ourselves to get up. As the streets began to clear, we sat in front of the house, reminiscing of the young years when we used to steal cherries from the neighbor's tree, play *Yun Yun* in the middle of the streets, *caman ahi* with sticks because we didn't have guns, and rubber bands against the walls. I asked for Ezequiel and Paula, he was working and she was out of town until the following day.

The houses, trees, and street polls were decorated with lights. At the corner of the street there was a stand made of plantain and corn peel. There were two women and a man cooking another pot of *locrio*, rice with chicken and smoked pork chops mixed with it. They had shots of rum lined up on the stand for people to help themselves.

At one in the morning we finally made it to bed.

"Josef, you heard that knock on the door?" I walked out of the room.

"Who?" I peeked through the window.

Mom walked past me and opened the door without asking who. An explosion of music came through the door.

"It's the *Aguinaldos*." A smile on her face as she saw my confusion, "they go from house to house every night, all night long, starting December 1st through January 7th and play Christmas music for the families."

Wellington rushed to the front of the house, grabbed me by the hand, and pulled me towards the middle of the street to dance. The soft breeze played with my hair as he twirled me around to the beat of the music. Josef and Darwin danced next to us as the streets began to get crowded one more time. The women cooking the food earlier served the newcomers a plate with a cup of rum for men and a cup of *jenjibre* for women. As they knocked on other houses, we followed them and danced and sang along with the crowd.

At five in the morning a priest and a few nuns rode in a red pick-up truck as they sang Caribbean Christmas songs using a loud speaker. The crowd followed them to a small garden as they sang along, where they gave the visitors *jenjibre* tea and butter cookies, and began the early mass. I sat on the grass surrounded by trees and tiny pink flowers. There were benches a bit further down but most of the people sat on the grass and gathered around the priest. I wondered if the priest knew how drunk most of us were? But I don't think he cared, having us there seemed to be enough for him and the nuns, who prayed in whispers and sang gracefully.

Grandma's house had a small Christmas tree with red and white decorations. The living room and kitchen had containers with red apples, red grapes, and chestnuts. After mass we headed back home to try and get some rest.

"Cuz, get up, we're going to the river to have a cookout." Wellington and Darwin pulled the cover off of us.

"We just got back, is only 8am." Josef covered herself with the blanket.

"The rooster already sang, time to get up!" A loud air exploded from somebody's ass.

"That's disgusting." Josef and I had no choice but to get up.

"Mom, Wellington and Darwin want us to go to the river with them, can..."

"Of course, be careful, and don't drink too much."

"Guys, don't drive those motorcycles too fast, I know you've been drinking all night," Mom shouted at them as they waited for us to put on our bathing suits.

"Be careful Luna," Grandma whispered as she hugged me.

"Jolsefisna, look after her." Grandma walked away without giving Josef a chance to complain.

There was something magical about riding on the back of a motorcycle in the early morning in the Caribbean. Speeding down a hill with my hands up in the air was more thrilling than a rollercoaster ride. The morning sun felt like little sparkles dancing on my skin as the wind carried the scent of the rivers' water to us. For a second, I closed my eyes, smiled, and wished that Jazz were the one driving the motorcycle or that he would be waiting for me by the river. I wanted to share this part of me with him, show him my roots, my culture, the details of that rich land. I took a deep breath and opened my eyes before the 'buts' could bring me back to reality, Grandpa would never accept him. It didn't matter if he came from a good family, or that his parents had been married for 30 years, or that his father had a PHD, and they owned a three bedroom condominium. That didn't matter because they were Black, not educated and family oriented, but Black. I looked around and most of the people I saw had dark skin. In America, the 'real *gringos*,' the ones with blue eyes and blonde hair, would categorize them as Black. It didn't matter where they were from it mattered what they looked like. But they didn't know that. Their psychology had been programmed to hate Black by Trujillo. Black in the Dominican Republic was like Black everywhere, a stereotype engraved in the souls, minds, and thoughts of the *Quisqueyanos*; Black is not good enough. But to me, when I closed my eyes and felt the darkness come upon me, all I felt was the strength of solitude, gratitude, and peace.

There were times when I wanted to change the world and others when I wanted to run away from it. I wanted to run away from *el salto de jimenoa* river. The first thing I noticed as I walked down the dirt road towards the river was a huge rock, about six floors high, standing on a corner of the river. The river was surrounded by rocks. Although the water was cold because it was winter and the temperature was 77 degrees, the river was filled with young people. The

guys jumped off the rock into the deepness of the river as the girls celebrated their braveness and stupidity.

I assigned myself as Darwin's assistant cook and helped take the ingredients out of the bag, such as the rice, the chicken, and the seasoning. I knew that going in the river was out of the question.

"You don't even know how to cook." Josef took off her top and placed it on a rock near us.

"Great time to learn." I took off my shirt too and kept my shorts on and the orange and yellow one piece bathing suit.

"Whatever."

Darwin cut the three chickens, took off the skin, and seasoned it with garlic, red pepper, *sazon goya*, *cilantro*, *oregano*, and lime. He set the wood on fire, which was being held together by rocks, and placed the pot one foot above it. He poured some oil into the hot pot and shortly after tossed the seasoned chicken into it and covered it. He washed the white rice with the water he bought in the supermarket. The white water felt to the rocks with scattered pieces of rice. Once the chicken was almost cooked and the water had boiled he threw the rice in the pot, stirred it and covered it. I sat on the edge of the river, feeling the rocks mixed with sand and cold water under my feet. I was tempted to jump in, but I sat on the edge unsure if that was another Indian river; a river where the spirits of Indians lived at the very bottom and at the surface of the waves that hit the rocks. I saw girls being flipped upside down in the water by guys that liked them. All I could do was dream of a day when Jazz would come with me to the river and carry me on his shoulder or hold me firmly by the waist to keep me from slipping into the river's depth. And

he couldn't protect me from the Indians, spirits or myself. But at least he would give me the courage to confront what had threatened to drown me once.

Behind me was a hammock hanging from two trees. I tested the ropes to make sure they were secured and lay my body on the white hammock. The river was surrounded by many trees, the chirping of birds, huge and tiny rocks by the side of the river, and a bridge in the distance streaming from one side of the river to the next. At the top of the hill was a red and blue small store that looked like a house with an ample gallery space surrounding it. They sold cold beer, rum, snacks, and fried finger food.

My hands hung from the side of the hammock. I felt the texture of the rocks and grabbed a tiny one and wondered what was inside of it. I held it tightly in my right hand and sheltered it against my chest. I closed my eyes to the laughter of girls, the splash of water, the chirping of birds, and the smell of food. As I drifted into rest, I marveled if the birds were singing in Spanish or English. I thought of how lucky they were to live in such a beautiful Island.

I woke up to the coldness of the water that was splashed on my face and the pitchy voice of a young Haitian guy selling fried fish.

“Senorita, quere un peje? Di grati per ser tan linda.”

“Gracias.” I took a bite and smiled as soon as the fish touched my tongue.

“Ey. Careful, that’s my cousin.” Wellington nodded his head as he told the fish seller.

“No hay problema primo.” The guys smiled at me and walked away.

“You’re going to sleep all day.” Wellington threw another cup of water at me.

“She can’t get in the water, is her time of the month.” Jessica slapped his shoulder.

“Ah, you can still drink, here, have some Brugal.”

“I need food.”

“Here, a piece of bread and a cup of rum.”

“Cheers, Cuz.”

“Cheers.”

After a plate of rice with juicy chicken and pork chops and three cups of rum the river looked like a bathtub and the sun felt like fire burning on top of my head.

“Cuz, get up. Let’s dance to this song.” Wellington pulled me from the hammock.

He threw a glass of water around the rocks and the dirt and in that heat we danced to *perico ripiao*, which was often referred to as *merengue* on crack.

“Come up here, *jaba*.” Shouted a few man from the gallery in the house at the top of the hill.

Wellington and I went up to the gallery. We danced and drank as the men and women joined us and bystanders stood around and clapped or sang along to the music. We danced until it was time to leave. As much as I loved the motorcycles, I wanted a car really bad. I wanted to lean my head back on the cushioned seats and pass out. But all I got was the chilled air playing with my head until it gave me a headache. We got home, showered, ate dinner and did what we did the night before all over again.

I kept hoping to get some rest but that didn’t happen until the 23rd. I took a nap on the floor, in the middle of the hallway after the afternoon dinner, and slept for five hours straight. The ants crawled up my back and ankles like I was a piece of fruit, as I snored and talked under my breath according to Grandma.

“They talk to you in your dreams.” Grandma walked towards the kitchen.

“You’re not scared of what people may think?”

“No. I learned a long time ago that they are scared of what I think and know.”

“Luna, the day you accept who you are, you will meet a woman within you that you didn’t know existed. You’re scare of her now, but one day, she will save you. And you will learn to love her and appreciate her.”

“I feel caged sometimes. Like my own breath drowns me, like I don’t belong.” I sat down in a chair by the stove.

“You were born to be free. Stop trying to fit in.” Grandma patted my shoulder.

“I don’t want to hurt others.”

“You’re not me, Luna. You’re a good girl, you hear me, a good girl. You will use your gift for good. You don’t have to be like me and you won’t.” Grandma’s eyes got watery.

Silence.

“Josef, stand by the door and make sure nobody walks in.”

“You’re calling your *azabache*?”

“Yeah, I’ll just be a minute.”

The phone rang three times before Jazz answered the phone. I had missed him so much. It was hard to speak with him because there were no secrets in Grandma’s house. And me dating Jazz was not a secret I wanted revealed, especially not while in the Dominican Republic. He asked me for the number but I always found a way to avoid the conversation.

“Hey you,” I said to him excited to hear his voice.

“Hey Pretzel, I’ve missed you. How is the weather over there?”

“It’s beautiful. You would love it here.”

“Maybe one day you can take me to meet the family.”

“I can’t stay long. We’re fixing dinner for tonight.”

“You didn’t tell me you knew how to cook,” Jazz teased me.

“I’m learning from the experts.”

“When you get back, you can cook for me AND I can give you the gift I got you.”

“You shouldn’t have. I.”

“You’re going to love it. I know you are.”

“Thank you, Pretzel, you’re the best!”

“I have to go but I’ll try to call you tomorrow, Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas, I love you.”

“Love you too.”

It would have been nice to have him there. But how do I explain a six foot one, Black American guy to my family? It would have definitely been an elephant in the room. I hung up the phone and walked to the kitchen to help Mom and Grandma cook while we drank wine.

“Luna, did you go say hi to Paula and Ezequiel yet?” Grandma Pecuezo asked me.

“Not yet, I’ll go now.”

I embraced Paula in a hug when I saw her. Unfortunately Ezequiel was working and his shift didn’t end until the next morning. He was a firefighter. We caught up and laughed and headed back to Grandma’s house to finish cooking.

The table was filled with ham, *pernil*, goat, baked chicken, potato salad, rice and green peas, rice and brown peas, green salad, and cheesecake and flan for dessert. Mom and three of her sisters and two of her brothers, their kids, and friends of the family gathered around the table to give praise for God’s blessings. After the prayer everyone grabbed a plate, a cup of wine, and sat down to eat. I put a plate of food aside for Ezequiel. His family was very poor when we were growing up. On a good day they would eat white rice and eggs. He never complained and I admired that about him, but I was still shocked to learn that he had never ate *pernil* or lasagna. It seemed like something so simple but I guess it wasn’t that modest for everyone. After everyone had finished eating Wellington drove me to the firefighter’s department. It was only five minutes away from the house. His eyes and smile always made me feel special, almost like there was a special place for me within them.

“Is Ezequiel here?” I asked a guy sitting in front of the firefighter department with his hat over his eyes.

“Ezequiel!” The guy shouted at the top of his lungs without moving his hat.

“*Hola!*” I said as I held the plate in my hand. “I heard you were working and thought I’d bring you some food.”

He walked over and gave me a hug.

“*Gracias.* This is a very nice gesture of you.”

“Anytime. I see you tomorrow, okay.”

“Okay.”

Wellington and I headed back home. On our way back he asked me, “So, you know he’s in love with you, right.”

“No he’s not. We’ve been friends since we were like 5.”

“Cuz, the guy would eat dirt if you asked him to. If you look close enough you could probably see his heartbeat through his eyes when he looks at you. You’re crazy, friends my ass!”

“It would never work anyways. We live in two different worlds.”

“I know. He would be perfect for you, is all.”

“Maybe.”

I didn’t dare bring up my relationship with Jazz. Not even with him who was someone I trusted. Maybe because I was scared of being judged or having grandpa find out; or because somewhere inside of me I held a special place in my heart for Ezequiel and didn’t want him to find out. Part of what I loved about Jazz was that he didn’t know who I really was. He was a separate world in which I could navigate carelessly because he didn’t believe in magic and therefore it didn’t exist.

We drank and danced and drank some more in the middle of the street. We walked from neighborhood to neighborhood mingling with friends and strangers. At around three in the morning I felt a cold sensation invade my body. A laughter that I didn’t recognize took over me

and I couldn't explain what was happening. I was aware that there was someone inside of me but I had no control over it. I sat Indian style in the middle of the street. My head down and eyes closed as a sensual smile crossed my lips. The people in the streets formed a circle around me and the neighbors from nearby houses came out to see what the commotion was about. I lifted my head slightly, took a sip of rum, and without moving my head or body said, "Get me a yellow cloth." The circle gathered around me grew as she stood up and danced in the middle of the circle as if paying tribute to the bystanders. Each part of my body felt sexy and desired. It felt as if muscles that had never touched before were making love with each movement. She walked around the circle, in short and delicate strides, as the echo of her laughter vibrated in the edges of my stomach. The crowd began to chant and clap as they shouted the name *Anaisa* in unison. She pointed at people and began to shout things about their lives. People waited anxiously hoping to hear what the future held for them but others left in a hurry. Some of those she followed as the crowd followed her. As my strength decreased, I vanished into an unconscious state and she completely took over.

At six in the morning, there was only me left, and the feeling of exhaustion, embarrassment, and confusion. Grandma had rushed to my rescue but there was nothing she could do. She had to honor *Anaisa* because in her eyes she was doing nothing wrong. I woke up at eight in the morning. Josef was laying next to me and Ezequiel was sitting on the rocking chair by the air bed in the living room, where I had fallen asleep. I didn't ask him if he saw anything or what happened because I didn't want to know.

"*Hola*. How are you feeling?"

I didn't say anything. I didn't know what to say.

"Get dress. I want to take you somewhere."

I took a shower, got dressed and put on a hat hoping that nobody would recognize me. Ezequiel was waiting for me in front of the house on his scooter. He didn't say anything during our trip. There was a comfort silent between us. I held on to his muscular waist as I took in the beauty of the morning. We drove pass the small bridge that was broken on the edges.

"Now you know where we're going?"

"Yes, to my secret place."

"I thought it would make you feel better. It always did."

"You still want to be a Nun?" Ezequiel asked, half teasing me and half serious.

"I do, but I don't think that's my destiny."

"I'm glad." He looked back at me and smiled.

The small chapel in the convent had not changed. You could still see the town from the top of its hill. The doors were opened and the benches were empty. It was the size of a 24 by 30 room, plain, with nothing but benches and windows and a big statue of Mother Mary holding baby Jesus at the corner of the chapel. I sat on the second bench and closed my eyes. Ezequiel sat behind me as he always did, as if guarding my prayers from thieves. I took in all the peace and love I always found in that place. I didn't pray, sing, or say anything. I just sat in silence for two hours taking in the abundance of love and faith that embraced me. Ezequiel waited for me outside while he asked one of the Nuns to pray for me.

The ride back to grandma's house was filled with peace that brought harmony to my heart. I got back to the house and went straight to one of the rooms. I locked the door behind me and didn't let anyone in. The lights and the fan were off because there was no electricity. Sweat ran down my face as I sat on the bed with my back against the wall. My head hung low as I

prayed to Nana, “Please protect me during these trying times. I’m not sure if this is good or bad. Is this a gift from you or a defect from birth? Nana, I don’t want to be a *bruja*, please fix me!”

Three hours passed me in prayer, followed by sleep, and more prayer. When I opened my eyes the shadow of the night was starting to creep in. A slight tremor caused me to shake. I felt heaviness on my neck again, a roughness at the edge of my skin, and a confidence that was foreign to me.

Josefina:

I had been sitting in the living room for seven hours with grandma Bella, grandpa, grandma Pecuezo, aunt Petronila, aunts, uncles, and Paula. I'm sure that was worse than having a spirit possess you. They talked so much and so loud that my anxiety level had gone diva. I had managed to eat dinner, fourteen little Dominican cupcakes, two *yaniqueques*, and had drunk one country club, one *cacheo*, and two beers. And I was still craving coconut pastries.

I was getting ready to put on my shoes to go buy the pastry when Luna stormed out of the living room into the streets. She was not wearing shoes and her hair looked like an earthquake had penetrated her scalp. Everyone called after her but she kept walking without looking back. I ran after her.

“Luna!” I yelled at her as if she were my three year old child.

There was no answer. I panicked. Part of me wanted to run back to the house and the other half wanted to know who was in there.

She walked into a *colmado* around the corner, her eyes vicious and powerful and her posture firm and poised.

“What do you have for your *patron* today?” Luna asked the grocery owner in a coarse voice.

The man looked at Luna and rubbed his unshaved chin. He grabbed five bottles of dark rum, seven cigars, and a red cloth that he had hanging from a bronze statue on the wall. The statue had a devil under his feet and stood victorious on top of him. Grandma has a similar statue, I remember thinking that day.

“You want anything my dear?” He asked me humbly.

“Three cupcakes.” My hands shook as I took the cupcakes, unsure of why he was giving Luna free things.

“It’s an honor to have you here.” The old man grabbed two chairs and placed them outside for us to sit.

She opened one of the bottles of rum, took a sip, and spit it out of her mouth onto the sidewalk as if spitting the bad spirits out of it. The second sip, she nearly drank half the bottle in one gulp.

“Take a sip.” I took a sip so small that my mouth barely smelled of liquor.

“You’re here to protect her. Don’t worry. I’m not here to harm her.”

Aunt Petronila and grandma walked towards us. Luna had lit a cigar and was smoking it and blowing air like she had smoked everyday of her life. I tried to smoke with her but started coughing and my cough made her laugh.

“Greetings,” Grandma said unsure of what to expect.

“Sit down, have a drink with me.”

“Can we go to the house?” I asked afraid of the reaction I would get. But I knew Luna wouldn’t want to be seen in public that way.

“Come, I have a bottle with your name in the house,” Grandma added.

“You’re a good friend to Luna,” he told me.

“*Patron*, she’s just a girl. Give her time.” Grandma sat next to her.

Luna was on bottle number two with no signs of stopping or being drunk.

Suddenly, she got up. She walked inside and before she walked back out there was music blasting from the radio. “I’m *San Miguel*,” he said as he wrapped the red cloth around Luna’s head.

Bystanders began to gather around Luna again like they had the night before. They danced and drank to the music in honor of his presence, the warrior of righteousness. He had people sit in a chair next to him, one by one, while he consulted them. Telling them about numbers to play for the Dominican lottery, warning them of things that were to come, and consoling them for the pain they had and were enduring. A woman cried when he told her he was watching over her son in the hospital, “Don’t you worry woman, your faith will give you a son for many years to come.”

When he was done talking to the people, he turned to me and whispered in my ears, “Luna will see many tears and many dark days. Tell her I will fight for her but first she will have to ask for my help.” A tear rolled down my face. “Take care of her,” he told me as he wiped my face. The texture of Luna’s hand felt like grandpa’s wrinkled hands.

Suddenly, her face had aged and her posture could barely sit straight in the chair. Her back looked like the hunch back of Notre Dame. Grandma greeted him as *San Lazaro*. He didn’t stay long. He asked to speak to three specific people, two which were not there and they had to go look for. One of them was a middle aged man. His lips were chapped and his eyes reaped of sadness. He kneeled before the old man, held his hands in his, without lifting his head. *San Lazaro* lifted his head and looked him in the eyes as his hands quivered, “She wants you to know that she knows it’s hard for you and that she misses you too, but the children miss you and need their father. She trusts that you will be a great father to the children and wants you to give yourself another chance. It’s not your fault. Her death is not your fault.” The man’s back contrasted as he wept and grasped for air in front of the crowd. As the man got up, Luna’s face transformed to that of a delicate and pretty woman. She began to walk towards the house, the crowd gathered in front of Grandma’s house as she sat on a rocking chair. She asked for a pen

and notebook and wrote messages to strangers and family members in the notebook as she wept for an hour. When asked why she was crying she would only cry more. Her name was *Metrizili*, she was the one that made Luna sad. Three more came that day; one was a child that only asked for candy, the other one was a male whose name I don't remember and another woman.

After the last one was gone, we took her to the room to get some rest. I lay next to her, caressing her hair, letting her know that I was there. Her eyes were open but distant, as if she was traveling back from a far away place that knew no end. I was never the emotional type. I left that for the fools. But I knew that if I would have been in Luna's place she would have been there for me. Whispering in my ear, "It's going to be okay," even if she wasn't sure that it would. I didn't pray much, but that day I asked God to help her.

The following morning she woke up, showered, and went to her secret place with Ezequiel. She came back and sat quietly in the living room, smiling when a joke was said, but distant and quiet for the most part. Luna wasn't eating because she wasn't hungry, or so she said, but I couldn't understand it, we were always hungry. Three days passed by and she refused to eat or talk. I wasn't sure if this was a spirit or just Luna growing sad because of her reality.

Aunt Petronila went looking for Grandma but she had left for the Capital to help a lady that was in need. Unsure of what to do, she called a taxi and asked him to take her, Luna, and me to a small town that was forty-five minutes away. We drove in silence, listening to *merengue tipico*, and feeling the disrespect of the temperature. The sun seemed to have forgotten its distance because I was feeling its heat even in between my toes.

We arrived at a house that had a huge backyard. It must have been the size of four cars put together. There were a lot of people sitting around in chairs. They didn't seem to mind the chickens plucking away and the dogs running around them. It was if they all belong in the same

place. We grabbed a seat to wait our turn. A lady dressed in all white walked around with a fake silver tray offering cups of coffees.

“Can I get the purse with the toilet paper?” Luna asked as she stood up.

“You want me to come with you?”

“No, I know this place, I’ve been here before.”

She walked away without giving me a chance to say anything. She had never been there before. Luna had lost so much weight that it looked like I was eating all her food. I had gained the ten pounds she had lost. I had jokingly put the toilet paper in the bag while making fun of her because she had three days with diarrhea and couldn’t keep anything down. The cab had to stop twice on our way to the *bruja’s* place, so the toilet paper wasn’t so useless after all.

A lady dressed in a long white skirt, a white shirt, and a colorful bandana wrapped around her head came out of a blue small house that resembled grandma’s sanctuary. Only that it was twice the size. The lady serving the coffee handed her a glass of water. She looked at the water intensely and after a few seconds, closed her eyes, and drank the water. A smile crossed her lips as she began to clap and dance. Everyone sat in silence unsure of what was happening. She walked towards us and bowed as she greeted Luna by her name, “Welcome to my humble home, DeLuna. Come with me.”

Luna followed the lady into the sanctuary. Aunt Petronila had attempted to follow but the lady turned around and asked to see Luna alone. She must have been there for two hours. The people who had been waiting for hours gave us dirty looks.

Luna came out with swollen red eyes but smiling. She embraced the lady tightly as she said thank you.

“Remember today and you won’t have to fear tomorrow.”

Luna held something tightly in her hand and held it closed to her chest as she promised to remember. Aunt Petronila tried to pay the lady but she refused any money, “It’s an honor for me.”

We got in the car, got home, and waited for Luna to tell us what the lady told her but she didn’t say anything. She showered and joined us in the living room as if nothing had happened in the last few days. Grandma wasn’t anxious about knowing probably because she already knew but Grandpa was furious that his first born American granddaughter was being exposed to that bullshit.

“*Callate culo cagao!*” He yelled at a Haitian vendor selling white cheese.

“Good for nothing negroes,” Grandpa said as he turned to sit down in one of the rocking chairs. The guy had walked away from him to avoid problems.

“What if I fall in love with a black man Grandpa, what happens?” Luna asked defiantly. Her hair was out, wet, and curly. I wasn’t sure if that was her or a bold evil spirit inside of her; one that wanted grandpa’s kidneys and heart to pop out of his body, and wanted to see Luna hanging from the orange tree, in the backyard.

“Paint him white before you bring him near us!”

“There is nothing wrong with being black, is just...” Luna began to say before grandpa stood up in front of her and looked her straight in the eyes.

“Learn your place in this world girl, black and magic is not for you. I will make sure you never end up with a cockroach if is the last thing I have to do. And you, Bella, do what you have to do to rid her of all that magic shit!”

Grandpa walked out into the streets and Luna stood still without blinking as Grandma held her hand in hers.

Spring 2000

I arrived at Americana College in the afternoon that spring. As I got out of the car, I threw up. I saw pieces of letters from the word e-x-p-e-c-t-a-t-i-o-n-s flying out of my mouth onto the cement, crawling on the ice, hoping to survive outside of my system. But the letters melted into the coldness of the season, leaving me with nothing more than a reflection of my shadow. I looked away, afraid of what I would see.

In the room, we turned on the light, the radio, and opened a bottle of sweet wine to motivate us unpack. I thought of calling Jazz but changed my mind. Josef and I sang, drank, and unpacked. When our voices were scratchy and our suitcases were under the bed, we sat down to eat. Eat would be our last good meal for a long time; white rice, stew chicken, and sweet plantains. The music continued to play as the jokes subsided and all that was left was the melody and lyrics of an R&B song by Dru Hill, interrupted by a knock on the door.

“Come in,” Josef shouted from her bed.

Jazz stood in the door way with a gift in his hand and a huge smile on his face. I placed the plate on the bed and walked towards him, allowing myself to get lost in his 6’2 figure. The tears rolled down my cheeks as I let the cotton of his shirt dry them.

“What’s wrong pretzel?” he asked concerned.

“We just had a little too much to drink,” Josef answered with her mouth full before I could explain why I was crying.

“I missed you too!” He said as he kissed my forehead and lips repeatedly, hugged me, and kissed me again. “Open your gift. You’re going to be super sugar!”

“Thank you.” I kissed his lips one more time before tearing the red gift wrap with the gold ribbon. More tears filled my face as I held the purple journal with the words *Never Never Never Give Up* on the cover. Inside the journal was a fancy silver pen.

“You can write our story here.”

“Thank you!”

I didn’t know if I wanted to write our story, at least not the story that was being revealed to me in bits and pieces. Maybe I could write a fiction tale in which I had control of the narrative. But who was I to decide what was a good or bad story or a good or bad life? I was but a nineteen year old girl trying to better myself by going to college, an outcast that danced in the streets and spoke with spirits, and a fool trying to save the man she wasn’t sure she loved.

Jazz and Josef went back and forward about her gift. I sat in the bed and opened the journal to the second page. The first page would hold a picture of us two. I wrote:

Today, January 24, 2009, Jazz gave me this journal so that I can write our story. I promise to finish this journal.

You did everything you could.

That is one of the things the lady in the Dominican Republic told me that day. As the tears filled her eyes, she held my hand close to her heart, closed her eyes, and told me, “Luna, please remember, you must remember this, you did everything you could. This will make all the difference in your life.”

I closed the journal and placed it inside one of my drawers. I took the doubts and placed them below my thoughts.

“Dance with me.” Jazz pulled me towards him before I could say anything.

“You guys suck!” Josef grabbed her coat.

“You don’t have to leave silly.”

“I forgot my *charro* hat at home. I’ll be back!”

“You sure?”

“Yup, you guys have fun.”

“Don’t get any crazy, dirty ideas in your head, Jazz,” Josef said as she walked out.

That afternoon was great. We hung out in the room while listening to music and dancing to R&B music. He loved singing to me and I didn’t mind the spectacle. My favorite one was Angel of Mine by Monica.

“I have to go to the restroom. I’ll be right back.”

“Okay.”

When I came back, he was laying on my bed, his back was on the mattress but his feet were dangling off the bed. He stood up, held me by the waist, and pulled me close to him as we danced; his body and scent so close to mine that I couldn’t tell where his ended and where mine begun. The goose bumps raised through my skin as he sang to me, softly, in the corner of my ear. He kissed me softly at first, letting his tongue linger a little longer in my mouth, and then passionately, as his lips explored the taste of mine. His lips wandered up my neck and to my ear, tickling the inside of my ear as his tongue moved in slow waves. His hand wandered up my shirt, caressing my back.

“Sorry, I got excited.”

I wasn’t sure what to say or do. The tongue in the ear did nothing for me other than give me the task of removing the saliva smell off my ear. Was I supposed to get excited by that? Was something wrong with me? He probably thought I was weird. I wanted more. I just didn’t know what more was. And I was scared. What if I lost my virginity to him and Grandpa put a spell to

break us up? What if he put a spell to keep black men away from me? But he needed to know their names. I wasn't making sense. I was probably nervous and anxious and over analyzing things, I remember thinking that day.

“Come here.”

I moved closed to him again. Grabbed his right hand and had him walk with me towards the bed. I sat down and motioned for him to sit next to me. He sat down. I went behind him and lay on the inside of the bed. He didn't turn around or say anything. Jazz sat motionless. I tapped him on the back. “Lay next to me.”

He laid on his side looking towards the window and I laid on my side looking towards the door. His eyes staring straight into mine, looking at the nakedness of my soul, as I stared back at him.

“You're beautiful,” Jazz said as he removed a strand of hair from my face.

“I don't want to miss one smile. I don't want to miss one kiss.” He sang softly as he held my hands in his.

I couldn't help but smile at the grown man looking at me as if I was the most extraordinary woman that had ever lived on this planet. I leaned forward and kissed him before he could finish the lyrics but pulled away before the next verse started. I wasn't sure if my heart was dancing to the melody of the song or the beating of his heart, but it was dancing to something. Jazz leaned towards me and kissed me gently. His hands wandered up my shirt as he caressed my breast and played with the tip of nipple. Before I knew it his hands wandered down my stomach and passed my belly button. A chill ran down my spine as his warm hands touched my pubic hair and wandered around my clitoris. He leaned against my ear and asked me, “Can I put my finger inside of you?”

I had heard of the term finger popped before. I had always wondered if a girl was still a virgin after being finger popped. Probably not I remember thinking. Mom always said that once you let any boy touch you down there, you open your leg, and you were basically screwed. Like, going nowhere in life type of screw. Opening your legs meant running the risk of getting pregnant and spending a lifetime looking after children and giving up the hope of being a professional woman.

I startled to answer as the thoughts clouded the feelings I was having. But curiosity was stronger than my fear and before I could decide I heard myself saying yes aloud. I felt his thin, strong, big manly finger break the safety door to my vagina, releasing a moistness that I was not familiar with. As his finger explored the inside of me, my heart began to beat faster, and although I was mostly dressed, I felt exposed before him.

“You want me to stop?”

I shook my head vertically without saying a word. He zipped up my pants and buttoned my jeans. He pulled me towards him, kissed my forehead and brought me closed to his chest. We cuddled in my twin size bunk bed. It was the first time I laid in a man’s arms in a bed. And it felt good. It felt really good to be in his arms.

Spring 2000

After the incident in the room Jazz wanted to see me everyday and he wanted to touch me everyday. I didn't mind, but sometimes he wanted to touch me there for a long time, until I had an orgasm, but I never got one. I wasn't sure how an orgasm was supposed to feel. My two closest friends were still virgins too, so I couldn't ask them. And I was too much of a chicken to ask Leslie. I could sense that he was starting to get frustrated when I asked him to stop. Once he got on his knees and placed his head over my vagina and asked if he could kiss me down there. I held his hand and asked him to get up, "I'm not ready to go there," I said. I was starting to worry that he was getting bored with our intimacy but I hated the pressure of doing something I wasn't ready to do. I was scared that he would just walk out of my life but part of me preferred that. Part of me was exhausted of feeling like I needed to make important decisions fast. I felt like I was being pushed to a corner with a magnet so strong that I feared never being able to get out of it again.

"I just want to taste you, Luna." I heard Jazz say.

"I have to go."

The next day he came to the room with a blister on his mouth, said it was something to do with him getting a cold, but I didn't believe him. For the first time since I had been with Jazz I began to question if he was seeing other girls on the side. After all, I wasn't sleeping with him. That evening I tried to bring it up in a subtle way.

"Jazz, I know you have needs. If you want to stop dating and want to see other girls, I'm okay with that. I don't want to waste your time."

“I’m good. You’re the only girl I want to be with. I don’t care about those girls out there. You’re my sugar bear. I’m happy. End of story.”

“Jazz.”

“Luna, there is nothing to talk about, I love you and I’ll wait for you for as long as I need to.”

“You don’t have to.” Jazz interrupted my thoughts. “I want to.”

Everything was fine. We spent nearly every day together. Went to parties, movies, restaurants, and hung out in the lounge together. Three weeks before the end of the semester Jazz asked me to meet him at our favorite bench by the lake. It was a beautiful day in late April and the ducks were enjoying the water and the sun. I remember it was a Thursday because I had an eight page paper due the following day and had not started it. I had agreed to meet him because he had mentioned it was very important.

“Hey, Pretzel.” He gave me a kiss and held on to me a little longer.

“Hey you.”

“How’s the paper coming along?”

“I haven’t started, which is why I’m so stressed. But what’s going on? You’re okay?”

“This will be my last semester at Americana. I’ve decided to take a break from school to work and save money to start my own car dealership.”

“When did you decide this?” I wasn’t sure what to ask or feel. This was the first time I was hearing of this.

“I’ve been thinking about it for some time. I miss my family and best friends. My boss at the card shop offered me a job as the store manager and I accepted. Is off the books and I can save that money to start my own business.”

“Are you sure? You’re not going to go to school?”

“It’s not for me man. I’m not cut for college. My father has a PHD and my mother has her Masters but this is not me. I tried. I really did.”

“Luna, I don’t want this to change anything between us.”

“I don’t know what to say. If this is what you want, I support your decision, but I don’t know if I can be in a long distance relationship. I don’t believe in them. They never work.”

“Please don’t say that. We’ll make it work. I’ll come to see you every other weekend.”

“I don’t know. I.”

“At least think about it. Take until the end of the semester to think about it.”

“I have to go work on this paper.”

“I’ll call you later.”

“Bye.”

I left without giving him a hug or a kiss. I was upset, sad, and disappointed. I walked into the room and when Josef asked me what was wrong, I started crying.

“I don’t know what to do Josef. Eighteen years without letting anyone in. And when I do, this happens.”

“*Mamacita*, I know you really care for him. But long distance relationships rarely work. Besides, do you really want to marry a card store manager? Take it for what it was, a good time. I guess Grandpa’s prayers worked.”

“It was more than a good time.”

“I know babe, but it is what it is, and destiny has nothing to do with feelings. Besides, the family would never accept him.”

“So you think I should end it?”

“Yup. But don’t listen to me, I’m just a cold bitch that wishes that all men lose their dicks.”

I was mad at Jazz for dropping out of school, for leaving, for making me feel the way he did, and for telling me during finals. He could have waited until finals were over. Instead of focusing on writing the paper all I could think about was how hard it was going to be without him. How I would have to tell him it was over and how much I was going to miss him. I was going to go from seeing him every day to possibly never seeing him again.

I laid in bed in a fetal position and cried myself to sleep. Josef was kind enough to give me space. She walked in the room later that evening around 9pm to find me in the same position. She tried to get me to eat fries with ribs, our favorite fatty meal. But my throat felt so dry I couldn’t swallow even when I tried.

“You need to snap out of it and work on your paper. We can cry and get drunk tomorrow, but today, you need to focus,” Josef told me as she pulled me off the bed and tried to throw me on the floor.

She finally got me to sit in front of the computer and the books. I stared at the blank screen for a long time. At midnight the screen was still blank. Josef fell asleep around three in the morning after she saw me typing away. Jazz called four times and each time Josef would tell him that I was unavailable and working on my paper. That day, I appreciated her Nazi spirit. It got me an A- in that class.

I avoided Jazz the entire weekend, spending most of the weekend off campus or at the guy’s room or Leslie’s room. I wasn’t ready to confront him, to say goodbye, or walk away.

To make matters worst, Elias had told me he was leaving too. The only one who understood me and could look after me was embarking in a new journey. And for the first time

in a long time, I felt vulnerable and alone. I had Josef but she was starting to hate Jazz and she hated the world of mystery even more. Mainly because she hated what they did to me, suck the joy and life out of me. Elias stopped by that Sunday when I was alone to check on me and spend quality time together. Popped his head into the room like he had a right to be a part of my life whenever he wanted, and maybe he did.

“*Piti*, want to go for some ice cream?”

I smiled and walked out of the room where he waited for me with a pink rose.

“Roses for my secret *bruja*.”

“Not such a secret anymore, all of La Vega knows I’m. Anyways. Thank you for the rose.”

“I thought it would cheer you up.”

“Cheer me up? I’m fine.”

“I had a dream of you last night. You kept crying inside a purple box. The box was sealed, but one of the sides was clear and I could see you, crying. The box had all this weird scribble around it. I sat down next to the box just to let you know I was there but you couldn’t see me.” He stopped in front of the building for a second before we continued to walk down the path to town.

“Jazz is dropping out,” I said as I held his hand in mine and looked at him with teary eyes.

“And you’re breaking up with him because you don’t believe in long distance.”

“Sometimes I hate how much you know, but other times it makes it easier.”

“If you could only let him go and never look back, but you’ll look back sooner or later.”

“It’s over, *Piti*. It’s really over, and I hate that it hurts so much,” I said as Elias wiped the tears from my face. “Did they do this to me because I don’t want to be a *bruja*? Is this their way of getting back at me? This hurts me but it changes his life. This is crazy. Was it them, *Piti*? Please tell me it wasn’t them.”

“You’ll need this.” He handed me a handkerchief. “I wish the story would end here. Just know that when you need me the most I’ll be there. So, if I don’t show up, that means there is more to come.”

“It hurts to know, doesn’t it?” I asked him as I smile.

“That is our gift and our curse. We are a blessed tragedy.” He smiled back at me as I handed him a rose pedal.

“Thank you in advance for being there for me.” I hugged him tight and gave him a soft kiss on the lips.

“I think is ice cream time.”

We walked to town to eat ice cream. I got a plain vanilla cone. As we were walking back it started pouring. The rain fell over us and my ice cream as we walked at a normal pace, inviting the rain into our world, a world that sometimes drowned us in its complexities.

The following Monday Jazz waited for me in front of the building where I had class. He stood in front of his new Q45 champagne car with his arms crossed. I saw him from a distance and was tempted to turn around but that was the only entrance.

“Luna, can we talk?”

“I have class in five minutes. Meet me afterwards, this is my last class.”

I began to walk away and felt him walk behind me. When I turned around he was bending down pretending to pick something from the ground.

“What are you doing?”

“Picking up the pieces of my heart.”

“You’re so silly.” I smiled.

“Luna, I love you, remember that.”

I walked away without looking back. I didn’t want him to see the water that was accumulating in my eyes.

A dream of fear

Summer 2000

I was walking down a path made of sand. On the right hand side was a river with beautiful dark blue still water. On the left hand side was a brick wall that extended far into the sea. I walked closer to the brick wall because I didn't know how to swim. I could hear the waves of the ocean hitting the sand. Suddenly the brick wall began to move, pushing me towards the river. I looked to the sides in desperation, running as fast as I could, to reach the beach. But the brick wall closed in on me. It pushed me two inches away from the river. The most minimal movement would have made me fall into its depth. It could have been five feet deep but it could have been ten feet deep. One never knew the deepness of a river until one hit the bottom.

I closed my eyes hoping I could wake up but opened them to find myself in the same place, standing against the brick wall. Suddenly, a ripple began to spread throughout the water. A mysterious man emerged from the water on a white horse. He extended his hand to me but I was too scared to move.

“Don't be scare Luna, grab my hand.”

I thought about it but my fear of drowning was too great. I didn't know that man and although I felt like I could trust him part of me was too frightened to move. The horse legs stood balanced on top of the calm water, as if its weight were as light as a leaf.

“If you don't learn to swim, you will drown.”

Before I could say anything or ask him what he meant, the brick wall disappeared, and I felt my body falling backwards in slow motion into a pool. His image vanished as my body hit

the water and I saw myself falling to the bottom of an eight feet pool. At the floor of the pool was a dark brown closed casket. The pool had lights made of gold that stemmed from the walls and made me squint. I tried to move my body upwards to the top, but I couldn't move. I sat down, unsure of what or who was inside the casket. As the casket began to open slowly I closed my eyes tightly and refused to open them. A voice kept whispering, "Open your eyes Luna, open your eyes," but I refused to obey.

Summer 2000

The Spring semester finished, and I gave Jazz the news in his new car. A car which he said he bought with the money of the Acura he sold and some savings he had. It was over. I remember hearing the screeching tires as he sped away after I closed the door behind me. He was hurt and disappointed and there was nothing I could do about it. I was hurt and confused and unsure of the decision I had made. We promised to stay friends but I knew that it would be too big of a challenge for me.

That Summer I went home and went out with friends but refused to date anyone. He left me a voicemail for my birthday in June but I postponed calling him back. Before I knew it the weeks had passed me by and I was too embarrassed to call back and say thank you. I was constantly tormented with the thought that something could happen to him or that he could think that I was a jerk or an idiot. I didn't think I was, but then again I didn't think I was pale neither.

Most of my days were spent hanging out with friends, drinking, and dancing. The spirits had left me alone. I started to believe that maybe they had gone away. Punished me by removing Jazz from my life and left me to suffer the loss of my first love, or maybe Grandpa had finally managed to get Grandma to remove all the magic from me, at least most of it. I still had the dreams every time I closed my eyes and I still saw people's lives in the corner of their eyes, in their shadows, in the figures that danced in their skin, the water, the walls, the skies, the trees, clothing, and everything around us. Sometimes I wondered how other people couldn't see these figures, they were there, telling us what was going on and what was to come. They didn't disappear. They were always there, guiding us silently, begging us to pay attention. They were like a language that had their own alphabet. At an early age, I became scared of the dark, maybe

because when I couldn't see their message, I felt lost. I slept with my eyes partly opened. I use to tell Josef that it was so that my subconscious and consciousness could meet halfway.

At times I was scared of speaking with *Nana* for fear that the spirits would hear me. I didn't want them to come back to hurt me or learn my deepest secrets and feelings and use it against me. But sometimes the feeling that they knew everything about me evaded me. I felt them in my laughter and the sadness of my loneliness. I didn't quite understand the role of saints in *Nana's* kingdom. And I don't think I will ever understand. I just knew they existed. They were real, selfish, powerful, and had impacted my life in a way that made me resent them, fear them, and respect them.

Although I was starting to learn to respect the world of magic, I still refused to obey it. I acknowledged that it existed but not that it lived within me. The day I picked up the phone to call Jazz to wish him a happy birthday in August, I ignored the figures reflected on the wall by the phone. They were so tiny that they looked like stains of water on the wall. But I could still see my face and Jazz face clearly. In the middle of us was *San Gregorio Hernandez*. His arms were stretched on both sides, holding Jazz by his heart on one end and me on the other end. *San Gregorio Hernandez* head was cast down. I looked at it closely to make sure I was not misinterpreting the image or the message, but I still called Jazz. Perhaps that's why he had his head down, because he knew all along that I would call, and I wondered at that moment if *San Gregorio* had given up on me too soon.

As the phone rang I prayed that it went straight to voicemail, but I wasn't that lucky. He picked up after the third ring. His voice was cheerful as always.

"Hello."

"Hey you, happy birthday."

“Luna!”

“Yup. I just called to wish you a happy birthday, may you get all that your heart desires.”

“Thank you, pretzel. How have you been?”

“I’ve been good, enjoying the last of the summer and getting ready for school. What about you?” I asked.

“I’ve been good, working seven days a week and staying focused, and missing you every day. I miss you Luna.”

“Can I see you this coming weekend? Just for a few minutes. It can be in a public place during the daytime. No finger sucking.”

“I don’t know if that’s a good idea.”

“Just a quick drink or bite.”

“Okay, I can’t stay long though.”

“Saturday at 3pm. We can meet by Central Park and go grab something to eat.”

“Okay. See you then.”

I hung up the phone, excited to see him but after ten minutes I was a wreck. What had I done? I asked myself repeatedly. Seeing Jazz was not going to solve anything, it would only make things worse, especially with everything that was going on. But it was too late. I couldn’t back out on my word so I had no choice but to deal with the consequences of my bad decisions. Besides, I missed him and wanted to see him.

I didn’t tell Josef about it for fear that she would advise me against it. That morning when she invited me to the \$3 movie theater I lied and said I had to run errands, but I agreed to meet her later that evening. I must have changed my clothing five times. In the end, as Mom would say, I picked the ugliest outfit. A plain white button down shirt with the sleeves rolled up,

tight blue jeans and beige flat sandals. I seriously dressed as if I was going to the park. Not that it would have changed anything, but I wanted him to have a pretty last image of me.

I took the number one train from Harlem to the upper west side. The train was mostly empty, but I still made sure my eyes were closed during the train ride to avoid any revelations through the window, the floor, the seats, or other people's eyes or clothing. I didn't want to know what I was doing. I wanted to be normal and make irrational decisions based on facts that were not always cleared and always left room for mistakes. I wanted to live without seeing the consequences of my acts, before I acted. I wanted those consequences to come later, like everyone else. An aunt that witnessed my transformations while I was in the Dominican Republic once told me, "You're so blessed." I was furious at her ignorance and told her, "Try living with pain for a lifetime and soon you'll wish for oblivion."

I opened my eyes to make sure I didn't miss my stop. As I waited for the train to get to the next stop I noticed my reflection on the window; my long and narrow face, my hair was out and hung below my shoulders, and the shadow of a man sitting next to me with his head down. There was nobody sitting next to me. I panicked for a second unsure of what to do or what to think, but smiled at the question answered, they knew everything about me, even the things I never said but always felt. I closed my eyes again as I got lost in my thought about the analogy of making lemonade when we get lemons. I was trying to make lemonade but had no glass to put it in. I concluded that I'll use the lemons to heal the wounds with its bitter juice.

I got off the train four stops later as I walked at a slower pace. He would be waiting for me in front of the train station. Part of me wanted *San Gregorio Hernandez* to appear before me and just boldly tell me, "Dummy, turn your ass back, this is why," or "This is the story. Trust

us.” Instead, all I got was, “We won’t tell you why, just do as we say.” I walked up the stairs as I told myself, the only way to know the story is to live it.

He was wearing a red polo shirt, blue jeans, and white Nikes that were so white that you could tell they had just been taken out of the shoe box. His curly hair was perfectly in place with a nice shape up. I kept asking myself, how did I ever become attracted to a GQ type of guy? His smile always had a way of relaxing me, letting me know that everything was going to be okay. When Jazz saw me, he walked towards me in a rush, lifting me off the ground as he hugged me and whispered in my ears how much he missed me. And for the first time I admitted to myself that he gave my heart a joy that I had never known before.

We grabbed some ice cream and walked towards the park to one of the benches. I noticed the lovers passing by as they held hand, the children running ahead of their parents, the old man reading the newspaper as he sat alone, the two old ladies laughing, and a group of young guys rollerblading with their shirts hanging over their shoulder. We caught up. There was not much happening other than him working at the stationary store seven days a week and me going out every week with friends. The conversation I was trying so hard to avoid was finally brought up.

“Luna, I know you don’t believe in long distance. But you didn’t even give us a chance.”

“It’s not going to work, Jazz.”

“Why not? It’s only a two hour drive and I have a car.”

“A very nice car. Where did you get all this money to buy a BMW?”

“I have a friend that sells cars and gives me good deals. Besides, I need to have a nice car if I’m going to start my own car dealership.” I gave him the raised eyebrow look.

“So, back to us,” Jazz said as he held my hand in his.

“I leave for Spain in two weeks. I’m studying abroad for five months. It won’t work. I’ll be in another continent.”

“When did you?” His hands slipped out of mine. He was speechless.

“I applied in March. I didn’t think I was going to get accepted. I got the acceptance letter two days before you told me you were leaving school. I wasn’t going to go, but then we broke up and I thought it would be a good experience.”

“You’re going with Josef?”

“I’m going by myself. Josef is going to France.”

“Congratulations Pretzel, that’s great for you!”

“Thank you.”

“I’ll wait for you. Five months will fly by and you’ll be back. Please give us another chance. I need you in my life.”

“Jazz.”

“I know is a six hour difference, but feel my heart. I love you Luna. I want to be with you.”

“I. I don’t know what to say.”

“Say you’ll think about it.”

“I’ll think about it.”

We sat in silence, holding hands, watching life pass us by together. I leaned my head into his shoulder as he kissed my forehead. And I thought, somewhere, in another part of the world or in that very same park, two lovers were holding hands, afraid to say goodbye for fear that hello will never meet them again. He walked me to the train, gave me a soft kiss on the lips, and made me promise that we would meet at the same time and same place the following week.

I met with Josef later that evening and had no choice but to tell her the truth. I was horrible at lying and she kept pushing the idea of us going to the beach the following Saturday. She was pissed to say the least.

“What the fuck! I told you not to call him for his birthday. I told you. But no. You don’t listen to me. Now, you’re seeing him again.”

“He knows I’m going to Spain. I’m still going to go.”

“Damn right, you’re going to go, even if I have to drag you to the airport.”

“I didn’t know I had two mothers.”

“We promised, Luna. We promised we will never stop doing what we needed to do for stupid boys. You promised!”

“I’m still going to go abroad and have the time of my life all by myself. I just needed to see him its all.”

“So, what’s he saying?”

“The same, he wants to get back with me, he’ll wait, give us another chance.”

“And?”

“I told him I will think about it.”

“Is he still working at the card store?” Josef asked sarcastically.

“Yes. He also has a new car, BMW.”

“How did he pull that one off? Is he doing something illegal?”

“I don’t think so. He sold the other car and had some savings. He also said he has a friend that sells them to him at a lower rate.”

“Yeah right, them shits are probably stolen. Don’t get in the car with him. Next thing you know I’ll be bailing you out of jail.”

“You and your hyperbole woman, another thing, I’m thinking of losing my virginity to him before I leave for Spain.” Josef touches my forehead with her hand and shakes me by the shoulder.

“Get out of there. Leave my cousin alone. There is a stupid spirit inside of you, right? Please tell me that’s what it is. Are you listening to yourself Luna, he works in a card store, is driving fancy cars that can possibly be stolen, and you want to loose your virginity to him.”

“I know it doesn’t make sense but is what I want to do. I want him to be my first, even if it doesn’t work out.”

“Oh child, I need to pray for you.”

“Whatever. Anyways, I’ve already made up my mind.”

“Fine, Luna. Suit yourself. Don’t come complaining to me when all he can bring home is a thank you card.”

“Whatever.”

Summer 2000

It was a normal Saturday Summer afternoon, nothing special or strange about it. I had confirmed my afternoon date with Jazz earlier that morning. Before I called, I looked at the wall to see if I saw a message, but it was plain, there were no warnings or happy endings. I looked for signs in the streets, people, and objects but there was nothing there. It was as if the earth had swallowed the shapes and spirits that day or as if my eyes had been covered with the void that blinded other human beings. And for the first time, I felt confused, like a person who had seen her whole life and had suddenly lost her sight. I had not dreamt for the past three nights and was starting to feel incomplete, like part of me was missing. All my life, I prayed for normalcy, and when I got it, I felt absent, an outsider to my self.

I closed my eyes in an attempt to say a silent prayer, but opened them when I realized I wasn't sure what to pray for. I didn't want the *gift* back but I didn't want to feel empty and misplaced. And for the first time, I asked myself, who would I be without magic? How would life be without the dreams, the messages, and the spirits? I wasn't sure if they were trying to punish me or were simply granting my wish. And if they had, what did it mean.

I got off the train distracted. Scared of the decision I was about to make, but terrified that for the first time I didn't know what awaited me. I was so troubled that I walked past Jazz and didn't notice him. He called my name a few times before I could focus on where I was and why I was there.

“Are you okay, pretzel?” he asked concerned.

“Yeah, just sleep walking for practice.”

“Silly face.” Jazz gave me a hug and a kiss.

We walked to the park as we did the previous time. He sat on the bench next to me, holding my hand.

“I got you a little something.”

Jazz pulled out a white envelope from his back pocket. I opened it to find a beautiful card. I thought of Josef’s sarcastic remark about him getting me thank you cards when times got difficult. I was sure she was going to appreciate my first card and would have more mean remarks to make. But all I saw was a beautiful card, with a little girl holding a magic wand in her hand as stars sprinkled throughout the card, and read, “I wish you love, I wish you joy, I wish you magic, I wish you were mine.” And I thought in that instant, of all the cards in the store, he chose the one that wishes me magic. I gave him a hug and a kiss, “Thank you. I love it, is a beautiful card.”

“Can I drive you to the airport next week?”

“My Mom is driving me.”

“Can I come?”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Why, you don’t want her to meet your Black boyfriend?”

“No, it’s not that, and who even said I was your girlfriend?”

“You never stop being my girl Luna. So, when do I get to meet your family?”

“When do I get to meet yours?”

“My parents know all about you. Have you even told your Mom about me?”

“I will, I just need time. When I get back?”

“Okay.” He kissed me gently on the lips.

“Will I see you before you leave?”

“I leave on Sunday. I can see you next Thursday. That works for you?” I asked unsure of how to bring the sex thing up.

“Of course it does.”

“So, I’ve been thinking a lot. And, I’ve decided that I want to lose my virginity to you before I leave. I don’t want.” Jazz interrupts me.

Jazz interrupts me. “Babe, you don’t have to do this, I’ll wait for you.”

“I wasn’t finished. I’m not doing this because I want you to wait for me, or hope that you’ll marry me someday. I’m doing it because regardless of what happens between us, I want you to be the first man I’m intimate with. I want to give you that part of me.”

“I love you.” He kissed me tenderly as he held my face with both his hands.

“No promises, just the moment,” I repeated.

“Just the moment plus a lifetime,” he said as he kissed me again.

I had all sort of daydreams of my first time with Jazz, some were beautiful and others were frightening. I feared the pain, the embarrassment of being fully naked in front of him, the not knowing what to do or what to expect. But I had made a decision and I was determined to go through with it. He picked me up in his black BMW that afternoon and we drove for forty minutes to a hotel in New Jersey. The hotel was not a five star hotel but it was nice enough, I guess. I had not been to many hotels. It had a Jacuzzi in the room, a big bed, and a dresser with a bright flowery comforter. Jazz turned on the radio and served us a glass of liquor. He barely drank when I first met him. It wasn’t until he started hanging out with me that he started to drink every weekend, which made me feel like a bad influence on him.

We took a sip of the liquor and danced to some R&B music, I think it was one of Monica’s songs. I was so nervous I had trouble remembering the details. I remember having

thoughts of Mom walking through the door and beating me like I was five years old with her shoes, belt, or the lamp on top of the dresser. I pictured myself living alone in a small room, seven months pregnant, on welfare, with no friends or family, and Josef telling me every day of my life, “I told you so.” Anything frightening that could have crossed my mind, took a stroll through my thoughts that day.

I didn’t notice when the lights went off and how we landed on the bed. My shoes, shirt, and bras were off. Jazz was undoing the zipper to my pants as he kissed me fervently. The roughness of the jeans gave me goose bumps as he pulled them off. His naked and lean body was on top of my naked body. He didn’t touch me down there that day. He got on top of me, gave me a kiss on the lips, as I felt his penis gently go into my vagina. I felt a small rupture, like the thread that becomes loose in a worn out dress. Every stroke was painful. He was gentle and kept asking me if I was okay but I just wanted it to be over. I wasn’t sure if it was supposed to feel painful and uncomfortable, but it did. There were no rose pedals on the bed, greatest love confession of all times, or promises like in the romantic movies. All there was, was Jazz and me giving into each other for the first time and maybe the last.

Once he let out an aggressive moan, I assumed he was done, and he was. He got off me and lay next to me in bed. A smile spread from cheek to cheek. I wasn’t sure if I should smile or cry. I was just there. He brought me close to his chest and gave me a kiss on the forehead, “You’re okay?”

“Yeah, I’m okay.”

I didn’t want to talk about what had happened, didn’t really see the point. It happened and that was it. We fell asleep for 45 minutes holding each other. I woke up first and got dressed.

“Hey, I have to go, it’s getting late.”

“Okay,” he said as he pulled me towards him to kiss me.

“I’m going to wait for you Luna. Promise you’ll call.”

“I won’t promise, but I’ll call you.”

I sat on the bed as I waited for Jazz to get dressed. I noticed the stain of blood on the white sheets and tried to cover it, but Jazz caught me. He walked over and sat next to me.

“I hear it’s normal, most virgins bleed their first time. You don’t have to be ashamed.”

“I heard that too. I didn’t know it was true.”

We turned off the lights and left the hotel room holding hands. He dropped me off by Central Park where I took the train home.

“I love you very much,” Jazz told me as we said goodbye.

“I love you too. Bye.” I waved as I disappeared into the underground subway train station.

Europe – August - Fall 2000

I left for Spain a day before Josef left for France. She drove me to the airport with Mom. I didn't shed one tear in front of them, but as soon as I sat on that plane, I cried. I cried for the family and friends I was leaving behind, for fear that I would never see Jazz again, for fear of loneliness, for the excitement of being on my own and far away from everything I knew. I hoped deep down in my heart that all the magic would get lost and disappear with the distance. I wished that the spirits would become weary by the trip and would vanish into one of the many clouds, leaving me alone, to live a life of adventure. I was both scared and thrilled to get to know who I really was, or maybe, to get away from whom I really was. After an hour and a half of crying I opened the mini window and was amazed by the vagueness and beauty of the skies. I remember closing my eyes and asking *Nana*, "Just once, give me a new life, even if only for four months." I had another five and a half hours left of flight. During that time I read, listened to music, and looked out the window.

As I stared out the window, I wondered, why I was born a *bruja*. Bella wasn't my real grandmother and Mom wasn't a *bruja* and neither was Luron. It didn't make sense. The plainness of the clouds was breathtaking. I took a deep breath as I repeated to myself, "I am free."

I closed my eyes. As I drifted into a deep sleep, I saw the reflection of a shadow lift my body from the chair on the plane. I tried to scream but I couldn't. The women next to me tapped me on the shoulder to wake me up but all I could feel was the sharpness of my own nails penetrating my arm, attempting to bring me back to reality. I woke up terrified. The lady gave me a glass of water and told me, "Seems like you were having a nightmare." Distracted by what

I saw, I couldn't find the words to say thank you. I sat quietly, with my eyes focused on the window one more time, determined to stay awake. Afraid of what awaited me across the ocean. I didn't know anyone on that side of the world and the thought of not having anyone there who could understand me or help me frightened me. I had not stopped to think of what would happen if I got 'sick' in Spain. Grandma tried to warn me but I refused to listen. I was tired of feeling caged. All of a sudden, her words and Elias words kept playing in my head, "You can't runaway from who you are. You can't hide from them." Nobody would know the difference between them and me. Suddenly the feeling of freedom that excited me so much transformed to one of captivity. I put on my headphones and tried to play some upbeat Spanish music to distract me from my thoughts, but the beating of my heart ignored the rhythm of the guitar and continued to beat faster than usual.

Two hours later, I got off the plane, and grabbed my two big suitcases. Cassandra, the University guide who was scheduled to pick me up at the airport and drop me off at a hotel for the evening, had not arrived. I sat down at the airport for an hour and a half, too exhausted to be frustrated. Instead, I listened in amazement to the thick Spanish accent that I had admired since I was a little girl. They didn't speak really fast or forget to pronounce syllables. This was a rhythmic Spanish, one that was gentle, soft, and inviting. The women and young girls wore elegant shoes and purses. And before long I felt out of place with my jeans, sneakers, sweater, and Dominican accent.

When Cassandra arrived I was half asleep, my body laid out on two chairs as I held on to one of my suitcases, and secured my purse under my head. She recognized me because there were only two girls left in the airport and the other one had already confirmed that she was not DeLuna. Her car was so small that one of the suitcases kept hitting me in the head every time

she stopped at a red light. She apologized for half an hour for her lateness and offered to let me use her calling card to call my Mom. I had bought a \$2 calling card from the grocery store before leaving New York. But the idea that in Spain they would not accept that calling card didn't cross my mind. We stopped by a phone booth where I called Mom to let her know I got there safe. It was 10pm in Spain and 4pm in NYC. I knew Mom had not left the house all day waiting for my phone call.

“Hi Mom, I got here safe.”

“I was so worried about you,” she said.

“I'm okay, the University guide is going to take me to a hotel, and tomorrow she will show me two apartments near the University so that I can pick one.”

“Call me when you get to the hotel.”

“I can't. The lady lent me her calling card to call you. I haven't exchanged money to buy one, but I will call you first thing tomorrow, okay?”

“I love you. You take care of yourself and don't leave the hotel room until she picks you up, okay.”

“Okay Mom. Love you too. Bye.”

I pretended to be all grown when I spoke to her. But deep inside I wanted to close my eyes, open them again and be home speaking with Mom and eating a hot plate of Spanish food.

The streets of Oviedo were quiet and isolated with a hint of elegance to them. Most of the cars were small and the buildings were about four stories high.

“Thank you for letting me use your card, that was very sweet of you.”

“Oh, is my pleasure. I'm a mother too and I would have a panic attack if my child didn't call me.”

“What time would you like to meet tomorrow? Does 8am work for you?”

I couldn't help my reaction, after a seven hour flight and six hours of time difference the last thing I wanted to do was wake up at 6am. I wanted to rest and rest some more.

“10am would be better. I'm really tired and with the time difference and all I would like to get some rest.”

“Okay, 10am it is. Tomorrow, I will show you two apartments near the University, each one has three bedrooms,” she repeated, “so you will share the apartment with two other roommates. We will also go to the bank so that you can exchange money, and finally to the University where you will be taking your classes. Get some rest, because tomorrow is going to be a long day.”

“Again, thank you for all your help Cassandra, you're an Angel.”

“My pleasure. Where is your accent from?”

“I was born in New York but my parents are from the Dominican Republic. My great grandfather was from Spain.”

“That's beautiful, your last name is of Spanish descendant, that explains it. You're one of us. Welcome home!”

“Thank you.” I smiled. Finally embracing the experience I had hoped to have and excitement invaded me.

The hotel looked like one of the four story buildings, small and not glamorous. I checked in a bit suspicious of what to expect of the room. Cassandra guaranteed me that it was a safe place and that the University had been doing business with the owner for decades. She gave me a warm hug and left me by the elevator with my bags and room key. The room was simple, not too small or big, just perfect. The furniture seemed a bit outdated. The paint to the dark wood

bed frame and dresser was peeling off. There was an old fashioned wood frame chair with yellow and red fabric that appeared to belong in one of the 18th century novels I had read in High School. But for some reason its mere presence gave the room a warm and chic feeling. Perhaps because right next to it was a balcony, and when I stepped out, the energy of the town came to live with its lights and splendor, the laughter of youth, the classiness of the small shops and narrow streets. And even the cars parked halfway on top of the sidewalk appeared to have a surreal sophistication to it. I took a deep breath, the air smelled like that of fresh morning in the country side. My eyes remained closed as I attempted to capture a moment that filled me with bliss. I took a warm shower, turned on the two night lamps on top of the night stands, and left the balcony door open so that the sun could greet me with a different sun ray the following morning.

The following day I opened my eyes to a room filled with sunlight. I lay in bed staring at the balcony, energized by the beauty of a new day. I was ready and determined to conquer the world, or at least a little piece of Europe. I showered and got dressed. Before heading downstairs at 10am, I made sure my suitcases were locked and that I had all important documentation with me.

Cassandra greeted me with a smile, a hug, and a cup of very strong espresso and a *torrija*. It was my first time tasting the bread pudding topped with sugar and cinnamon. I felt like my body had received five electric shocks. My energy level was that of a 4 year old. How could they sleep a two hour siesta at noon with a morning coffee so strong accompanied by sugar? Welcome to Spain, I thought, what a delight.

Everything was great; the day, the *torrija*, and Megan, the other girl in the program Cassandra introduced me to. We drove to the bank. I had trouble believing that a bank could

possibly have such beautiful architecture. I couldn't tell you who designed it or built it, it was unlike any bank I had ever seen. But the graceful symmetry to the edges of the wall lost its appeal when the teller told me in Spanish that she could not access my bank account. We went to different ATMS in the street but my debit card kept giving me an error message. I wanted to sit down and cry. Like babies cry when they are hungry or in pain. At the top of their lungs with no regard for who is there or who it bothered. All I had on me was \$90. The other American girl that had joined Cassandra and me, Megan, wouldn't shut up with her suggestions. I was embarrassed. She probably thought, poor Latin girl, with no money in a foreign country. Most students didn't apply to that specific program because it was too independent. Once they helped you find a place to live in, you were practically on your own. And, I wouldn't be able to find a place to live in because I didn't have the money to make a deposit. I had no interest in taking pictures of the big fat lady statue or the bull statue with her in it. I wanted her to shut-up so that I could figure out how I was going to fix the bank issue. I knew I couldn't call Mom, she would have had a heart attack when she found out I had no money. I was traveling with money I had earned from a Scholarship and she had been very honest about being against studying abroad and her inability to fund any of it.

I exchanged the money I had on me and prayed to *Nana* to bless me and protect me in Spain. After I exchanged the money we proceeded to check out the two apartments. One was seven long blocks away from the University, small, with an unfriendly Spaniard girl and an older Spaniard man. The second one was a block away from the University and was with two young Spaniard guys.

“Luna, which one do you want?”

“You can have first choice. I still have to figure out this thing with the bank.”

The one with the Spaniard boys was \$200 more expensive because of the location and the size of the room. I didn't want to live with two boys but didn't have a choice as I couldn't put down the deposit that day.

"I'll take the second one and you can take the first one. If you want I can lend you the money for the deposit and when you fix the issue with the bank you can give it back to me," Megan said to me while Cassandra spoke to the second Landlord.

"That's very sweet of you, but you don't even know me. You just met me today."

"You're the only friend I've got in this country and you speak Spanish. I know where you'll live, so you'll pay me back. I have you today, you got me tomorrow. Deal?"

"I can't, but thank you for the offer."

"Luna, stop being so proud and take the apartment and you'll pay me later."

"You're a doll," I told her as I gave her a tight hug and cried.

I hated charity even if it was just a loan, especially from strangers, but I couldn't think of anything else to do. We paid our deposits and decided to move in the following day. Cassandra dropped us off at the hotel and confirmed to meet us at 9am the following day. Megan and I wondered about the streets of Oviedo, taking pictures, tasting the sweets from the cafeterias, and talking as if we had been friends forever. She stood out more than I did, with her bright blonde hair and big mouth. She tried to practice her Spanish with me and strangers, but she needed a lot of practice. Our conversations often went back to her goal of losing thirty pounds during the trip. I was already 125 pounds and didn't need to lose too much weight. She was a bit heavy but nothing alarming. I didn't care much about how she looked, but rather appreciated her liveliness and friendship.

She cheered me up after I spoke to the bank, which told me that they would work on it but that it could take a few weeks to resolve the issue. I was so frustrated I cursed at the bank lady. Megan also made jokes as I dialed to call my Mom, who immediately panicked and called all the Saints from the Catholic Church in less than one second, as she screamed at the top of her lungs, “I told you so, I told you so. Now, what are we going to do?”

“I’m fine Mom. I met a girl name Megan from Upstate NY who lent me the money for the apartment. I’ll be fine, don’t worry about me.”

“Meiguel? What kind of name is that, *gringa*? How much is the deposit?”

“It’s \$800. The bank is going to fix the problem and I’ll have access to my money in a few weeks.”

“What are you going to eat Luna, air?”

“I have a little bit of money. I’ll be fine Mom.”

“Luna, call me everyday, you hear me.”

“I’ll try, but I need to save as much money as I can until I solve this thing with the bank.”

“Luna, call me EVERY SINGLE day.”

“Okay, Mom. Love you too. Bye.”

The following day we moved into the rooms. I was starving but was afraid to buy a full meal for fear of how much it would cost. I walked to a supermarket three blocks from the apartment and bought bread with tangerines and a bar of chocolate. It was the cheapest thing I could find. I thought of calling Jazz but it was 4am in NY. I missed Josef and wanted to call her but she was already in France with no access to a telephone. Megan and I didn’t have access to a computer yet to check or send emails.

I went back to the room and unpacked all my clothing into one big closet and placed the two suitcases under the bed. The room was small but very bright, with European ash wood furniture, and a smaller than usual twin size bed. On the night stand next to the bed I placed my bible, three books, and the card Jazz gave me of the little girl holding the magic wand. On the book shelf with drawers, standing near the end of the bed, I placed a picture of me and Mom, one of me and Josef, and the statue Mom bought me of *San Gregorio Hernandez*. I was angry when she gave it to me. Furious. I tried to leave it in NY but Mom managed to pack it in my suitcase. She kept saying, “He will protect you.” I was tempted to place the statue on the floor behind the book shelf so that nobody could see it, but Grandma always said it made them upset when you hid them from the public. I wasn’t sure why Mom did that, she knew how I felt about all the magic business. I looked at the statue for a few seconds wondering if it held any power or if it was just a male figure made of bronze wearing a black suit and black hat.

When I was seventeen, Grandma offered to give me a statue of *San Gregorio Hernandez*.

“No thank you, Grandma.”

“Luna, it is very offensive to them when you reject them or deny them. I take the offer back, but never reject a gift like that because you will feel their rage.”

“But what if I don’t want it?”

“You accept it. But never throw it away or hide it. You wait for the right moment and give it as a gift to someone who needs it. And as long as you keep it, you take care of it, by putting a glass of water, a rose, and/or lighting a candle. You understand me?”

“Yes,” I told her that day.

I reflected on that conversation as I made the bed with my baby blue comforter and sat on it relieved to be finished. As I grabbed my journal to write about my experience in Spain, I

heard a knock on the door to my room. I was surprised. I had not had a chance to formerly introduce myself to my roommates.

“A girl by the name of Megan is looking for you,” my female roommate said as she walked away.

“I’ll be outside shortly. Thank you.”

Before walking out of the room, I grabbed the statue of *San Gregorio Hernandez* and hid it in one of the drawers. I didn’t want Megan to ask me about it or to think I was weird.

“OMG, you’re so freaking neat, it’s ridiculous.”

“No I’m not.”

“Look at your closet, neat freak.” She closed the closet door.

“Want to go grab an early dinner? my treat.”

“Yes, but no treating.” I grabbed a sweater in case it got cold.

“Home girl, you’re broke until further notice, my treat. You can treat me when I run out of money.”

“Where are we going anyways?”

“My roommates said there is a Chinese restaurant around here, let’s go find it.”

“Cool.”

It was the first time I heard an Asian person speak Spanish, fluent Spanish. They sounded like Spaniards. I asked of their origin and it turned out that they had migrated decades ago and were natives of Spain. I was fascinated by this discovery. The food tasted as good as the Chinese food in NYC. I thought to myself, how great of them to keep pieces of their culture alive in any part of the world. Megan and I laughed and cheered to a fabulous time in Spain. And it was already a great time. I had discovered that Asians lived in Spain and had found a

great friend, who happened to be White. In Spain, it didn't mean as much as it did in America, but for me it was different. Grandpa would have loved to know I was hanging out with a White person. He may have even encouraged me to see if she had a brother or friend she could introduce me to. Luckily he didn't have my number and I had plenty of time to call him.

That evening before heading back to the house, I stopped by a pay phone to call Jazz. I called him at work. I knew that it was 5pm in NY, although it was 11pm in Spain. The streets were quiet and secluded. I looked to the sides every 20 seconds to make sure that nobody suspicious was approaching me.

"Hello, with Jazz please." I said hoping he would answer.

"Hey you, I've missed you."

"I've miss you too. How are you?"

"Worried, I haven't heard from you in three days and have no way of reaching you."

"I know, sorry. I don't have a cell phone yet. But I'll call you every day. I found an apartment. Write down the address in case you want to write me."

"I'm going to write you a four page love letter. Do you have a cell phone yet?"

"I'll be waiting for your letter. And no cell phone yet."

"I can't stay long, but I miss you and will call you soon."

"Call me tomorrow, okay. Blow me a kiss," Jazz said teasing me.

I blew two kisses and hung up the phone with a big smile.

I couldn't get a cell phone because first I had to solve the bank issue but part of me didn't want to. I was afraid that nobody would call because nobody missed me. That would have been too painful to deal with and in that instant I decided that I wouldn't get a cell phone and would

just call family, friends, and Jazz myself. I considered telling Jazz about my financial restraints but was afraid that he would react like Luron did when I told him I was going to study abroad.

“Luna, I don’t have any money, I cannot give you a dime for a luxurious trip,” he told me that summer day.

“I didn’t ask you to. You’ve never given me anything. I wouldn’t expect you to do so now. Bye, I have to go.”

I knew he had the money. He always did, but never for me. It angered me that he would assume that I would ever ask him for anything. He had never been there and I had stopped longing for his presence. I spoke to him as an acquaintance but had no interest in treating him as a father. So much so, that I didn’t speak to him for the rest of the summer or prior to leaving for Spain. I knew Jazz wasn’t Luron, but what I didn’t know was if he was like him. Unwilling to take the risk, I saved myself the embarrassment of getting a similar reaction from Jazz. He said he loved me but so did Luron. Instead, I replayed the conversation with Jazz in my head and smiled every time he asked me to blow him a kiss.

I got home and stopped by the living room to formally introduce myself to my roommates. Sofia and Alberto were very nice. We watched a Spanish show that took me by surprise. On the upper right hand corner of the screen, was a nude couple, having sex as the host of the talk show spoke about some random topic I couldn’t focus on. Both Sofia and Alberto seemed to be very comfortable with this. I had heard of pornography but had never seen it.

“Is this show about sex?” I asked confused.

“No. Why?” Sofia asked. “Oh, the screen. Spaniards are very open minded. Sex is not a taboo like in the U.S.”

I had nothing to say, I had just had sex for the first time a week earlier. And I got to thinking about that, friends used to tell me that once I had sex I would miss it and would want it all the time. But that wasn't the case. I had forgotten I had sex until I saw the couple going about their business on the screen. They seemed to be enjoying themselves and she was on top of him as he held her by the waist. I hadn't done that yet. There is probably tons of stuff I haven't done yet, I thought to myself that evening. Then I got to thinking about the comment Sofia made, that Americans were closed minded. I had always heard Mom say that American women were too liberal.

“You think? I've always heard Americans are very liberal with their sexuality.”

“American women have the reputation of being open to anything and sleeping around, but the society as a whole is not open to discussing sex and sexuality for both female and male with the general public.”

“I guess you're right, we definitely don't have any popular television networks broadcasting two people having sex.”

“Welcome to Spain.”

“Welcome to Spain,” I repeated as I watched the remainder of the show and made small talk with Sofia and Alberto.

Sofia was the daughter of the landlord, who lived across the hall and Alberto was originally from Madrid but was in Oviedo working on a project. She was 18, had a boyfriend who stayed over most of the weekends, and her Mother was okay with that. And I remember thinking, what kind of planet have I been living on? Mom would cut me to pieces if she found out I had slept with Jazz or if he tried to take a nap in our house with or without her there. Alberto was 33, had a girlfriend he spoke fondly about, and still lived with his parents back in

Madrid. Okay, I was really confused. Spaniards honored everything I was brought up against. My Mom expected me to be on my own and start my life, meaning marriage and kids, by the age of 22. Anything after that made me a spinster. And here was a man who was 33 and still living with his parents and he was proud of it. Most women won't even date a man that is still living with his parents past the age of 25 in the United States.

That evening as I lay in bed exhausted, for the first time, I appreciated the value of traveling and the meaning of culture. Each culture was different; each celebrated and condemned different things. I wondered what parts of me had been imposed by culture? Which ones were American and which ones were Dominican. The one I knew was definitely Dominican was magic, for Americans knew about it through the content of its books and believed it to be entertaining, but nothing more than that.

The weeks passed by quickly. I managed to fix my bank issue 5 weeks after the matter. I spoke to Mom and Jazz every other day, but was let down every time I checked the mailbox and didn't find a letter from Jazz. I went three days without calling him and when I spoke with him, he didn't acknowledge he had not heard from me, it was business as usual, and that disappointed me too. For the first time, I wondered if he really loved me or if everything he had done and said was just an entourage of bullshit to get into my pants.

On the other hand, I had managed to lose 15 pounds with Megan's help, who had adopted me and made sure to buy enough food for both of us. She was serious about her diet and ate a can of tuna in water or grilled chicken with salad almost every day. I had no choice but to be grateful for the free dietary food that kept me alive during those weeks. The women signed us up for the gym and I had to stop going because my size 2 pants were dancing tango on my waist. My mother would have thrown a celebration party if she saw how thin I was and Jazz would

have probably dumped me. But me, I was happy, I had never been so small before and it felt good, but I had no interest in losing more. What was falling apart, with no pity for my image, was my hair. I had been washing my hair every other day and every morning it shouted at me in its silent voice, “I hate you!” Poor thing was wrapped in a bun like it was a sin. When I was finally able to use my bank card, the first thing I did was go to a beauty parlor two blocks from the University. I had the same fear most color women would had in my position. Will they know how to do my hair? It was a process and a craft that was not easily perfected, especially if your hair was not the type you dry with a towel. My hair had to be washed, hair treatment needed to be applied for fifteen minutes under the dryer, rinsed, roller sets and under the dryer for an hour and blow dried by a crafty and strong hand that could bring the natural growth down, which usually took another half an hour. And my fear came to life. The stylist washed my hair, literally put five rollers in my hair instead of sixteen, and after fifteen minutes under the dryer she took me out, blew out my ends and gave me a big smile as she said, “Beautiful, you’re done!” I looked around for a sign that read, salon express. I laughed at myself the whole way to Megan’s house and than we laughed together.

“Dude, your hair looks like a hat.”

“Really, I thought it looked like a dry sponge.”

“You should have seen how proud she was of herself when she was done. Beautiful! Beautiful!”

“Let me take a picture of you. This is classic.”

“OMG, it looks worse in the picture. At least is clean and dry.”

To add to my joy, I loved the Spanish literature courses; with the exception of grammar because the professor insisted that I was spelling my last name wrong. She deducted five points

from my papers for every assignment and I willingly gave them up as I refused to place the stupid accent over the 'e'. Otherwise, reading and learning about Pablo Neruda, Garcia Lorca, Miguel Cervantes, and Gabriel Garcia Marquez was something I looked forward to every day.

I recall the first time I walked into my poetry course. I was intimidated and terrified. I had been placed in an advance course and was in a class filled with Europeans, mostly Spaniards. Spanish was my first language but I knew nothing about poetry, literature, grammar, or accents. The professor was a thin, tall, blonde woman that dressed very elegantly. She wrote her name on the board and asked us to introduce ourselves and to name our favorite poet.

“Hi, I’m Luna. I’m a third year student studying abroad. This is my first time in Spain.”

“And your favorite poet, Luna?” the professor asked.

“Pablo Neruda.”

“Welcome.”

The rest of the students introduced themselves. I discovered that day that I was poetry illiterate. I knew nothing about poetry, other than the poetry I had written.

“Do you know who wrote this poem?” The professor asked as she wrote the title on the board.

“*Caminante no hay camino.*”

“Pablo Neruda a guy said.”

“No, anyone else?”

“Antonio Machado,” a girl sitting in the back row said shyly.

“Very good! What do you think he meant by, *caminante, son tus huellas el camino y nada mas; caminante, no hay camino, se hace camino al andar.*”

She repeated the phrase twice at a slower pace. I thought about the complexity and tried to translate it to English in my head with the hopes of finding an answer; *walking there is no road, road is made by walking*. I had no idea what that meant. The students raised their hands as they made an attempt to give a proper analysis.

“The only road that exists is that which we walk on,” I said.

“Very close.”

That instant I felt in love with poetry. I learned that each verse was a world of its own and poets were simplistic human beings that told stories with few words. Before I could raise my hand again the bell rang and the professor announced, “I will share the answer with you next week.”

“How was class?” Megan asked me as she waited outside for me.

“I loved it! You?”

“*Joder Tia*, I only understood four words during that hour, and two of them were my first and last name.”

“Let’s go grab a drink.”

“Si,” Megan said feeling accomplished.

After drinks that evening I opened the mailbox hopeful to find my four page letter from Jazz. But all I found was an empty square.

During the first five weeks, Megan and I had managed to visit two small towns, Salamanca and Zaragosa. She paid for it of course but with the agreement that I would cover the next two trips. We were inseparable and had a blast together. I was the queen of drinking anything and everything and she was the queen of making out with random strangers in bars. We were two wild friends having the time of our lives. I missed Josef and emailed with her every

week but it was nice to make new friends and to feel free to do as I pleased without being judged.

Dream of Punishment

Europe - October 2000

I was inside a building with high ceilings and big glass windows. The ceiling was so high that I found myself squinting in an attempt to find the end of it. But all I saw was the reflection of the sun shining through the glass windows at the top. There didn't seem to be any walls, but rather glass windows surrounding the open space. I looked down slowly, afraid that I was standing on glass, and soon realized that I was standing on white marble floor. The place was empty, but held an aura of beauty and peace, which gave me the confidence to walk towards one of the windows. The view was breathtaking, a setting sun of pink, purple, and blue skies with a bridge in the distance, similar to that of the San Diego bridge. I smiled as I saw the clouds pass by and caressed the glass to the windows without leaving a trace.

I looked around again and saw no doors. Unsure of what to do, I walked back to the center of the room where I had originally been, and sat down Indian style. Unexpectedly, the marble floor beneath me disappeared and I found myself falling at a fast pace through the open space. I saw the shadow of images reflected on the windows as I felt down but could hardly make them out as I was falling too fast.

My body hit the floor with impact, preventing me from getting up. As I lifted my gaze, before me was *San Gregorio Hernandez*. He was dressed in a black suit, white shirt, black gentleman hat, and a doctor's jacket over his suit. I was speechless; words were foreign at the moment. His face didn't appear as pleasant as I remembered it to be in other dreams.

"Luna, you must decide. Are you with us or without us?"

"I don't want to..." I lowered my head, unable to finish the sentence.

“You’re ashamed of who you are. Very well Luna. When you’re ready, you know how to find us.” He lifted his right hand and motioned for two men to come over.

“I...”

San Gregorio Hernandez lowered his head as each man grabbed me by an arm and dragged me towards a door that had rapidly appeared. The edges of my feet felt the coldness of the white marble floor as they dragged me. I looked back at him in desperation but he didn’t lift his head or gaze to look at me or to see the tears that filled my face. I heard the echo of my voice throughout the building shouting back at me, “Grandma please help me, Grandma, Grandma!!!”

The two tall men dressed in white walked me out of the building towards a solitary street, and released me inches away from the bridge. I felt my body hit the concrete as they walked away. By the time my head turned to look for them; the men, building, and *San Gregorio Hernandez* were nowhere to be found.

Europe - October 2000

I woke up on the edge of the twin size bed with wet cheeks and out of breath. Confused about what I had done or what had been done to me. I sat on the bed and tried to pray to *Nana* but my thoughts were too scattered and refused to form full words. I took a long shower as I replayed the dream over and over in my head, hoping to find a detail or a word that would hint that everything would be okay, but all remained the same.

In the process of locking my door and getting dressed I noticed that the statue of *San Gregorio Hernandez* was no longer on the book shelf. I looked for it behind the book shelf, inside my closet, under the bed, until I found it inside one of the drawers. Suddenly I remembered. I had placed it there a month earlier when Megan stopped by to visit me. And I never took it out. The sweat began to accumulate at the center of my palms. A smooth chill ran through the center of my stomach, prompting me to touch it. The lights flickered slightly as if its shadow had taken over for a few seconds. I sat down on the corner of my bed, hands over my head, as I sobbed.

The hours went by slowly as I waited patiently for time to pass so that I could call Grandma Bella. I tried to read poetry but got bored and refused to fall asleep for fear of what I might say or do. Instead I grabbed my journal and wrote:

Nana, I'm exhausted of being who I don't want to be. I'm tired of being me. But I'm also angry. Angry for getting a Father that abandoned me, denied me, and rejected me. For a first love that I'm not even sure loves me – he doesn't even care if I call him or not and hasn't written me once in two months. So much for me being his stars and moon. And to top it off the one I thought would always protect me (San Gregorio Hernandez), threatens to abandon me if I don't do as

they say. Is being a Bruja part of you or is this a sin I was born into? What am I supposed to do with the gift? Help people? Cure people? Dress in a big long skirt, wrap a colorful bandana over my head, light candles, and talk to spirits? Where does that fit in NYC? Spain? Where do I fit? Is that what you want me to be, an outcast? Because last time I checked Brujas were burned centuries ago, actually, not too long ago. So, what has changed? Huh? What has changed? People are still ignorant. They don't believe Nana. They think it's all a lie. So why do I have to accept something that the rest of the world rejects? I don't even know if you accept it. Do you? Do you accept it? Do you accept ALL of me as I am?

I called Grandma five times that day and three times the following day but was unable to reach her. Grandpa and the visitors that answered the phone gave me a different reason each time as to why she couldn't come to the phone.

"Abuelo, is Grandma okay?"

"Yes, she is. Just really busy with clients, call her a little later."

"You're sure she's okay? Is she mad at me?"

"Of course she's not mad at you, Luna. She's just a little busy right now. Call her back tomorrow morning."

After eight attempts, I gave up.

Europe – November 2000

Afraid of what awaited me I stopped hanging out at the bars and for the two weeks that followed I went straight home from the University. I continued to lose weight at a fast pace, eventually hitting 105 lbs. Megan tried to get me to go out but I refused to do so. One evening after class, I ran into her as I was leaving the University. She was waiting for me with flowers and chocolate.

“Oh my poor friend,” she screamed out as she gave me a tight hug, “Why didn’t you tell me you were on crack!”

“What!”

“Have you seen yourself lately? Here, take a look at yourself.” Megan handed me a mirror.

“You’re so silly. I’m not looking in that stupid mirror.”

“I brought you flowers so that we can make up, in case you’re mad at me, and chocolate, because you need to eat a lot of anything right now. Here, eat one right now!”

“I’m not mad at you crazy woman. I’ve just had some stuff in my head, that’s all.”

“You don’t have to tell me what’s going on, but I refuse to let you be depressed while in Spain. So, I bought us round trip bus tickets to Seville for the long weekend coming up, starting tomorrow.”

“You are a crazy woman.”

“We are the perfect match, a crack head and a lunatic. So, you’re down to go?”

“Yes, we can go get drunk and have the time of our lives.”

“Mama said they’ll be days like these, they’ll be days like these Mama said...”

“Let’s go get some food and drinks.”

“Okay, my treat,” I said as we hooked arm in arm and walked towards a restaurant.

The long trip from Oviedo to Seville was filled with singing, “*Mama said they’ll be days like these,*” laughing and drinking coffee with rum out of coffee thermos, starting at 8am in the morning.

“Thank you for being such a great friend!” I told Megan.

“That’s what friends are for...in the good times...and the bad times...”

And for the remainder of the trip we managed to speak by referencing songs. The Spaniards looked at us in awe. Some joined us and others turned their uplifted noses the other way. That day, I was just another obnoxious American girl disrupting the peace in a foreign country, and I loved every bit of it.

Seville was a beautiful, sunny, young city that demanded charisma and adventure. Megan had made all the arrangements, which were supposed to be a surprise, and surprised I was. We stayed at a hostel. But, at least we had our own room, which was small and simple, but clean and nice. We immediately made friends with a girl from Germany who was traveling by herself after a bad breakup. We adopted her for the weekend and promised her the time of her life. We went from bar to bar with one of my college buddies that happened to be studying abroad in south of Spain.

“You should go for it, he’s cute,” Megan told me in one of the bars when he stepped away.

“I have a boyfriend.”

“You do. Where is he? You think he’s being good? You’re young, Luna. Live!” Megan shook her shoulders and head in unison.

“He’s my friend. So, no thank you. Help yourself.”

“I’ll save him for you in case you change your mind old lady.”

At the last bar, I remember feeling an energy that filled me with confidence and euphoria. I felt sexy, young, and alive. Like I had the world at my fingertips and I could just grab it and turn it as I pleased. I danced to the rhythm of the music by myself as I entered into a trance of meditation and sensuality that made me feel present and alive. Before I knew it I found myself dancing in the middle of a circle as men and women clapped. My college buddy grabbed me by the hand and pulled me towards him. The crowd booed him and Megan smile thinking he was going to make a move on me.

“Are you okay Luna? This is not like you.”

“I’m okay.”

“I’m going to take you home, okay.”

“Megan!” He shouted at her as he held me close to him.

“Why don’t you guys stay at my house today, there is a room upstairs. You girls can sleep there and tomorrow morning we can do some sight seeing.”

“Awesome.”

I remember waking up in a strange place and wondering where I was. My college buddy, Isaac had prepared breakfast for us that morning. While Megan was in the bathroom he came over and gave me a hug.

“Were you on something last night?”

“I wasn’t on anything silly, I just had too much to drink.”

“Was I that bad?”

“No. Is just that I’ve only seen two women draw that type of attention, you and a young woman in the Dominican Republic, but she was a. Anyways, you weren’t that bad. I just wanted to make sure you were okay. Your cousin would kill me if anything happened to you while you were with me.”

“She sure will. Thanks for looking after me. I promise not to drink too much tonight.”

“It’s cool. I’ll look after you again.” Smile.

I remember walking down a narrow street with small boutique stores on each side of the path as we explored Seville. One of the boutiques was a bridal shop with the most stunning wedding gown I had ever seen on display. I stopped in front of it, observing every detail of the dress with watery eyes. I wondered if I would ever be able to wear such a splendid dress. I began to think of Jazz and if he would someday be my husband and if Grandpa would put his prejudiced ego aside and attend our wedding. But who knew what awaited me, it could go either way, I could change the world or the world could change me.

Megan, I, and the German girl walked back to the hostel to take a shower and have a change of clothes. We agreed to meet Isaac by a park near the hostel in two hours to grab lunch at one of his favorite restaurants. As we waited by a bench in the park a lady approached us. She was wearing a long green and red skirt with a red v-neck shirt, and a long red bandana around her long dark brown hair. She must have been no older than 30 years old. Her olive skin was without wrinkles and radiant. The black eyeliner and red lipstick made her look exotic, or perhaps it was the two long yellow necklaces around her neck or the six rings she was wearing with three bracelets on each wrist.

“Would you ladies care for a palm reading?” asked the young gipsy woman.

“How much?” the German girl asked.

“We’ll all do it,” Megan said excited.

The gipsy read both Megan and the German girl’s palm as I translated. When it was my turn, I kindly told her in Spanish, “*no gracias.*”

“Is okay, I won’t read your palm, but I would like to share a story with you, if that’s okay. I know you love stories.” I stared at her in silence, the girls barely spoke Spanish and she was quite persistent about telling me this story, so I agreed to listen while we waited for Isaac.

Many lives ago lived a fine-looking young woman. She had the world at her feet as she was born into fortune and beauty, and had all that any girl could ever dream of; the affection of her one true love, the loyalty and admiration of a best friend; loving, healthy, and wealthy parents; exquisite dresses; and the most luxurious parties of all times. Her life was like a dream come true. She used to wake up in complete bliss, ready for the adventures of a new day.

One sunny afternoon, her and the best friend were walking arm in arm in the park, speaking of their plans for that summer. They were both to be wed that summer, and they were secretly planning the birth of their children. They wanted to make sure they were born around the same time so that they could be best friends, just like they were. They would experience motherhood together; the laughter, the joy, and the surprises. Each one daydreamed about her wedding dress and their first time with their groom. What a treasure to be held.

As they sat down in their favorite bench, under a tree, to keep the sun from reaching their young skin, five soldiers approached them.

“Please come with us.”

“Is everything okay?” asked the best friend.

“Grab both of them,” instructed the highest ranked soldier.

“We haven’t done anything, please let us go,” she shouted as the people gathered around them.

They looked at each other, knowing that neither one had spoken of the other. Their eyes sought for answers in one another but all they found was darkness as the soldiers placed a dirty beige cloth bag over their head.

As the carriage took them to an unknown destination, she reminisced, about the first time she felt normal and truly alive. She had not always been the charming and charismatic stunning woman she had turned out to be. During her early years, up to the age of nine, she spent most of her time locked in her room, afraid to speak or be noticed by anyone. Most times she avoided her parents’ affection for fear of being discovered. There were many nights when she heard her poor mother crying on her father’s shoulder as she told him, “She hates us. Am I such a horrible mother?” The mother refused to have other children so that she could focus on her. This tormented her more. For nothing was wrong with her mother, she yearned to feel her warmth and love as much as she did.

One sunny day her mother’s best friend traveled many miles to visit her mother. She had a daughter who was two years older than her. Her mother asked that she keep the girl company while she spent time with her friend.

“Would you like to take a walk to the garden?” she asked the other pretty girl.

“Okay.”

Once they reached the garden, she had nothing to say, and stood silently, unsure of how to start a conversation. The other girl stood next to her smiling. She looked up, moving her eyes from side to side, until two oranges fell off the tree.

“Here, they’re very sweet.”

“Thank you.”

“We’ve been friends for many lives, it’s nice to see you again, I’ve missed you,” said the little girl as she peeled the orange.

“I don’t understand.”

“You always forget. Here, I’ll peel your orange, you’re horrible at it.”

“Thank you.”

“We’re soul mates. Every life we’re best friends. I can see the past and you can see the future.”

“How did you know that I can see the future?”

“Because you’ve always been able to, you knew I was coming, you just didn’t know who I was. I’m your best friend.”

“It’s a sin to practice magic,” she told her best friend that day as she took a bite of her orange.

“I know. But my secret is safe with you and yours is safe with me, Friends?”

“Friends.”

“Do you get scared?”

“Sometimes, but we don’t have to be scared anymore, we have each other now, right?”

“Yes.”

After that day they became inseparable. Once her mother saw her daughter laughing aloud for the first time she begged her dearest friend to move there with her family. She agreed to after receiving news from her husband who was to meet them there in the months to follow.

When the carriage came to a stop, they took them out, she screamed at the top of her lungs, “please don’t hurt her, please let her go.”

The dirty cloth was removed from her head. She found herself in a dark room with a three by four glass window behind her. The room was smaller than her closet and reaped of sweat, urine, and rotten food. Her left hand was cuffed to a hook located twenty inches below the window. Before her was an old woman studying every inch of her. She closed her eyes afraid to be exposed. That was the same woman who lived in a small blue house at the end of the town. She lived alone after her two sons and husband were killed in an attempt to punish her. There was rumor that she had joined forces with the army in exchange for her life. For every witch she gave up they gave her one month of life for her cooperation. She was not to leave town or practice magic, which she boldly disobeyed, or that's what they said.

"Open your eyes pretty girl," the old woman said scornfully.

"Please have mercy on me. I have nothing to do with this. Please let me go."

"Sunteti o rusine pentru noi," the old woman told her as she left the room with the soldier.

She cried as she felt the liquid running down her thighs which stained her delicate embroidered green dress.

"Nice to run into you again," she heard the old woman's voice.

She lifted her body to peak through the glass window. Her best friend stood still on her feet without moving.

"She's one of us," the old woman said disdainfully as she laughed.

"Traitor! May you be damn in every life," the best friend shouted as she spat on the old lady.

One of the soldiers instructed the other two soldiers to take care of her. They removed every item from her body until she was fully nude. The first soldier forced himself on top of her

as he penetrated her best friend and she shouted, "I dam you now and forever, that every child you father may be raped and that you may never know the true feeling of a woman again." He got off of her and kicked her repeatedly as the blood ran down her mouth and nose. Both soldiers lifted her and placed her against the wall with the window, beating her repeatedly with a leather whip as she quietly swallowed her pain. Her friend lifted her hand as she whispered, "Don't be afraid, we have each other."

As her friend fell to the floor bathed in blood and bruises, she heard a scream come from her mouth, her right hand scraping the window as she wept uncontrollably. The old woman was right, she was a disgrace.

A month later they released her. Her body walked into the big house where her parents lived, climbed the steps to her room, and lay in bed for three days without eating, drinking fluids, or sleeping. Her mother got her to shower and eat a bite or two but that was as much as she was willing to do. Time abandoned her. It stood still, staring at her, with no remorse. Fifty years passed her by, too afraid to die and not brave enough to live.

Five lives passed her by before she was able to forgive herself for being shamed by who she was, for being a coward, and for abandoning her best friend when she needed her the most. It took her that long to accept who she was. She never saw her best friend again and every day she wonders if she will ever see her again.

"That's a very sad story," I told her as her eyes got watery.

"I know your fear, is not new, it's as old as time itself."

I stood up to walk away, but she grabbed my hand.

"You don't deserve your gift. "

I walked away without saying a word, because, I didn't know what to say.

“What did she tell you Luna?” Megan asked curiously.

“Nothing, the same thing, that I’ll meet a great guy and will have three kids.”

“She was awesome.”

“Yeah, she was okay.”

That day something broke inside of me. Her words shattered a part of me that I didn’t know existed and lingered in the core of my character nostalgically. I walked, ate, laughed, drank, and danced obliviously, as if my spirit had stepped out of my body, and had abandoned me in the middle of our journey. I could feel the weight of my emptiness and constantly imagined my spirit sitting in the corner of strange rooms weeping for me and for her; wondering if I had turned to steel or if she had turned to dust.

Europe - December 2000

Finals were over, memories had been created, and foreign students were getting ready to head home for the holidays. Megan and I were ready to embark in our last adventure before parting ways. Every time we got drunk and did something outrageously crazy or funny, we promised that we would be friends forever. We lived eight hours away from each other in the U.S., had different circle of friends, and knew how hard it would be to stay in touch.

“I’m going to back pack and go to one last place before I head back to NY. I bought us tickets, my treat!”

“Portugal! You know I’ve been dying to go there.”

“You’re down?”

“And leave your skinny ass waste all those fine Portuguese man. I’m coming to save you from yourself.”

There was a reason why Portugal was known as the forgotten country. I myself didn’t remember it existed until Megan brought it up in her wish list of places to visit. We took a train there. The mesmerizing sceneries made me hope for a second that I could stay in Europe and never return to the United States. And maybe there were places like these in America, but none that I was familiar with. My America consisted of buildings filtered with drugs, a poor education system that barely had books for its students, streets filled with rats, young people’s lives ending in the dirty pavements, and lately trees, mountains, and the feeling that my America didn’t know me or understand me. Part of me wanted to build nicer memories. Maybe, get off in every stop to experience different cultures, without time rushing me and reminding me of all the pending things in my life, but just living moment to moment. But I knew that wasn’t an option.

As we were getting off the train a young man with deep blue eyes gave me a folded white paper. I tried to rush pass him but he smiled as he told me, “for you.” Megan and I walked to a corner, hoping to get out of the travelers way, who were rushing to leave the station. The paper was a sketch of me; long neck, refined long jaw, full lips, an Arabic pointy nose, expressive dark brown eyes with a bright light shining on the corner of my left eye, puffy, dark brown hair that fell below my shoulders, and the slight shadow of a second shoulder behind my left shoulder. My heart filled with emotions as I saw the longing in my eyes and wondered if that was what people saw when they looked at me. I put it away in my handbag as I listened to Megan practicing her broken Spanish with some White guy that had a professional camera hanging around his neck.

“Oh, I give up. Where do we take the train to Algarve?”

“I’m heading that way myself. We can share a cab if you ladies don’t mind.”

“Awesome,” Megan said before she saw me staring at her like she was a mad woman.

“Don’t mind the rawness, is a tough city,” he said as we walked passed a dead dog three feet outside of the train station.

Lisbon was like nothing I had ever imagined and there was probably a reason why I never imagined it. It wasn’t the prettiest city on the map. Physically it looked like one of the poorest neighborhoods in the Dominican Republic with its tin and zinc houses and a flare of one of the most dangerous neighborhoods in Harlem. I’m sure it had its nice areas, but that was all I saw when I left the station, a lasting impression that left me no desire to see it again or recommend it to my worst enemy.

We arrived at the other train station where we were taking the train to the south of Portugal, what a difference. It was chic, beautiful, and welcoming.

“Where are you staying?” Megan asked the stranger, who was obsessed with taking pictures of the rails, trees, and nothing in particular.

“Not too far from the beach and main streets. The owner is a nice lady and there are two extra rooms in the house. She is looking to rent them for the rest of the week, if you’re interested.”

“Luna, we should go check it out.”

“Awesome.”

“Have you been to south of Portugal before?” I asked him.

“Yes, plenty of times, I’ve been traveling all over Portugal for the past year.”

“Nice.”

“I’m convinced, you’re 100% lunatic. We’re going to go check out a place with a complete stranger that can kidnap us, rape us, and throw us in some random beach where nobody will ever find us, or better yet, who can sell us for \$100 each,” I told Megan as the guy walked away to use the restroom.

“Relax skinny sister. If he makes a move, it’s two of us against him.”

“Unless if he has a gang of fierce criminals waiting for us in this ‘nice house.’”

“Stop panicking, it’ll be fine.”

The house was nice and south of Portugal was beautiful. It was the perfect place to hide from the world. We shared one room in order to save money. Megan and I walked around town with our bright beach bags and big tourist hats. They had the cutest stores and restaurants. We stopped at a restaurant to eat pizza and it had to be the best pizza in the world, not too big or small, crispy with just enough cheese. After that we walked to the beach and lay like two

zombies on our towel until the sun woke us up with its insatiable heat. The water was clear beyond belief, forcing me to rub my eyes to confirm that it wasn't a dream.

After that evening, everything was a blur, with the exception of certain images that kept replaying in my head. I remembered; eating, drinking, two men playing their guitar in front of a Greek restaurant by the beach, taking pictures of Megan riding a cock statue, riding mopeds and crashing one into a random wall, a soothing boat ride, drinking four shots of Absinto, which supposedly had opium in it, people staring at me, dancing on top of a table, and the one thing I wanted to forget, kissing a Portuguese guy by the name of Frederico. Him I remembered, his eyes were a deep gray, inviting me to get lost in sin.

“Come with me to the beach. We can watch the sunrise.”

“That sounds nice.”

“Just give me this one moment.”

“I'll be back. Let me tell Megan.”

He kissed me one last time. “I'll wait for you here.”

I was tempted, to run to a beach with him and make love until the sun came up, but I didn't. I went back to find Megan and left him standing on the sidewalk waiting for me, but I never went back to him. Him I remembered because Megan took a picture of us and because he had placed his dog tag, with a smiley sun on the chain, around my neck.

“I'm proud of you *Tia*.”

“I have a headache.” I leaned my head against the window of the moving train.

“You finally kissed a boy, and man, was he fine!”

“Don't remind me. You're a bad influence on me.”

“Yeah right, he was crazy about you, and you liked him.”

“He was cute.”

“Momma said they’ll be days like these, they’ll be days like these my momma said.”

I felt horrible after I kissed him. And I wasn’t sure why. Jazz had not written and we communicated because I called him. But I didn’t want to excuse my actions because of his behavior. Part of me wanted to do things right even when it felt wrong. I constantly feared that Jazz would notice something different in me when I got back to New York. Maybe my style of kissing had been altered in some way after kissing the Portuguese guy. I spoke to him almost every day but figured I would give myself an extra day before speaking with him after kissing the Frederico guy. I didn’t tell Megan how guilty I felt. She already thought I was the most conservative young girl on the face of the earth. But through my shame there was this passive stimulation that filled me with freedom and exhilaration, inspiring me to write a brief entry in my journal.

December 2000

Hi Nana...

I don’t know what to know or what to expect, but Today, I begin to live.

Yours always, Moonlight.

When we got to Spain, the first thing I did was check the mailbox. There was no letter from Jazz. I had no idea why he never wrote. All I knew was that it hurt and I regretted not going to the beach with the guy in Portugal.

Megan and I had one last dinner and the following day parted ways as we boarded different airplanes. As the plane took off, I removed the dog tag the Portuguese guy gave me,

closed my eyes, and prepared myself to confront the life that awaited me back in the United States, starting with Jazz. He would be waiting for me at the JFK airport.

I looked out the window, knowing that there would be nobody to draw a sketch of me or notice the yearning in the corner of my eyes; a longing to keep exploring, living, being. A deep breath escaped my lungs prematurely causing me to cough. I smiled. At the chance I had given myself. Something in me changed; there was a joy and a freedom in me that lifted me in still motion. It carried me gently from darkness to light without terrifying me and I allowed myself to travel in its blurred dimensions of excitement.

I grabbed a book in my bag, *Huellas de las Literaturas*, and read in between sleep. I awakened to sentences that invited me over and over again to get lost in its world. The last short story I read before the plane landed was “Circular Ruins,” by Jorge Luis Borges. The journey took me to a forest where a man was attempting to create a human boy. This man worked tirelessly on his creation until exhaustion. I wondered through the forest with him, rested when he did, and sought solutions with him. I too was disappointed when he found out that the boy would never know that he was not truly human or the production of another’s dream. And I thought, what was the point of creating the unthinkable only to conceal its genius from the creation itself? At the end I cried at his perplexity when he discovered that he too had been but a creation of another man’s dream. I couldn’t help but wonder if I too had been the creation of someone else’s imagination.

The Spaniard pilot announced that we would be landing in twenty minutes. I put the book away, placed my bag under my chair, locked in my seat belt, and carefully removed the chain that the Portuguese guy had placed around my neck. I looked at it with amazement, accepting my adventure, and wondering if I had limited myself. Perhaps, I should have allowed

myself to get lost in the deepness of his gray eyes; allowed the sun to cover our naked bodies with its rays as the sand served as our blanket time and time again. But the moon didn't want to share me with the sun and all I was able to give was a kiss. I had found comfort in strangers and strength in solitude. Suddenly there existed a thread that linked two worlds that would never meet but that lived in a common place within me. The feelings I had for Jazz, had retreated to a quiet corner, becoming so subtle and distant that I could hardly sense it. I had imagined that suffering would consume me like it did the first time we parted ways, but all I felt was a consistent plainness that lead to nothing.

U.S. - December 2000

Time had a way of rushing through moments that were meant to happen despite its efforts to erase them. The sliding doors opened, and a crowd of people waited anxiously for their loved ones or perhaps strangers. I saw his big smile among the crowd and by the time I looked at the handle of my suitcase and lifted my head again he was lifting me off the floor into his arms as he whispered repeatedly in my ear, "I've missed you so much, pretzel."

The softness of his lips merged with mine before he put me down. I felt like a Spanish word that gets lost in an English translation and changes the entire meaning to the story. I wasn't sure if I was the Spanish word that didn't have a home in the English dictionary or if Jazz was an English word that wasn't strong enough to capture the significance of its predecessor. I heard the whispers of feelings imploding to let them surface, but I wasn't sure where they could live.

Jazz grabbed my bags and showed me to the car. He kissed me and hugged me again before opening the door. Suddenly I remembered his affection, words, and touch. How blindly I had once believed he loved me and how harsh it was every time I opened that stupid mailbox that never had his letter or how he never called Megan's cell phone to ask for me, even when three days went by and he had not heard from me. I remembered that in Spain it had all felt surreal. He had felt like a dream; distant, complicated, and blurry; his words always consistent but the actions missing. And it made me wonder what type of love it was?

"You're okay, pretzel?"

"I'm just a little tired. You got a new car?"

"Yes, I traded the BMW for this one, you like it?"

"It's very nice. It is a Mercedes. Where did you get the money to buy a car like this?"

“I told you silly, it’s for the business, Matthew and I chipped in and will be selling it during the spring. So don’t get used to it.”

“Jazz, you’re not doing anything illegal, right?”

“No, the cars all have legal paperwork. You’re hungry?”

“Yeah, just a little.”

“You look stunning.” He kissed my forehead as we stopped at a red light.

“Thank you.” I smiled and allowed his hand to hold mine as he drove.

I was starting to question where Jazz was getting all the money to buy those cars. Maybe Josef was right and he was doing something illegal. I didn’t want to push it and be judgmental but I was starting to become concern. Being away had made me question Jazz love for me. But being back made me realized how much I had missed NYC. It was such a powerful city; one that could lift anyone to the tip of glory or bury them in the darkest edges of a never ending dirt hole. And that was the irony of its beauty; that it gave us the choice to choose our path, but we got to choose, or at least we thought we could. I looked at Jazz and wondered if I had chosen him, he had chosen me, or life had chosen us?

Looking out the window a complex Dominican phrase that Grandma Bella always said came to mind, “*Cuando Malaya llegue en el caballo cansado tu sabra.*” It was something about when Malaya came back in the tired horse you will know. And I always wondered what it was that I would find out. I always worried that whoever Malaya was would come back and that the horse would be tired. It just didn’t make sense. It was one of those lessons that would tap you in the shoulder once you’ve experienced it for yourself to let you know, “This is what I mean.” I pondered on it, wondering what it meant, but came to no conclusion.

Jazz sang and dedicated me every love song that played in the radio, kissing me at every red light, and telling me how much he loved me and missed me. I reciprocated the affection, but distraction can be such a cruel enemy at times, it kept taking me from that moment to a nostalgic past or an uncertain future. Reminding me of his distance when I was in Spain, which transformed into a future filled with doubts when it came to Jazz.

Part of me was also scared. Actually terrified, that I would run into Mom and she would find out that I had arrived a day early to hang out with a boy she knew nothing about. There wouldn't be enough shoes, spoons, irons, and pots in the world to show the intensity of her wrath; they would all come collectively lashing at me until I was knocked unconscious. I would have no excuses other than I lied because I wanted to spend an evening with him, the boy she knew nothing about. The other part of me was frightened of spending the night with Jazz. I had never spent the night with a boy before. He would probably want to have sex and it had been months since we had done it that first time. It would probably be painful and uncomfortable again. I didn't know if he had condoms and was tempted to ask him but didn't know how to. I didn't want him to feel that I didn't trust him but I wanted to be safe.

We parked in front of an American Diner to grab a bite. Jazz held my hand proudly as we walked in, sitting next to me instead of in front of me. I looked him in the eyes trying to figure out if he loved me or not. I was unsure if I should believe his altruistic expressions of love or if I should build a wall so high that a million 'I love you' couldn't bring it down.

“So tell me all about Spain, all your adventures and stories.”

“I loved it!!! The culture was so different, modern yet the pace slower than NY.”

“You didn't like the food much. I know that much.”

“Funny. Definitely not the *chorisos*.”

“I hung around with Megan for the most part. I told you about her, the crazy chic from upstate NY. She was great, you would love her.”

“What about guy friends?”

“None that you need to worry about, smart ass.”

“What! I was just making sure.”

“What about you?”

“I’m not interested in any other girl. I told you I would wait for you, and I did.”

“I missed you like crazy Luna. I’m not letting you go again, not anymore.”

“I go back to school in a few weeks.”

“I know, but we’ll make it work. I promise.”

“One day at a time.”

“I’ll come see you every other weekend. It’ll be fine.”

“What would you like to order?” The waitress asked us.

“Chicken salad and mozzarella sticks.”

“You sure you don’t want a burger too? I’m teasing. I’m teasing.”

We waited for our orders as we made small talk.

”Is Josef back?”

“Yeah, she got here two days ago. She thinks I get here tomorrow.”

“You want me to drop you off at home tomorrow?”

“No, I’ll take a cab somewhere in Manhattan. My Mom will kill me if she knew I spent the night with a boy.”

“By the way, we’re staying at my parent’s house tonight. They’re away on vacation until next week.”

“I thought we were staying at a hotel.”

“I want you to see where I grew up and where I live.”

“Okay, but I have to leave early tomorrow.”

“Okay, Mrs. Moon.”

The instant we reached the Brooklyn Bridge I felt a relief. I knew that Mom knew nobody in Brooklyn and that I would be safe. But part of me wanted to stop somewhere to pick up a bullet proof vest. Brooklyn was a borough that was as strange to me as Spain itself. The news reporters did a great job of depicting it as a web of crime that respected nothing or no one. And that’s where I was heading, to a web that knew nothing about me and didn’t care about me. Jazz parked the car in front of a liquor store, which happened to be in front of a Duane Reade.

“What are you in the mood to drink?”

“Remy Red. You finally learned to hold your liquor?”

“I’m trying to keep up with you.”

“I’m going to stop at Duane Reade to pick something up.”

“Okay. I’ll meet you in front of Duane Reade. Give me a kiss.”

I walked down the aisles aimlessly looking for condoms. I had never bought them before and was embarrassed to ask an employee for help. Jazz said that he had not been with anyone else during the four months I had been away, but what if Josef was right. What if he had someone else? I didn’t want him to feel that I didn’t trust him but I wasn’t sure that I did. As I stood in the middle of the aisle staring at the product that could change my relationship with Jazz, a man approached me. There was nothing particularly threatening or suspicious about him other than the discomfort of him staring at me. I felt uncomfortable and tried to walk past him. Suddenly he walked towards me and stood in front of me. My instinct was to move to the right,

but he moved too, looking me straight in the eyes. He extended both his hands and placed them in my lower stomach, as he repeated three times, “You know why.” Before I could say anything he had left and I stood still unsure of what to make of it. He could have just been a crazy old man that was confusing me with someone else. I left the store uneasy and met Jazz outside.

I didn’t tell Jazz what happened and he didn’t ask what I bought. When we arrived at the nice building where he lived with his parents, he turned off the car and smiled as he looked at me.

“Can I hold you for a second?”

“Here?”

“Only for a second.”

I crossed to the driver’s seat where I sat on top of his lap. He carried me like a mother carries a new born child, with care and delicacy. My head lay on his chest and eventually I felt myself letting go, drawing closer to him, as the doubts I had about him hid behind the comfort he was able to give me at that moment.

“I wish we could stay this way forever.”

“I missed you.”

“I love you Luna, always remember that.”

“I love you too.”

His parents owned a co-op apartment in a very nice building. The security guard by the entrance greeted Jazz with a smile, as if approving of me. The apartment had three bedrooms. The main one had a bathroom in it and balcony that had a view of the better part of Manhattan. The second room was Jazz, and the third had been converted to an office space which his parents used, but mainly the father. There were many extravagant paintings and pieces of art that I had

never seen before. For the first time I asked myself if I could ever fit into his world. I knew the complications of his role in my life, but I had never thought about what role I played in his life. I was raised in the disadvantaged neighborhoods of Harlem; a bastard who didn't even have her father's last name; and was the first along with Josef to attend a University in our family. Would they think less of me? Was I good enough for Jazz? His color was not acceptable in my family? But was my social status a hindrance to him?

“You want to watch TV?”

“Sure.”

We lay on the sofa. I felt asleep in between his legs, my head on his stomach. The trip had exhausted me and he waited patiently for me to wake up. When I woke up three hours later I felt five years younger.

“You want to take a shower and order in?”

“That sounds good.”

I went to the shower. Before I could grab the soap Jazz was standing behind me naked with the soap in his hand. He kissed me on the lips and neck as he gently rubbed the soap all over my body. I did the same for him after he was finished. After we rinsed our bodies we kissed passionately under the warm water. His hands lifted my body against his, as he pinned me to the wall. I felt his penis penetrate between my thighs as he stroked me slowly at first and faster and faster as he became excited. His hardness eventually hitting a point inside of me that made me throve with pain and forced me to release a gasp for air. Jazz let me down as the water hit my body and his penis squirted sperm all over my stomach. He kissed me on the lips again as he held me closed to him.

Jazz ordered pizza, hot wings, and two sodas. After we finished eating we lay in his room for another nap. I woke up to kisses on my neck and shoulder. We kissed one more time as he climbed on top of me and entered me again.

“Get on top of me,” he whispered on my ear.

I had no idea what to do. I had seen it on the TV in Spain but I was afraid that he would notice that my breasts were not as perky and that my stomach was not as flat.

“Don’t be shy or scared, it’s just me.”

I climbed on top of him as he inserted his penis inside of me. His hands grabbed me by the waist as he moved it in slow and faster movements. I wasn’t sure if I was doing it right but he got excited again as he grabbed my ass and I continued to move on top of him. Eventually he threw me on my back and his sperm came rushing all over my breasts and stomach.

“I love you,” Jazz whispered in my ear as he held me close to him and we both vanished into a deep sleep again.

A Dream of threat

December 2000

I walked down a dark hallway that led me to Jazz parent's living room. The room had been divided in two. To the left, was a white crib, decorated with blue blankets, toys, and baby clothing. The wall was blue with teddy bears paintings above the crib, a rocking chair next to the white dresser positioned by the crib. There was a new born baby boy in the crib sleeping. He looked peaceful and adorable.

On the right hand side was an altar with many bronze statues, five white lit candles on top of the altar, and *San Gregorio Hernandez* sitting in a rocking chair in front of the altar. I stood looking at the room, confused by what it meant.

"Have a seat where you wish, Luna," *San Gregorio Hernandez* said as he removed his gentleman hat.

I looked at the rocking chair next to the crib, the empty chair next to *San Gregorio Hernandez*, and back at the dark hallway I had emerged from. I walked towards the crib to make sure the baby was still there. His eyes were wide open as he stared at me, and I couldn't help but feel the deep connection I had to the baby. Unsure of what to do, I walked back to the middle of the room and sat Indian style on the floor. I sat proudly with my shoulders firm, chin up, and eyes focused on *San Gregorio Hernandez*. For the first time, I was ready to fight for my freedom.

We looked at each other in silence until the candles turned off. *San Gregorio Hernandez* lowered his sight to the lower part of my body. I refused to move my gaze from him but

couldn't help but be curious by what he saw in me that held his attention. As I looked down, below my breast were thorns surrounding every inch of my lower body; they were sticking inward and outward keeping me from moving. In a state of terror, I looked at *San Gregorio Hernandez*, all my strength had turned to fear and I knew that he could see it in my eyes.

Slowly he stood up and grabbed the baby from the crib. He walked towards me and stretched his arms as he held the baby with both hands.

“Do you want the baby? You will never have him without us.”

I extended my arm to reach for the baby but was unable to move. The tears rolled down my eyes as the baby began to cry and suddenly all that was left in the room was me in the middle of its darkness.

December 2000

I woke up in Jazz arms that morning with frozen eyes. Grandma's phrase kept ringing in my head, "A woman without children is like a garden without flowers." She never had children other than the ones she inherited from Grandpa Gumencido. Although they all loved her I'm sure it wasn't the same. I began to wonder if my subconscious was creating these dreams or if my conscious was avoiding its truth. I closed my eyes again, hoping to fall asleep, and hoping to have nicer dreams. I wasn't ready to be a mother anyways, I told myself. I still had to finish college, become financially stable, get married, and the list knew no end. But for some reason the dream made me uneasy.

I was too distracted to make love to Jazz that morning. We left his parent's house and headed to a diner to grab breakfast.

"Pretzel, I know you have to leave early, but I promised my two best friends that I would not let you leave Brooklyn until they met you. I promise it won't take long."

"Jazz!"

"I know. But all I do is talk about you and they're starting to think you're a ghost."

"Okay, but I can't stay long, okay."

"Okay, I promise."

We drove to one of his friend's house. I wanted to make a good impression for Jazz but I wanted to get home before my mom called 911 in a state of exaggerated panic. I was scared that

we would end up somewhere in the projects but instead ended in front of a lovely brownstone which belonged to one of his best friends.

“Aren’t brownstones worth three lifetimes of work?” I asked Jazz.

“His father passed away not too long ago and left it to him and his mother. He was a very hard working man.”

“Your friend is not?”

“Not as much, curious girl.”

A tall, handsome, dark, and slim but built young man approached me with a hug before I could say anything.

“It’s a pleasure to finally meet you, Luna. I’ve heard so many great things about you.”

“It’s nice to meet you too.”

“You are very beautiful and are a lucky woman to have this man here. He’s a good man and he is crazy about you.”

“I’m sugar my pretzel is back,” Jazz added.

Another guy joined us, who was dark, tall, and very heavy set.

“You have any friends you can hook me up with, Luna?”

“Not that I can think of off the top of my head.”

“If you find me a beautiful and good Latin woman, you just call me. Don’t be shy. I’m ready to settle down like these two dudes here,” Lester said.

We made small talk for a few minutes and I agreed to go to one of their barbecues during the spring or the summer. They were both very polite and kind to me, and I was relieved to know that Jazz had nice friends and that they actually liked me.

“I need to take a cab somewhere in Manhattan, it’s already 1:30pm.”

“Can I take you home? I promise not to get out of the car.”

“Jazz, my Mom would kill us both if she finds out I spent the night with you.”

“I promise to leave you in front of the building and will leave right away.”

“Fine.”

I don’t even know why I agreed. All I could do was imagine all the different scenarios of what would happen if Mom saw me with Jazz, and more importantly what she would think. She was a smart woman, she would know right away. But he promised to leave right away and that he wouldn’t get out of the car. The scenarios I envisioned felt short of imagination. When we arrived at my neighborhood I asked Jazz to open the trunk and that I would grab my suitcases so that he could take off. But that didn’t happen. Before I could say a word he was outside of the car pulling out the two monstrous suitcases. Thankfully it was winter time and there was barely anyone outside. Jazz walked them inside the building and left it by the door.

“Luna, you cannot possibly carry these two suitcases upstairs yourself. Can I bring them up for you and I’ll leave before you knock on the door. The car is in double parking; I have to leave anyways.

“Jazz!”

“Stop being such a scary cat. I’ll leave before you knock on the door.” Kiss on the lips.

I nearly felt on my face. Not sideways or backwards, but flat on my face.

Once the suitcases were upstairs I waved at Jazz but he stood there. I had not knocked on the door but Mom opened the door before I could say anything. She hugged me and kissed me and showered me with all the love only a mother has for their child.

“I’m Jazz, nice to meet you.”

“Nie thu miit jhu,” Mom said perplexed.

Jazz walked the suitcases to the living room, said hello to Josef whose chin had dropped from the 5th floor to the basement. He even drank the glass of water Mom offered him.

“Bye, Luna.”

“Bye, thank you for everything.”

I was originally pale. But that day, I was transparent. You could see my veins, cells, bones, blood, except my heart. The sucker of my heart had grown two mini legs and had jumped out the window in an attempt to commit suicide. Mom didn’t say anything that instant. All she said was, “You’re so skinny! Are you sick? Come, sit down, I made you your favorite dish; rice, white beans, barbecue ribs, salad, and sweet plantains.”

“Mamacita, you look gorgeous! And don’t say anything about me looking like a fat pig. All they’ve told me is, you liked the food over there.”

“Thank you, Mama. You know you look awesome.”

“What the fuck was Jazz doing here?”

“I’ll tell you later. You think Mom knows what’s up?”

“Probably, he was way obvious.”

“I’m just going to say he is a friend that picked me up at the airport.”

“I’m seeing someone new. He’s from around here but goes to Americana. I’ll tell you about it later.”

“Okay. I miss you nutcase.”

“Yeah, yeah, I miss you too punkio.”

I gave everyone the small gifts I brought for them. When everyone left, Mom stopped by my room to say good night.

“You want *mangu* with salami, eggs, and cheese for breakfast tomorrow?”

“That sounds good Mom. I missed your food.”

“I can tell.” Wink.

“So that’s your boyfriend?”

“No Mom, he’s just a friend, he offered to pick me up at the airport. He goes to school with us.”

“Eyes never lie, Luna. Just be careful with who you date.”

“Okay Mom. I love you.”

“I love you too!”

March 2001

Josefina:

Jazz had kept his promised and had gone to visit Luna in February and was scheduled to visit in March too. Long distance was such a challenge but they were really trying to make it work. She looked happy. I just didn't trust him. That weekend was Latino week, the biggest party week of the spring semester. It was like being drunk once, but for a whole week. I lived for those parties and the dinners. It was always great to see alumni, catch up, and have a good time.

Having Jazz there was great for Luna, but for me, it took my partner in crime away from me and the action. Luckily he called to tell Luna that he couldn't take Friday off and would be arriving on Saturday. I was ecstatic and was hoping deep inside he didn't show up on Saturday neither. Jazz was a cool guy, not a good boyfriend, just a cool guy. But he wasn't cool enough to listen to some *tiqui tiqui* music all night long. I couldn't even blame him, for a long time, I couldn't do it either. I remember that Friday being such a fun night. And for a long time I wished that life would have stood still just a little longer that day. There was nothing special about that day, other than Luna and I were both happy for no reason.

Jazz arrived with breakfast the following morning. A very nice gesture of him, but he would have to buy me the whole chain of IHOP restaurants before I could forget his crooked ways. Luna was a forgiving individual and I loved her for it most of the times. But I wasn't. I wrapped my grudges around my veins to make sure those suckers stayed alive forever.

“Thank you, Jazz.”

“You are very welcome, Josef.”

Jazz showered her with kisses and hugs. He even bought her a red velvet cake, which was the only cake she truly enjoyed. And of course she gave more than half of it to me.

“Well, I’ll leave you two alone. Call me if you need anything.”

“Will do girly.”

I was supposed to meet the guy I had been talking to, to head to the pool party. It was fun but it wasn’t the same without Luna. It also made no sense for me to go anywhere without her, every other person would ask for her and it got on my last nerves.

“Where’s your twin?”

“I’m not my sister’s keeper,” I told someone with an attitude after being asked the same question too many times.

I had one too many drinks because I had not even noticed I had two missed calls from Luna. When I called Luna’s phone, Jazz answered and was talking fast and in a pitchy voice.

“Luna is really sick, she keeps crying that it hurts and I don’t know what to do. She keeps asking for you.”

“Put her on the phone.”

“She can’t speak. Her stomach is hurting really bad.”

“I’m on my way.”

When I got there Luna was laying on the bed crying and screaming that she couldn't take the pain. Jazz was trying to hold her but that wasn't working. I was relief to know that she wasn't sick with that spirit stuff because I wouldn't have known what to do. I took a deep breath when I realized it was something as common as a stomach ache.

“Mama, what's wrong? You want me to take you to the hospital.”

She shook her head yes. I put some jeans and a shirt on being that she was wearing only shorts and a t-shirt.

“Jazz, go grab your car and call me when you're downstairs.”

As soon as he walked out of the room I asked her three times what had happened but she was in so much pain she couldn't talk.

The emergency room was nearly empty, nothing like NYC. And I knew she most have been in a lot of pain because she hated hospitals. The nurse asked her a few questions while we waited for a doctor to see her.

“Are you pregnant?”

“No, she's not,” I answered unsure if this was true.

“Are you allergic to any medicine?”

“No, she's not allergic to anything.”

“We're going to give her a shot of morphine for the pain, okay.”

“Okay, thank you. When will the doctor be able to see her?” I asked.

“He should be with her shortly.”

They escorted us to a room with Luna where we waited for the doctor. The dosage of morphine had alleviated the pain but she was in and out of sleep. When the doctor came in we were asked to leave the room.

“Mama, you want me to stay here with you?”

“Yes.”

Jazz waited outside impatiently pacing back and forward in front of the room. The doctor examined her stomach with both his hands. Putting pressure to see where it was hurting.

“Does it hurt here?”

“No,” Luna said.

As soon as he pressed her pelvic area the tears rolled down her face.

“Are you sexually active?”

“Yes.”

“How many partners have you had?”

“One.”

“When did you get the pain?”

“I was having intercourse with my boyfriend, nothing unusual, and out of nowhere I got this unbearable and consistent pain that wouldn’t go away.”

“What position were you in?”

“He was from behind.” She squeezed my hand and I knew she was embarrassed.

“Is this the first time you get this pain?”

“Yes, I just started having sex this year.”

“Was he being rough?”

“No.”

“We’re going to do an ultra sound to make sure everything is okay. On a scale from 1 to 10 how bad is the pain right now?”

“It’s better now, a 6.”

The doctor left the room and I stayed there holding Luna’s hand. When Jazz walked in, I wanted to become a sharp knife and slice his throat until he had no blood in him. Luna must have felt my hostility towards him because she held my hand tighter as she told me, “Is not his fault, Mama.”

“Whatever, you better be okay.”

“Josef, I would never do anything to hurt your cousin, I love her.”

“Yeah, sure you do.”

“Mama, relax, I’m going to be okay.”

“You want some water?” I asked looking for an excuse to leave the room before I jumped on top of him and took out his eyes with my bare hands.

“Yes, my mouth is dry.”

The doctor came back in with some machine and asked Jazz to wait outside. I stayed in the room with Luna holding her hand. The machine had a small television that only he could see. He took out a long stick that looked like a penis but was made of white metal. He placed a condom over it and put tons of KY jelly over it.

“What’s that for?” I asked concerned.

“This is to do an internal ultra sound.”

“Luna, you’re going to feel a little pressure, okay.”

Luna shook her head as she looked at me with watery eyes and I knew in that instant that she had regretted becoming sexually active. That she wished she would have listened to me, but it was too late. All I could do was be there for her and comfort her, “You’re going to be okay Mama, this is going to be a piece of cake.” She squeezed my hand tighter as the doctor inserted the device inside of her and she cried.

“Try to relax for me Luna.”

“It hurts.”

“I know, just a little longer. Does it hurt here?” He asked applying more pressure to her abdomen.

“Yes, a lot.”

He took more pictures of it as he looked at his little television that showed him Luna's insides. When he was finished a nurse came in and gave Luna a second dosage of morphine. She felt asleep and I sat in silence next to her, holding her hand, refusing to speak to or look at Jazz.

Two hours later the doctor came in to give Luna the results. Jazz waited outside again while we listened to the doctor's diagnosis.

"Luna, have you experienced pain during intercourse prior to today?"

"Yes, but not this bad. I thought it was normal."

"You have a few cysts in your ovaries that could be because of ovulation. Your uterus is upside down and is far in the back which could be causing the pain. Based on all your symptoms and the pain you are describing, it appears that you may have Endometriosis."

"Endome what?" I asked.

"Endometriosis. It is a disease that accumulates tissues from the menstruation surrounding the female organs and other organs; the accumulation of these tissues, causes a great deal of pain. Some women never experience pain and don't know they have Endometriosis until they try to get pregnant. But for some women the pain is chronic."

"What type of medicine can she take for this?"

"Again, based on her symptoms it appears that it is Endometriosis. It is always hard to tell. Usually an endoscopy needs to be performed to confirm it. Endometriosis is usually treated with birth control pills to manage the pain or by having a child. Scientifically we're not able to explain why being pregnant helps women with Endometriosis being that it is one of the primary causes for infertility in women."

Luna began to cry and I tried to remain strong for her but I couldn't help but cry with her.

"Will I be able to have children?" I heard Luna ask the doctor.

"There are many treatments to help women conceive today. But with endometriosis we never know how bad it is unless we perform surgery. I will prescribe you with pain killers and will recommend that you see your GYN every three to six months to confirm if it is endometriosis and to treat you."

"Thank you," I told the doctor as he walked out.

"They're punishing me, Josef, they're punishing me."

"Calm down, Mama. You heard the doctor, he's not even sure. It may have been a cramp. You're going to be okay, you hear me."

"I had a dream, he told me, *San Gregorio Hernandez*, he showed me. I'm so tired. I'm so tired, Josef."

"Girly, you're going to be okay, it was just a dream. You're going to be just fine."

We got to the room and let Luna sleep until the next day. She didn't cry in front of Jazz, it was against our principles. At least that's what our mothers told us, "Never cry in front of a man." But he knew something was wrong.

"Is she going to be okay, Josef?" Jazz asked me concerned.

"Yeah, she's going to be okay."

I didn't give him any details because it wasn't my secret to tell. He lay next to her all night caressing her hair and kissing her forehead and for that instant I believed that he may love her. He left town the following day in the early afternoon and called Luna that evening. That instant I allowed myself to believe that Jazz cared for Luna vanished as soon as it had arrived. I sat on the little stool inside the shower where we usually placed the towels to make sure she was okay. Most of the pain was gone but the nostalgia of the news she received lingered in her eyes.

“You're hungry, Mamacita?”

“No, I just want to sleep.”

Three hours later I left the room to run some errands and left her resting.

“*Piti*, wake up,” Elias told me as he gave me a kiss on the forehead.

I opened my eyes and didn’t say anything. The water in my eyes hid behind my melancholy, “You warned me but I didn’t listen. I didn’t listen to you, Grandma, or the dreams.”

“I wish I could take your pain for myself, but I can’t. This is only the beginning Luna and I need you to be strong. I’ve never seen anybody fight so hard for what they believe in and for who they are. I admire you. I wish I had just one ounce of your courage.”

“I’m not brave, *Piti*. I’m exhausted. I don’t even know what I’m fighting for or against anymore.”

“You’re fighting to be an individual. You’re fighting for you. Just make sure to take the time and figure out who you really is.”

“I feel lost.”

“I know you do. But if it is of any comfort, I promise you that I will be there during the hardest time of your journey. I won’t leave you alone.”

“I know you won’t.”

“If I don’t show up during your hard times, that means the worst is yet to come, so don’t get scare, okay.” He rubbed my stomach as he gave me another kiss, but this time on the cheek.

“I love you.”

“I love you too, *Piti*. I love you too.”

Summer 2001

It was nice to be home for a change. I had landed a job at a big magazine as a marketing intern and was excited to get work experience. I was also excited to see more of Jazz. I had not seen him since end of April. I wasn't sure if that was because Jazz schedule was always too busy or because I always came up with an excuse. I wasn't sure what to do. Eventually he would want children and I didn't know if I would be able to give them to him. The last time I saw him we attempted to have sex but it was too painful for me and he was too scared of hurting me. I visited two GYN who gave me the same diagnosis at the beginning of the summer. Every time my world felt apart. I wanted to hide in my Mother's embrace and never face the world again. But I couldn't because she didn't even know I wasn't a virgin. Instead, I hid in the shadow of my pain and allowed it to cradle me in its obscurity.

There were conversations that a young woman should never need to have, infertility was one of them. I agreed to see Jazz the weekend of my birthday, who bought me a rose, a perfume, and a pair of Nike sneakers. He took me to a soul restaurant, which was quite expensive and had a lovely lady singing R&B music with a hint of Jazz and Blues. We had a few glasses of wine and enjoy our appetizers as we waited for the main course.

“You look super sugar!” I teased.

“I'm super sugar to see my beautiful girl, who has been hiding from me.”

“No, you've been too busy to see me.”

“I have been really busy but I always try to make time for you.”

“Sure you do.”

“Did you see the doctor yet?” Jazz asked concerned.

“I saw two doctors.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“Sure, you need to know sooner or later. I have some condition that causes pain anytime I have sex, and lately just randomly, just because.”

“Did they give you medicine for it?”

“Yup, to get pregnant so that it can go away. Cheers to me!” I raised my glass sarcastically.

“Do you want to have a baby now? I’m ready when you are.”

“That’s very sweet of you, but I’m good, I don’t need your pity.”

“I love you Luna, and sooner or later I want to start a family with you.”

“I’m a junior in college. I don’t care what the doctors say, I rather be in pain every day of my life than drop out of school to have a baby.”

“Okay, so we will wait until you graduate, okay.”

“Jazz, you don’t have to deal with this. I’m sure there are plenty of beautiful and healthy girls out there.”

“I’m sure too, but I want you. So we can have a baby after graduation, okay.”

“Whatever.”

He whispered elephant juice in the air which sounded exactly like I love you. The love I felt for him at that instant shifted something in me. I wasn't expecting him to be so understanding and supportive. All the doubts I had about him transformed to trust and gratefulness one more time. But in the back of my head Grandma's voice whispered, “you're going to fall in love with a man as dark as me.” And I smiled as I cherished Grandma's wisdom that day. She knew all along this man would come to my life. I didn't like knowing other people's future or present, but Grandma embraced it with such humbleness and humility. She was grounded in who she was while I was like a mountain, watching the clouds above pass me by. While Grandma Bella brought me peace and joy, Grandpa Gumencido's words torture me, “Paint him white.” He was the only male figure I had ever truly loved. Luron had never been there. It would break my heart if Grandpa rejected my child if it were Black. He probably wouldn't respond to them calling him Grandpa. How would I explain that to Jazz or my children, that Grandpa couldn't love them because they were Black?

“You're okay, Pretzel?”

“I'm just thinking.”

“You're thinking about how our baby is going to look? I hope it's a boy and that he has your nose, lips, eyes, complexion, but my hair.”

“What you're trying to say about my hair?” We both laughed.

We enjoyed the rest of our dinner. Jazz took me to a hotel that evening and made love to me slowly. Exploring every inch of me; taking his time. And I couldn't help but love him so much more that day.

After that day I saw Jazz maybe four times for the rest of the summer. Every three weeks if that much. He told me he was working seven days a week, and I tried my best to believe him, he was always in the card store when I called him but couldn't talk for long. An instinct in me rejected the idea that he was working so hard to save up money to start a business and a family the following year. I wanted to speak to Josef about my doubts but it was hard to get a neutral opinion from her, she didn't trust him, didn't like him, and told me every chance she could that I should break up with him. I knew she was concerned for me but I don't think she understood my predicament.

Winter 2001/2002

That winter break I did the unthinkable, I invited Jazz to Thanksgiving dinner with my family. Josef had agreed to bring her boyfriend so that all the attention wasn't on me. Jazz was excited but worried. He had lost his job in October like many other Americans after the collapse of the Twin Towers. September 11, 2001, that's when Americans from all different cultures united to pray for loved ones and strangers, and it was the day we saw others celebrating our tragedy on national television. I was in college the morning it happened, getting ready to leave the room to go to my first class. I had no idea what was going on until a girl who had lost her mother was being held by two other students.

“Is she okay?”

“A plane just hit one of the twin towers. Her mother works there. Is all over the news,” one of the girls told me.

I rushed to the room to turn on the television. Josef and I sat in front of the television like two little girls as we saw another plane hit the second tower; the flames bursting through the walls, people throwing themselves off the building, women and men dressed in fancy suits running in the midst of dust and panic. Josef and I tried to get in touch with our family members but all the lines were busy. We cried with friends that had family members working there and contacted Arab friends who were being advised not to leave their dorm rooms or to leave the campus.

I had taken a course on the Middle East and didn't feel I knew enough to judge their actions but felt enough to mourn the lives of thousands that didn't make it out of the twin towers.

Many lives were affected, not only emotionally but financially, Jazz being one of them. He found himself with no job and no college degree. I was terrified of the judgment my family would pass on him and myself; an African American boyfriend with no college degree, no job, and Black. He had everything against him. But I refused to leave him during his most difficult moments; he had been there for me when I needed his support.

I had finally mustered the courage to tell Mom that I had a boyfriend. I didn't tell her much about him. Nonetheless that she had already met him. At times I felt guilty and ignorant, while I was concern if my family would like my boyfriend or not, there were thousands of family mourning the deaths of loved ones that would never have a chance to celebrate with them again.

"Stop being so curious, you'll meet him in a few days for Thanksgiving," I had told her earlier that week.

I had no idea what to expect, I would either be disowned or they would pretend it was okay and would criticized me until my ass grew as big as the planet earth. There was this silly saying that whenever people talked about you your butt got bigger. I must have been the center of many conversations because my behind was bigger than four car wheels put together. There was probably talk that Josef and I had boyfriends. We were scheduled to graduate in a year and had yet to bring a boyfriend for the family to meet. After 9/11 I figured that life was too short to spend it being afraid. Jazz kept asking when he would meet my family and with time the excuses became weaker and weaker. In a moment of bravery, I caved into a formal introduction.

Both Josef and I wore dark blue jeans, a black dressy shirt, and black shoes. All our relatives were gathered in Josef mother's house that evening; cousins, sisters, brothers, aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews, brother and sister in laws; anticipating the introduction of our very first

boyfriends. We were the first to go to college in America; to study away from home; and to travel to Europe. The expectations were high, but I'm not sure that Josef and I realized how high they were. We had them both meet in the lobby of the building and arranged for them to arrive together. The music was stopped and their best smiles were in place when the doorbell rang. I sat by the dining table as Josef grabbed them, escorted them to the middle of the living room and announced boldly, "This is Jazz, Luna's boyfriend."

"Hi Everyone," Jazz said as everyone replied, "Hi." Shock.

I saw a few chins drop, a few eyes pop out of place, and some even choked.

"And this is, Charles, my boyfriend."

"Hello."

"Hi," everyone replied in shock again.

As I observed from a distance, too frozen to get up from my seat, I realized that Jazz was wearing baggy jeans, an iceberg gray sweater with a teddy bear, and white air force sneakers. Similarly, Charles was wearing blue jeans, a yellow shirt, and timberlands. The expectations had been raised so high that we could have never reached it with one thousand ladders. When I was finally able to move, I walked over to Jazz and gave him a hug. The family was cordial the remainder of the time, but their disappointment was obvious.

"Cuz, I got all dressed up with my best attired thinking you girls were going to bring attorneys and doctors as your boyfriends," Darwin told me that evening, "You should have sent me a memo telling me they were regular Joes."

"Whatever, you need to dress up more often."

I formally introduced him to Mom and she was polite to him but there wasn't much to be said, their language barrier kept their conversation at hello, yes, yes, and no.

"I told you he wasn't a friend," Mom told me later that evening.

"He was only my friend, but now he's my boyfriend."

"You're a big girl, you know what you're doing."

We served them food, drinks, and danced the remainder of the evening. I tried to forget that my family kept staring at the 6'1 guy which stood out amongst them. I drank so much beer and rum with the hope that it would overflow out of me until it covered my whole body and drawn me in its madness. At some point I found Jazz speaking with my brother in law, who was making a toast to alcohol in the kitchen. As soon as Jazz walked away, he asked me, "Where did you find that monkey? You didn't have to go that far, there's plenty in Harlem."

"Fuck you," I told him unable to find any other words to describe my anger and his ignorance. He tried to apologize later that evening. But it was too late.

When I got home, Mom noticed I was still mad, I already knew how she felt, but I needed to know she was okay with my relationship with Jazz.

"Mom, what did you think of Jazz?"

"He seems like a nice young man."

"Somebody called him a monkey at the party," my eyes got watery.

“*Hay* Luna, we were just expecting professionals, not a Black guy and a boy from the hood. Josef’s boyfriend is from up the block. We just thought you girls would be a little more sophisticated.”

“Jazz is a nice guy, Mom.”

“He’s very charming and I trust you wouldn’t be with him if he were not a decent man.”

“Grandpa will hate him.”

“He will, but let’s not worry about that now. One day at a time.”

Jazz was oblivious to what happened at the party, he was so excited, he couldn’t stop talking about how much he liked my family and how much fun they were. That Christmas holiday it was my turned to meet his folks. I was anxious at first, but they turned out to be nice people. There were many things I didn’t understand and just agreed with them on. It was the first time I heard of the band earth, wind, and fire. For dinner they had; mashed potatoes which I strongly disliked, sweet yams which were okay, mac and cheese, and ham. I brought a cheese cake from school for dinner, which Jazz lied about and told his mother I made it.

“This cheese cake is delicious, where did you learn to make it?”

“My mother taught me.”

“You have to give me the recipe. How did you make it?”

Jazz changed the conversation and I was relieved. I had no idea what ingredients went to making a cheesecake. I wasn’t even sure why he lied about it. Part of me felt like he was trying

to make me out to be more than I was. I don't know if they approved or not of me, all I knew is that I had met them and they knew I was Jazz girlfriend.

His family was nothing like mine, they had a quiet dinner with no music, smart conversations, and there was no dancing and drinking afterwards. After dinner with his family we headed to my family's gathering. They were polite to Jazz and nobody made any absurd remarks but their judgment never left me, it stayed with me, with every bite, every drink, every turn, and every song. It was always present. Reminding me that he was the last man they had expected to see me with.

After the holidays, Jazz grew concerned about not being able to find a job. I helped him with his resume and cover letter, but it was February and he couldn't get an interview. He considered starting his business did not have enough savings and the economy was in such a stagnant place that loans were not easily being approved. Jazz couldn't afford to come visit me at Americana and every conversation we had increased the stress within me.

"I miss you," I told him one day.

"I miss you too, but I can't come see you because I can't afford gas or a bus ticket."

"You'll find a job soon, is a tough market out there."

"I can't go on like this Pretzel, I can't go on being so broke."

"It'll get better before you know it, just stay positive."

"I have to go, I'll call you later."

March was approaching and every other day we had a similar conversation. I became nervous by his frustration and begged him not to do anything stupid. He assured me he wouldn't but each day his tone sounded less reassuring. I suggested he speak with his parents and when he did he was heartbroken. His father didn't know what he could do for a college dropout. His relationships wouldn't be able to help him because his resume consisted of a card store job off the books.

One Saturday afternoon while Josef was out with her boyfriend I got on my knees out of desperation and began to cry. An unfamiliar feeling stirred within me like a hurricane as it grew stronger and stronger. Until it had gathered so much force that I heard myself say aloud, "I'll help two people in exchange for a job for Jazz." I grew silent. I didn't know what to think, say, or do. I had promised myself that I would never seek their help after what they had put me through, and there I was, crying out for help, to the very force that was slowly destroying me.

Two weeks later I had a dream with *San Gregorio Hernandez*, he was sitting on a big rock by the river, dressed in his usual black suit and white button down shirt. I stood in front of him without moving. The river was calm and clean, surrounded by trees that formed a bridge over its water. One of the trees had beautiful white flowers that I had never seen before. Lizards crawled up and down the trees and around the rocks. I rejoiced at the beauty and peacefulness of the place. Swiftly, *San Gregorio Hernandez* got on his feet, lowered his head to avoid looking me in the eyes, and extended both his arms as he opened both hands and said, "Take what you asked for." I touched both his hands feeling the energy of his power. I performed the same gesture he had earlier. After he touched my hands he said, "You'll know who to help when the time is right."

A week later Jazz got a job at a home for disabled people. He was so excited he beamed of joy. I wasn't sure what to believe, had it been a coincidence or had *'they'* really helped him? I didn't know if it would be worth the sacrifice I had committed to, but that instant all I could do was be happy for him and with him.

“Pretzel, now I can continue to save money for the business and we can start a family when you graduate in December.”

“Start the job first silly man.”

“I just want to give you everything you deserve.”

“I already have you, you make me happy,” I told him that day.

That Summer I took a job working at a restaurant in order to pay the remainder of the tuition for the fall. I only had three classes left to take and decided to work through the fall in NYC while attending classes twice a week Upstate NY. Jazz decided to get an apartment in Manhattan so that I could stay with him during the days I wasn't in school. I always lied to Mom and told her I had to go back to school. But I'm sure she knew I was staying with him.

“Pretzel, I want you to move in with me after Graduation.”

“I want to get married before moving in together.”

“We'll get married, I promise, I'm just anxious to start my life with you.”

“Let's talk about it when it gets closer to Graduation.”

“Okay, Mrs. Moon,” he teased that day.

Right before and after graduation the conversation of moving in together didn't come up again. On my graduation date he gave me a small blue box which I was hesitant to open, only to find a gold necklace with a heart. It was the first piece of jewelry a guy had ever given me. And deep down, I was happy that it wasn't a ring. Although I loved Jazz I wasn't sure if I wanted to spend the rest of my life with him anymore. I couldn't picture myself waking up to him every day because I was starting to doubt his love for me. I had started to question if the dreams and visions were mistaken. Maybe we didn't need each other. Possibly, I needed him more than he needed me. Perhaps, he would be fine if I walked out of his life. But what if I did and he wasn't fine? What if the dreams and everything else was true?

Luron contacted me, offended that I had not invited him to my graduation. I was confused by the rights he believed he had over my life and accomplishments. He had been there a total of fifteen days in twenty two years. All of a sudden, he was the proud father of a college graduate he had never care for.

“Luna, I’m your father, you know that, right?”

“Since when?”

“Don’t talk to me like that, you hurt my feelings.”

“Really? Did you ever stop to think of mine in the past twenty-two years?”

“I know I haven’t been the best father, but I love you, Luna.”

“Sure you do.”

“I just called to say congratulations. I’m very proud of you and would like to invite you and Josef to the Dominican Republic with all expenses paid.”

“I’ll speak with Josef and get back to you. I have to go now.”

Furious was not the right word to describe what I was feeling. He was proud of me? He had done nothing for me. The only time I called him to ask him to help me pay for books he said he would get back to me and never called me back. I wanted to forget all the principles and morals Mom had taught me throughout the years and cursed him until I was out of breath.

“Josef, you’re not going to believe this.”

“What? You dumped Jazz?”

“Very Funny. Not yet. Even better. Luron just called me, extremely offended because I didn’t invite him to my graduation.”

“Is he on crack? He has to be.”

“Anyways, he also wants to invite us both to Dominican Republic with all expenses paid in February during carnival season.”

“Really?”

“Yup, all of a sudden he’s a proud father.”

“I think we should go; is not like we need to hang out with him. We take his money and go our separate ways.”

“I don’t know, I don’t want to owe that man anything. Not even a thank you.”

“If he’s going to bother you, you might as well take what he has to give.”

“You make a valid point, I’ll request the time off from work, and will tell him yes.”

“DR here we come, for free!”

It took me a week to get back to him. I missed the Dominican Republic and wanted to see Grandma and Grandpa, but I hated that I was accepting a gift from him. A few weeks later we left with him and Josef spoke to him more than I did. I treated him as a friend and nothing more. I was polite to him and his family but it took a lot of effort from my part. Everyone acted as if he had been a substantial part of my life and was even shocked when I didn’t call him Dad.

Although he had been a horrible father, he was a good friend. People around him loved him and he was fun, funny, and charming. Eventually we began to have a great time. He took Josef and me to the beach, clubbing, to the country side to have cookouts, and to concerts. We had such a great time that for a minute I forgot who he was. A few days after hanging out with him, he dropped us off in La Vega so that we could spend time with our family.

“My two favorite ladies,” Grandma said when she saw us walking through that kitchen.

“Our favorite Grandma,” I replied hugging her tight.

“Hello Luna,” Grandpa said when he walked in. There were no hugs, kisses or my favorite granddaughter in the world. I had no idea if he knew or not about Jazz but I suspected he did.

“Let me make you girls something to eat.”

“You know we love your food, so anything you want,” I said.

“Luna, I’m going to go talk to Grandpa to distract him, stay with Grandma.”

“Thank you girly!” Wink.

Grandma Bella had aged. The pain in her left leg diminished the elegance that used to hang from her shoulders. She leaned closer to the stove with her left arm to sustain herself in order to stir the pot with the silver spoon in her right hand. I noticed that her dark skin had given birth to wrinkles around her eyes, cheeks, mouth, and forehead. Her waist was bigger and her eyes looked distant and tired. I wanted to get up and hold on to her forever. I never wanted to lose her, but time knew nothing about love. I took a deep breath, inhaling her seasoning, the scent of burnt carbon, rain, mixed with mango tree. She sat down in the chair next to me, held my hand firmly as she told me, “*Hay* Luna, I’m getting older, and you still haven’t promise that you’ll look after my altar.”

“Grandma, you’re not getting older, you’re getting wiser.”

“My dear one, you always know what to say, but I’m afraid you don’t always know what to do.”

“You’re probably right.”

“You have so much to learn, Luna.”

“What do I need to learn now? I feel like life is an endless lesson that never ends.”

“I forgot to teach you that you must always make sure that the sacrifices you make are worthy of your effort. Not everything deserves your sacrifice, Luna. You’re a *Bruja* not an angel.”

“I don’t know why you’re telling me this.”

“You know. You always know.”

“You were right about me falling in love with a Black man.”

“He’s a good man and he loves you very much but love doesn’t always mean happiness.”

“You think I should leave him too?”

“I know things, but I’ve never decided for anyone else.”

“Your father loves you. You should give him a chance.”

“I rather become a *bruja* before I accept him as my father.”

“You are a *bruja*, Luna, whether you accept it or not.”

A woman walked in looking for Grandma. In the sleeve of her green shirt she had the image of *San Gregorio Hernandez*.

“Josef, can you ask Grandpa to take you to the market or somewhere to grab something. I need you to distract him for an hour or so.”

“Why?”

“I’ll explain it to you later.”

As soon as Grandpa and Josef left, I walked to the kitchen and told the lady speaking to Grandma, “I will be helping you today.” The lady looked at both of us suspiciously but Grandma nodded her approval to the lady and left us in the kitchen alone as she waited in the living room. I prepared the coffee and had her take a sip from her cup. Once she was finished I

asked her to leave enough to burn the coffee off the cup on the stove. I placed the cup upside down on the stove with the knob at its lowest.

I never thought I would do anything of that nature. But there I was, paying for the favor. When I asked that Jazz be helped, I never asked, what would I have to do for it? I was foolish, and had no choice but to pay the debt.

“How long have you been doing this? You look pretty young.”

“It’s my first time.”

“I rather see your Grandma.”

“You have a child that is sick and you’ve been asking *San Gregorio Hernandez* to heal him. You came here looking for help because your husband left you and you don’t have enough money to buy the medicine.”

“How did you know that? You haven’t even seen the cup.”

“Your husband will not be coming back for a long time, but your ten year old son, Carlos, he will be okay. The doctors will release him from the hospital today and will tell you to take him home because there is nothing they can do for him. But you will give him three beets, five oranges, and seven lemons three times a day. Pray this psalm to him at five in the morning for nine days, and play five hundred pesos of these two numbers on Wednesday.”

“Thank you! Thank you so much.” She tried to give me money but I put it back in her hand, “It’s my pleasure,” I said as I walked away.

I walked out of the house without saying bye to Grandma or waiting for Josef. I had avoided that moment my whole life. The images in her eyes and her body kept replaying in my head like a photo portfolio that never ends. Her feelings and emotion engraved in my spirit like the roots that stem from a tree. I could feel her anguish for her son, her son’s fear, and my

vulnerability as *San Gregorio Hernandez* smiled victoriously at me. And I remember asking myself, what had I done and what would be the second favor?

Ezequiel found me walking in the street distracted.

“Luna!” I heard him shouting at me.

He got off the motorcycle and I hugged him tight wetting the area of his shoulder in his shirt.

“What’s wrong with you?”

“Can you take me to my hiding place? I know it’s late but I just need to be there right now.”

“I’ll take you to the end of the world if you asked me to.”

“Thank you!”

We drove in the dark to the convent. There was no electricity and it was already 7pm. The door to the chapel was locked. Ezequiel rang the bell on the side as we waited in the room next door by a blocked window.

“May God be with you.”

“And with your holy spirit,” he answered.

“We would like to enter the chapel. DeLuna, who comes every day when she’s here from New York, would like to say a quick prayer.”

“DeLuna, are you there?”

“Yes.”

“It’s great to have you back. I’ll open the chapel for you in a few minutes. Make sure to lock it after you finish.”

“Thank you,” Ezequiel and I said at the same time.

“The nuns love you. I come here sometimes when I miss you too much.”

“You do?”

“Yes, they always ask me for you.”

I walked into the chapel and sat in one of the benches unsure of what to say or do; simply embracing the peace that uplifted me to a place of nothingness. Ezequiel sat behind me as he always did, silently guarding me, and patiently waiting until I was finished.

That evening I got to Grandma Bella’s house to pick up Josef so that we could hang with my cousin Wellington and my cousin Darwin. We drank, danced and hung out for two days straight until our bodies couldn’t resist being awake. I wanted to have a great time, live, and enjoy life. Luron had been calling us for the past day to pick us up but couldn’t reach us. He drove for three hours to pick us up and after waiting for four hours gave up and turned back to the Capital. When he finally contacted me his tone was filled with anger.

“Luna, do you think that’s okay, to keep me waiting for four hours? That’s not funny, you know.”

“I didn’t know you were here.”

“I told you I was picking you up that day. We leave for NY in two days.”

“I forgot. Pick us up tomorrow.”

“No young lady, you girls can take the bus to the capital.”

“Okay.”

“Put your grandfather on.”

“Luron, you can’t get upset with her, she’s just like you. She says she’ll be there in an hour and shows up the next day. Just like you.” They both laughed.

I sat on Grandpa’s lap and gave him a hug and a kiss. He gave me a hug back this time.

“I’m so disappointed in you, Luna.”

“Why?”

“You know why. I would rather you marry that poor kid that drives you around, Ezemiel?”

“Grandpa, you don’t even know Jazz, he’s a good guy.”

“He’s a monkey and all he’s going to do is paralyze your life and ruin our race. Your kids would look just like him.”

“Grandpa, you’ll like him, I know you will.”

“I damn that man and your relationship with him. He’s not for you, Luna.”

“I decide who I love.”

“But not who you marry.”

I walked away without responding. What else could I say to change his mind? He had a lifetime of hatred in him towards Blacks. In his eyes they were nothing, and I was about to marry nothing and have invisible children. Josef sat on the corner of the sofa. Not knowing what to tell me. We both knew that day will come and we both knew he would never accept it.

For the first time in my life I was excited to see Luron and to get away from Grandpa.

“Sorry I screamed at you, I was very upset with you.”

“It’s fine, I’m over it.”

“Your Grandpa is right, you’re just like me, in more ways than you can imagine.”

“Thank you for the trip, we had a great time.”

We went to a restaurant to eat where they had pretty girls serving in some neon blue mini jumpsuit. The food was great and Luron enjoyed the view of beautiful women. Exhausted we went to his mother’s house and opted to stay in the house relaxing. The old woman wasn’t a

woman of many words, but the few she had were firm. There was no breakfast or lunch the following day. At first we thought she was rude until we realized that she didn't know how to cook. We ended going to a tiny restaurant in the neighborhood and brought her back some food.

"Thank you so much," she told Josef and me as she placed the food on a plate.

"You're welcome. Do you know when Luron will be coming back?"

"He went to run some errands, probably in an hour or two. But he asked that you girls confirm the flight for tomorrow."

"Okay."

I grabbed the phone and dialed the airline to confirm that the flight was not being cancelled or delayed and that our reservations were confirmed. His mother looked at me in shock as she sat next to me. Josef sat quietly in the rocking chair trying to fight the humidity.

"Luna, what's your last name?" She asked me.

"Lopez. I have my mother and grandfather's last name."

"Why don't you have your father's last name?"

"He never gave it to me."

"That's not possible. Your mother probably didn't let him because he didn't want to be with her."

"My mother has nothing to do with this. He didn't give it to me because he didn't want to. My grandfather brought me to the capital twice to get him to give me his last name and he was always too busy."

"That's a lie. As soon as he gets here we're going to talk. You're going to get your father's last name."

"I don't want it."

“What do you mean you don’t want it? That’s your father.”

“Over my dead body will she get his last name; I rather see her dead than let her get his last name,” Josef said in an angry tone.

“This is none of your business.”

“Yes it is, she’s my sister. YOUR son has never been there for her. She had years she didn’t see him and three years prior to that which he didn’t call her or look for her. All of a sudden he’s a father to Luna. She doesn’t need his last name or anything from him for that matter. He never contributed anything to Luna’s life other than pain. And when she is a professional, is her mother’s last name she will honor, not his.”

“My son is a great father and husband!” The old woman exclaimed agitated as she put the plate on top of the dresser.

“I’m sure he is, to his sons and his wife, but never to Luna.”

The lady walked out of the room and spoke to Luron of the incident as soon as he walked through the door. Luron was offended and hurt.

“Luna, can I speak with you?”

“Of course.”

“You know, what your cousin did was wrong. It wasn’t her place.”

“She didn’t say anything that wasn’t true and it was her place, I allowed her to do so.”

“After the way I treated her here.”

“Her loyalty is not to you, Luron, not even for a fancy trip. Her loyalty is to me.”

“I want you to have my last name.”

“It’s too late for that, but I suggest you let your family know you’ve been an absent father to me because they are under the impression that you’re a huge part of my life.”

“My love, I’m trying to build a relationship with you.”

“After twenty-two years. I’m a human being, not a cherub.”

We arrived at New York, thanked him for the great time when he dropped us off in our house and didn’t see him again for a long time.

Josefina:

I received another call from Jazz in the middle of the night saying that she was sick in the hospital. When I arrived Luna was rolling over in pain. After a shot of morphine and two doses of Percocet the pain subsided. I had no idea what to tell her mom but I had to call her because she was going to spend the night in the hospital under observation.

“*Tia*, Luna’s in the hospital with a stomach pain. They gave her pain killer and are keeping her overnight under observation.”

“What hospital is she in? I’m heading over now.”

“Is okay *Tia*, she’s sleeping now. It was probably something she ate.”

“Josefina, what hospital?”

“St. Vincent’s Hospital.”

She showed up with a pony tail that threatened to poke out anybody’s eyes if they stood too close to her and some high water green sweats, with white socks and black and red reebok sneakers. I wasn’t sure if I was more afraid for Luna’s health or *Tia*’s fashion. I mean, it was pretty disastrous.

“What did the doctor say?”

“They think is a virus or something she ate. They’re giving her IV and pain killers.”

I was sure that Luna wouldn’t want her mom to know that she was sexually active. Hiding it from *Tia* was going to take a fully equipped FBI team and to Luna’s misfortune I didn’t even know a cop.

We waited patiently for Luna to wake up and for the Doctor to return. To Luna’s luck the doctor did not speak Spanish and was not obligated to translate for *Tia*; Luna was an adult, at

least in the doctor's eyes. There were three letters that didn't escape her, GYN. She understood that really fast and I wanted no part of that conversation. But I was on the wrong side of the room, *Tia* was near the door and I had no way of getting out. Luna didn't take her eyes off the doctor as he told her that she needed to see her GYN the following day and that he was recommending surgery based on the frequencies of her pain and her visits to the ER. I wanted to grow wings in my back, carry Luna, and fly far away from that room. There was nothing comforting about the harshness in the doctor's nature and the fury in *Tia's* face. Unable to bare her position, I kept my eyes focused on the clock on the purple wall, tick tick tick, 2:57am.

"Luna, what's going on?" *Tia* Petronila asked her as soon as the doctor left the room.

"The doctor is recommending I get surgery. I have something called Endometriosis that is causing me chronic pain during menstruation and now randomly."

"What is that? And how long have you known about this?"

"Is the number one cause for infertility in women and I've known for two years."

"How did you get it?"

"They say it's because the tissues of the menstruation don't leave my body and gather around my uterus and ovaries."

"You can cure that by having a baby, I was like that when I was your age and it went away when I had your older sister. You can get better by drinking bottles of melasa," *Tia* told Luna.

"Mela what?" I asked.

"Is a homemade remedy known to help with all the women organs. I'll ask your Grandma to send you one from DR."

Luna and I looked at her in awe. She didn't ask if Luna was having sex with Jazz or not. She sat in a chair next to Luna and didn't get up until the doctor gave her the release paper. I sat on the other side of the tiny bed, avoiding contact with *Tia*, terrified that she would punch me in the face or pinch me until she saw blood coming out of my skin. We were supposed to look after each other and I had done a horrible job with Luna. I knew I had let her down.

The following morning both *Tia* and I visited the GYN with Luna. Jazz had not called since he had left the hospital to ask how Luna was doing. I didn't tell Luna anything, she had enough in her head, but it had to cross her mind that the dude that claimed to love her was a fully functional dressed animal with two legs. We sat in the waiting area in a warmly decorated room. There were cute pictures of babies which I caught Luna glancing at, fresh tulips in a vase on top of the magazine table, and a few magazines on women health and parenting. It was cleaned, smelled of new paint, tulips, and lavender spray.

“DeLuna Lopez.”

Luna walked in alone, refusing for aunt Petronila or me to go in with her. Thirty minutes later she came out with the eyelids a bit swollen and holding a tissue in her right hand.

“What did the doctor say?” Aunt Petronila asked anxiously.

“The doctor scheduled me for an endoscopy for February 14th. He wants to open me up to confirm that it's Endometriosis. If it's not he thinks it may be mental being that everything else is okay.”

“What does he mean mental? He thinks you're crazy?”

“He thinks that if it is not Endometriosis, it could be in my head.”

“If you're crazy, than what am I doing out roaming the streets?” I asked her.

“You're so silly.”

“How long will you have to stay in the hospital?” *Tia* asked.

“It’s an ambulatory procedure; I leave the same day after I recover.”

Jazz dropped us off at the hospital that morning and had compromised to pick us up. Who ever wanted compromise when there was love somewhere out there? He was starting to change. The tenderness he had for her was starting to vanish with each touch and each kiss. I noticed this when he said goodbye to her before the surgery. He opened the door for us, gave her a kiss on the cheek, and rubbed her shoulder as he told her, “I’ll see you in a few, Pretzel.” There was no I love you, I’ll be there when you wake up, everything will be okay, there was only a, I’ll see you in a few. And I wanted to take that ‘I’ll see you in a few’ and shove it up his ass as a token of my appreciation.

Tia and I sat patiently in the waiting room. Every ten minutes I came up with an excuse to use my telephone, go to the bathroom, or check the status of Luna’s surgery with the nurse. But the truth was that I didn’t want to stay alone with *Tia*. I didn’t want to say anything that I wasn’t supposed to, especially about Jazz. An hour later the doctor came out to let us know that the surgery was finished and that Luna should be able to receive visitors in an hour after the anesthesia had worn out. We grabbed a bite to eat and went in to see Luna.

The last time I saw her that fragile was the day in Grandma’s sanctuary. Her body looked frail and delicate. Like the pinch of a needle could break her in half. My heart became overwhelmed with emotions. I wanted her to be young, healthy, and normal; to live a full life.

“Hey glamour girl,” I told her when she opened her eyes and smiled.

“Hey.” The dryness of her lips barely allowing her to speak.

The doctor stopped by a few minutes later to give his diagnosis. I held her hand on one side as *Tia* caressed her tangled hair.

“The good news is that you’re not crazy. The bad news is that you have chronic Endometriosis. I tried to remove some of it but it was pretty bad. That explains you’re excessive pain. I will refer you to the number one doctor in NY for Endometriosis and he can perform a second surgery later this year if you continue to have pain.”

“Okay. Thank you! Can I go home?”

“In an hour or two, after you drink water and use the bathroom.”

“Okay.”

Jazz picked us up and dropped us off in the house. He helped to take her up to the house and left shortly after. An hour later he showed up with a rose for Luna and food from one of their favorite restaurants. They ate in the room alone. I couldn’t tell you what they talked about or what he said to make her feel better. All she told me was that he was starting a second job as a security guard in a club and was starting that night.

“He’s starting a new job on the day of your surgery that happens to fall on Valentine day?” I asked sarcastically.

“I know it sounds bad, but he needs the money.”

“Luna the guy is an asshole with a capital A! Why do you deal with him?”

“At least he brought dinner and a rose before leaving for work.” Luna lay back down as she grabbed her stomach in pain.

“You know Mama, I know you’re in pain, and I should be nice to you. But, the food and rose is a bullshit way of covering up all his fucking dirt. I hope his dick falls off today for being such a prick.”

“Josef, I don’t need this today, I’m in a lot of pain.”

“You don’t need this ever. He’s no good Luna and you need to get rid of him.”

“Okay, I will. But I’m going to take a nap first, okay.”

“Whatever, I love you too. I’ll be here when you wake up to remind you again in case you forget.”

“Okay.” Closing her eyes and dosing off.

I knew things between her and Jazz weren’t great. She was with me every weekend and I stopped asking about him. He was always working, babysitting his parent’s apartment or had to walk their dog. Once, Luna had to work a twelve hour shift. She had been trying to reach him but his phone was off. I wasn’t sure if she was worried or if her instinct were finally starting to alert her. She asked me to go check if he was in the apartment but when I went nobody answered the door. When she got in touch with him the following day he said his phone wasn’t charged and that he was with his best friend. Luna had spoken to his best friends and neither knew where he was. Luna didn’t need proof. He was showing her in a million ways that he didn’t care.

It was extremely difficult to watch her being made a fool of. The second surgery happened that fall and he went to visit her almost every day. Mr. Jazz behaved like a boyfriend, which made Luna happy but made me suspicious. That December he turned in his apartment in Manhattan because he wanted to be closer to his family. The conversations of moving in together and starting a family had been replaced with, “I need to save money, Luna.”

In March 2004 Luna got her first professional job as a Marketing Assistant for a book publishing company. She was ecstatic. I took her out for drinks to celebrate a new chapter of her life.

“Did you give Jazz the good news?” I asked half drunk.

“Not yet, he’s working tonight and is probably sleeping.”

“You should go surprise him.”

“I don’t know where he lives. I haven’t been to his new apartment yet.”

“What?”

“I know. I know. I told him I don’t care if the place is ugly that I want to see it but he always makes an excuse. We’ve been arguing a lot over it.”

“We need to follow him one of these days. Dress all in black and catch him in full action.”

“You’re so crazy.”

“You’re crazy, Luna, you need to learn to stand for something.”

“I know.”

I wasn’t the only one telling her. Aunt Petronila started pressuring her to start a family and she didn’t necessarily have Jazz in mind. I was there the summer day he called her to tell her he had quit his job to start his own business and that he will continue to work as a security guard as a safety net. Luna supported his decision but I knew her well enough to know that she was concerned. She was a corporate working woman with a college degree. And she was in a relationship with a man that didn’t have a degree, didn’t have a job, she didn’t know where he lived or who he lived with, and he barely had time to see her. I couldn’t understand why she would stay with him. Why was she allowing him to get away with so much? She kept saying she was trying to protect him, but I wasn’t sure from what or who. It’s not like Luna could protect him from his own stupidity or bad decisions.

My journey had been decided by the decisions I made; every single one of them. I wasn't sure why I had stayed with Jazz for so long, to protect him or to hide from myself? All I knew was that the shield that he had been to me once had turned into a sword. I didn't know how to stay or how to leave. I found myself constantly fighting the invisible and the impossible. And every blow was one I knew that could come but I never expected.

The dreams began to give me mixed signals, one day I was flying freely and the next day I was being buried. Nothing made sense. My thoughts had become a volcano of emotions. Constantly destroying everything it touched. I began to prepare myself to leave Jazz but couldn't help but be there for him when he needed me. That evening when he stopped by to express his frustration with his business and his inability to deal with the failure, I listened cautiously. Looking for signals or a vision of what to expect of him, but blankness blinded me.

“What are you going to do?” I asked him attentively.

“I'm going to try and get a job. Maybe finish school.”

“That's great!”

“Can you help me find a job?”

“Anything I can do to help you.”

And I did, I made a few calls within the corporation I was working for and was able to refer him for a Security Guard role. He got the job and was scheduled to start in March. Jazz was so excited about having a flexible schedule of 11am to 7pm. They even gave him five new suits which he handpicked from Bloomingdales. I helped him apply for three colleges but he

postponed his return until a better time. I was genuinely happy for him. He invited me to dinner with his first paycheck to an expensive seafood place.

“Cheers to a new beginning!”

“Cheers,” I said.

“Once I save some money we can move in together and start a family,” Jazz told me as he held my hand.

“I started looking for an apartment. Mom is moving to a two bedroom apartment and has asked me to move out. She thinks it’s time I become independent. So, I’ve been looking.”

“Luna, I just started this new job.”

“I know. I’m not asking you to move in with me. But I can’t keep doing this. We’ve been together for almost 8 years and if you’re not ready, you may never be. Maybe I’m not the woman for you.”

“Don’t say that Luna, I want to be with you.”

“Jazz, I’m starting a new chapter of my life, with or without you. That’s up to you.”

“Don’t give me any ultimatums, DeLuna!”

“No pressure at all. I’m just letting you know where I stand.”

“After seven years, you’re just willing to leave?”

“I don’t even know where you live Jazz.”

“I told you a million times, I’m embarrassed to show you where I live. Haven’t I always been there for you? Haven’t I showed you I love you?”

“Sure, you definitely have; by leaving me alone during the surgeries, by going missing every weekend, by always being too busy. You didn’t even write to me when I was in Spain. I

love you Luna. I love you so much but where was your love when I needed it? Huh? Where was it?"

"Don't say that, you know you're my world."

"Your world is vanishing before you and you haven't even stopped to notice."

He promised that he would change but I was too exhausted to believe him. He started coming around every other day, wanting to spend quality time with me and bringing me thoughtful gifts, such as roses, chocolates, sneakers, notebooks, and books. Meanwhile, I continued to look for apartments with Josef. We had decided that we would each get our own place but we still did the apartment hunt together. We each found an apartment and paid our deposits to move in May 1st, our first big responsibility.

"Charles told me you and Josef found an apartment."

"We did. She is staying in Harlem and I'm moving to Washington Heights, is only a 15 minutes commute in public transportation."

"When are we moving in? How much was the deposit so that I can give you half?"

"Jazz, you don't have to do this."

"I want to."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm ready to start a life with you."

We moved in together the first weekend of May. He loved the spacious apartment and sunken living room. His friends brought the bedroom set we had picked out together, his clothing, and radio system. He also brought one big frame of an ugly boat his parents gave him and a mirror that was older than my great grandmother. He didn't stay in the house that first week because he had to housesit his parent's co-op apartment. However, he was there the

following week. We went shopping for sofas and a coffee table and a million other things a new couple needs for their first apartment.

He kept the security guard job at the club during the weekend to make extra money. Late at night before getting home he would call me and asked me, “Luna, can you tell them what I want to order. I’m starving! You want anything for you Pretzel?” We would sit in the kitchen table at 3am and eat, talk, laugh, kiss, and end up in the bedroom or the living room. Every Sunday I would fix dinner for him and we would watch all of our favorite shows on HBO.

Everything was fine until beginning of July when he started staying out of the house. The excuses were endless: my parents are old and I have to walk the dog for my mom, I have to grab food for them from the supermarket, and I have to get a haircut in the morning. I waited up for him but sometimes he just didn’t show up. Josef, my mother, cousins, and friends began to pressure me to kick him out.

“If he’s not coming home to you, he’s going home to someone else,” mom told me once.

“I already told him he needs to start coming home every day.”

“It’s not speaking, is doing; change the locks, don’t open the door, teach him a lesson, Luna.”

“I know.”

“I know nothing. I’ll be damn if you let him make a fool of you.”

“I have to go, mom.”

She was right though, I wasn’t comfortable with living with a man that only came home three or four times out of the week. Where was he spending his nights? I tried to talk to him numerous times but nothing changed. Suddenly, he didn’t want me to save him food because he was going to the gym and working out. And I was distraught. I barely went out to avoid hearing

the 1,000 advises and comments friends and family had to offer. I would stay home alone, drinking wine, watching the same movies weekend after weekend, and listening to music. Sometimes he would find me in the sofa and would carry me to bed.

One Sunday evening, we were laying on the sofa watching a show. My head was on his chest. Unexpectedly, an image of a white, thin, blonde woman crossed my mind. I tried to close my eyes but the image of her face wouldn't go away. Jazz began to kiss my lips and neck but all I saw was her image hanging over his head. I began to push his head away from me but he continued to navigate his tongue down my body. I kicked his stomach with my legs until he pulled away from me.

“What the heck is wrong with you?”

“Nothing, I'm just not in the mood.”

The image of the woman disappeared. I looked around the room to make sure it wasn't anywhere else. I walked away to the room and left Jazz sitting there mumbling something under his breath.

Dream of Blonde Woman

The light bulb in the small room flickered. I was wearing a hospital gown tied in the back with neon pink socks. I looked around the room as I sat on the bed. Abruptly, the walls to the room wiped out and I was sitting on the bed in an open space. The bright room was filled with patients crying, laying down, and being consulted by the doctors. A short, thin, White, blonde woman approached me. She was wearing a gown herself and stood in front of me without saying a word.

“Can I help you?”

The young woman didn't say anything. She simply stared at me.

“Who are you with?”

She grabbed me by the hand and walked me past the room filled with patients into a long narrow hallway. Gently she lifted her right hand and pointed at a figure that I couldn't make out in the distance. As the figure approached us I felt her left hand hold my right hand tightly. Jazz was walking towards us with two bouquets of red roses. He froze in front of us as her image came and went perceptively.

The following day I woke up early and cleaned the house, drank Corona and listened to Spanish music. Jazz was sleeping behind closed doors in the bedroom as I turned the house upside down. When he woke up at 3pm his dinner had already been fixed and I was waiting for him with a tight leopard skirt, black high heels, and a tight black tank top.

“Good morning you,” I kissed him on the lips.

“Good afternoon Pretzel.”

“Wake up, so that you can eat before you head out to work.”

“Okay. I’m getting up, I’m getting up.”

He tossed me on my back playfully lifting my shirt with his teeth. His hands removed my bras and kissed the tip of my nipple gently until they were hard and my legs were opened. I climbed on top of him as he grabbed my ass and I played with my clitoris and my nipples. His knees buckled as he came inside of me. I climbed off him and lay my head on his chest, closing my eyes as I felt his lips on my forehead. I asked myself had I been a fool for having unprotected sex with him the past five years.

“Jazz, are you seeing a White girl?”

“What? No, Luna, I’m not seeing anybody.”

“Are you sure?”

“When will I have time to see her? I work two jobs and I’m always here or at my parents.”

“You’re not always here and when you are the first thing you do is turn off your cell phone.”

“That’s because I want to rest and don’t want to be bothered.”

“I’m tired Jazz, just tell me the truth.”

“Let me guess, Josef is talking shit about me again or you had another of your weird dreams. Can a man be at peace in his house?” He walked away and went into the shower.

I no longer knew what to believe or who to believe. I put my clothing back on but remained barefooted; feeling the coldness of the wood floor under my feet. His suit was hanging from his closet door in the foyer; a black suit with a baby blue button down shirt. On the closet door was the shadow of *San Gregorio Hernandez* with his head cast down. I walked to the kitchen and walked back but his shadow was still there. I sat on the bed as Jazz got dressed, just looking at him, trying to capture the details of his image, his essence, his love for me. But all I saw was emptiness.

“I’ll call you to let you know if I’m coming home tonight,” Jazz gave me a kiss on the cheek as he walked out.

I sat on the sofa listening to music, drinking wine and beer, and staring at an empty page in my journal. There was nothing to write, everything had been written. At around 10pm when I knew he was working I grabbed a chair and placed it in front of his closet. When I opened the door the image of *San Gregorio Hernandez* disappeared but when I closed it his image would return. I left the door open, observing the crowded yet organized closet; four expensive Boss’ suits from Bloomingdales, twenty jeans stacked on the top part of the closet, five pairs of air force one, three pairs of dressy shoes, two black and one brown, two timberlands, a big red and navy blue sweater, gray sweaters, polo shirts, white and blue striped button down shirts, and a white plastic bag tight with a knot laying on the floor.

Where to start? Did I even want to start? Mom always told me that when a woman sought evidence is because she had to be ready to find it. My hands navigated the texture of the pockets

of his suit, his sweaters, and jackets, but there was nothing. I climbed on top of the chair and checked each jean pocket but there was nothing. I sat on the floor Indian style with the white plastic bag on top of my legs as I went through every single paper. There were cards, notes, and letters I had written him over the years. One card had a similar handwriting to mine, I could have sworn it was my handwriting, but at the bottom it was signed Tatiana O. (2003). I found a picture of a girl in a bathing suit from 1999 and some faxed papers of his resume. The fax was going to someone by the name T. Olvich and the letterhead was for the home where he had gotten the job a few years prior. Exhausted of looking through his stuff I put the bag away. *San Gregorio Hernandez* picture reappeared.

At one in the morning, Jazz sent me a text saying that he would be coming home around 3am. I opened the closet door one more time and went through each jean pocket again. This time I found an orange thong that read sexy on the string. I took the thong, the card, the pictures, and the letter and placed them on top of the sofa. The image was gone and all that was left was my tears, my pain, and my betrayal.

I waited for Jazz on the sofa. The melancholic music was still playing, and three bottles of wine sat on top of the coffee table with two glasses of wine, one used and one clean. I looked around the living room hoping to find an answer but all I found was loneliness and silence. I wasn't sure who I had been trying to protect all these years. Who was he? Who was I? The door knob creaked as he opened the door, a big smile on his face as always.

“Pretzel, what are you doing up?”

“I was waiting for you.”

He walked towards the sofa. I sat on the right hand side and the pictures, letters, and orange thong were in the middle.

“You were going through my stuff?”

“So, you’re going to deny you’ve been seeing someone else? The evidence is there, Jazz.”

“Fine, I slept with two girls while you were in Spain, but it meant nothing. One of them said she loves me and wrote me letters but I never saw her again.”

“And the thong in your back pocket? They’re not mine Jazz. You’ve been carrying them around for five years.”

“I put them there on purpose to see if you were going through my stuff and I was right.”

“You bought panties with stains?”

“Yes, I did. I cheated, five years ago. Suit me, I’m a man. It wasn’t easy Luna. If it makes you feel better sleep with whomever you want.”

My right hand hit his face with such impact that his face turned and he held my wrist tightly.

“If you touch me again, I swear...”

“You’re going to hit me Jazz? Go ahead! Just be ready to fight me like a man if you do. Let me go if you know what’s good for you.”

“Luna. Luna. Luna!” I heard him say as I walked away from him to the bedroom.

My eyes remained closed for fear of seeing anything. I didn’t want to see anything else. The tears accumulated on the edges of my throat, held hostage by the pressure of my pride. I didn’t want to sleep, think, or be me. One deep breath at a time. I lay on the bed with my feet where my head was supposed to be, opposite Jazz, opposite myself. I felt his hand holding on to my ankle later that morning as he whispered words I couldn’t make out or refused to make out.

When I couldn't stand the stillness of my body or the scent of his I got up and walked to the living room. He followed me there; his steps soundless and flimsy.

"Luna, you are the reason I wake up every day. You keep me sane."

"I can't do this anymore. I don't trust you."

"I'll change. I'm ready to be the perfect man for you, please don't leave me."

"This hurts too much."

"Say you'll give me another chance, Pretzel, one day at a time, for a lifetime."

"I need time to think."

"Whatever you decide, just remember that I always love you."

I walked away to the shower and left the apartment in a rush.

Dream of Roads Divided

I was in a bar with friends. A woman was serving us drinks in huge plastic cups. The walls were a bright red and were decorated with pictures of mosquito's skin. The floor was covered in white and brown rice and the bottle of rums were all empty. I found Josef sitting in a table with friends. I walked over to her but she didn't recognize me.

"These are all for you," the bartender told me.

"I can't drink all those drinks."

"But you think you can. Drink them."

I walked away from her unsure of what she meant; her laughter ringing in my ear as I got farther away. I found myself walking down an empty road. There were no cars, only trees and fog that were as low as the tip of my head. A woman I had never met before walked next to me. Her complexion was dark but she was tall and slim and wore a high bun on her head. Every time I looked at her, she continued to look straight ahead but smiled. We got to the corner of a street. We could only turn left or right. Before us was a stream of land that stretched from horizon to horizon. Its fields filled with horses, cows, trees, plants, and sticks with metal wire dividing the land.

"This is as far as I go. Go up the hill to your left."

"Should I get on the bus?"

"There will be other buses."

By the time I opened my mouth to say thank you she was gone. I walked up the hill towards the bus stop. Across the street, to the left, was the entrance to a dirt road. Elias was standing in front of it, dress in dirty overalls, a white tank top, and farming shoes.

“You must choose which road to take, Luna,” Elias told me.

“I don’t know which one to choose.”

“This solid road, where you can take the bus, it will be a smooth and long journey. The ending will be the same on either road, Luna, only that the bus will take longer to get there. You just have to choose where you’ll be standing. You can’t save him. You have to choose between him and you.”

“What will happen to him?”

“You’re gifted to help many, but not whom you choose my dear, *Piti*.”

“I don’t’ deserve the gift.”

“Many of us don’t but there is a reason why we were chosen.”

“I’m scared, *Piti*.”

“Just keep going, don’t look back, keep going and don’t stop until you reach the end of the road.”

Elias disappeared. There were no hugs or no kisses of comfort. There was the solid road and the dirt road. The sun was beginning to set and I stood still unsure of which road to take. The bus arrived and I ran towards it and watched it as it left without me. I walked towards the dirt road, feeling the dirt and rocks under my feet. On each side of the road there was grass, trees, the view of faraway mountains, the sound of crickets, frogs, lizards, and bees. I was alone and terrified. As the darkness greeted me I slowed my steps, tempted to stop and wait for daylight, but Elias words kept playing in my head, “Keep going until you reach the end.”

I saw lightning bugs every so often and felt the wet grass under my feet. Abruptly, my right foot got caught in a trap. I tried to free myself but couldn’t see anything and could only feel the sharpness of the object holding my foot. I looked around in desperation, scared to cry

out for help, and unable to see anything other than the shadow on the branches of the trees. Suddenly I felt a soft hand loosen the trap and get a hold of my hand. She lifted me an inch and a half from the ground and carried me to a place filled with sun light.

“That place is always tricky. Many of us get caught there.”

“Thank you,” I told her as I glanced around with astonishment at the fountain filled with water and the blue veranda filled with tables and rich food on top of them.

“Don’t thank me, thank him.” She pointed at *San Gregorio Hernandez*.

He took off his hat and bowed slightly at me.

September 2005

Josefina:

“Luna, I need your help!”

“What’s wrong?”

“Meet me in my house in 15 minutes.”

I was devastated. My boyfriend found out I had been talking to another guy. Some friend of his told him that she saw me at a restaurant with him. I tried to convince him that he was a friend but he stormed out of the house. Before he walked out he called me all types of unnecessary profanities.

“Baby is not what you think,” I told him time and time again.

“You don’t even care. Look at you, just indifferent,” he told me.

As soon as he walked out the door I began to cry and called Luna to come console me. I wanted to know if he was going to come back. She would be able to tell me; she knew these things.

“Luna, is he coming back?”

“I can’t help you Mama.”

“Come on, just this once, for me.”

“I love you, but I can’t.”

“Fine, would you at least go with me to one of those psychic places. You’re not going to let me go alone, are you?”

“Fine Josef, I’ll come with you, but I’ll wait outside.”

“You’re the best.”

I was so consumed with my life trauma that I did not even stop to ask her how she was doing. I knew how much she hated all that stuff and knew that she was making an effort for me. She looked different that day, kept laughing for no reason, unlike the sadness that had been lingering over her for the past few months. Jazz was like a joy sucking animal that drained her every day. I showered, got dressed, and talked non-stop about what had happened. Luna kept laughing and telling me it was going to be okay while she took shots of rum.

“Twenty five dollars,” the lady told me in the store. I looked to Luna for her approval. She smiled and gave me the go ahead.

After I was done the lady came out with me and told Luna, “Your turn.”

“Oh no, I’m not getting a reading,” Luna responded.

“It’s free for you.”

“You have something good to tell me.” Laughter.

“Come, I have something to tell you.”

Luna grabbed my hand so that I could go in with her. We walked into a tiny room filled with big bronze statues and a domino table in the middle, one chair on each side. She shook her head as she looked at me and rolled her eyes at me.

“Split the cards in three,” the heavy set woman told Luna.

“For my past, my present, and my future,” Luna said as she split it ironically.

“You laugh a lot, that’s good for you.”

“I think so too,” Luna said sarcastically.

“You’ve been with this dark man for six or seven years. He loves you but sometimes he feels like you don’t love him. Do you love him?”

“You tell me.”

“He has another woman in his life, a white woman. But you already know this. He’s confused and doesn’t know which one to choose. This woman will visit your house. He will leave with her. I see him lingering in front of your house, not wanting to leave you. Laugh a lot for as long as you can, for your tears will be many.”

“That’s all.”

“Why did she have to come to me when she has you?” The lady asked Luna.

“Thank you and have a great day,” Luna said as we walked out laughing.

Later that evening my boyfriend showed up just like the lady said he would and we made love like she said we would. I called Luna first thing the next morning to tell her that everything she had told me had happened.

“*Hay Mama*, what about me?” Luna said laughing, “Many tears and sadness awaits me.”

October 2005

I had allowed for Jazz to stay in the house but had not been intimate with him. He was trying to make it work but most of me had already given up.

“Are you on your way?” I asked coldly.

“No. Something came up. I don’t think I can make it home tonight. I promise to make it up to you,” Jazz said distracted.

My throat tightened and my respiration became heavy with resentment. My head felt light, my arms felt like rubber as I held the phone to my ear, and my knees felt like they were shifting backwards as they grew weaker.

I had heard that phrase so often that it irritated my ears. I may have physically become allergic to it, because it clogged my throat and gave my eyes a burning sensation, and ears an itchy feeling every time I heard it, “I’ll make it up to you.” I tried to speak but found myself taking a deep breath again.

“Not tonight. I don’t want to be alone. I won’t be alone tonight!” I repeated as I paced back and forward in the living room. I caught a glimpse of my shadow on the wall, only to turn away from it immediately and run into it again. He interrupted my thought when he said my name.

“Luna, I’m not in the mood to argue. Why would I want to come home to this?” Jazz asked irritated. Forgetting the conversation we had the previous week about him changing.

How was it possible for him to hurt me and for me to feel guilty? I asked myself. I tried to get a hold of my emotions. But they escaped my mouth with a taste of irony.

“You don’t have to, Jazz, just know that I won’t sleep alone tonight. I don’t have to deal with this.” He cut me off again, “I’ll call you back,” he said right before he hung up.

Numbness invaded my heart as I softly said, “Bye.”

I tried to calm myself down. Talk myself into a safe zone of common sense. Don’t think. Not right now. Not today. Please don’t think. Everything is going to be okay. I promised to make things right. I repeated to myself as I closed my eyes and clasped my hands together as if preparing myself to say a prayer. But praying while unstable was like staying dry while you were outside without an umbrella and it was raining.

“Can I live without Jazz? Do I want to live with Jazz?” My mind asked me.

“I love him,” said my heart.

“Things will only get worst,” screamed the temperamental mind.

“Love forgives. He loves you,” said the heart firmly.

“Really? does love usually hurt the one it loves?” asked the mind mockingly.

“Love makes mistakes. We all do,” supplicated the heart.

“There’s a difference between making mistakes and not giving a shit,” screamed the mind.

“You used to believe in giving chances,” said the heart disappointed.

“I had no choice but to grow up,” said the mind.

I turned around and found a bookshelf filled with books that I promised myself I would read; books that I was excited to share with Jazz over dinner or during late night talks. But that never happened. None of the books were appealing. They sat there motionless. They all looked the same. Their bright color didn't distinguish them. In a small space, among all those unfamiliar pages, I noticed a blue spiral notebook with colored flowers, butterflies and pink pages. I took five steps and bent down before I could feel its texture. Only to remember, that once I had dreams beyond that day.

I stood up and grabbed my black jacket. I left the apartment in complete silence and solitude. I forgot to notice the white, pink and yellow flowers as I exited the building and rushed towards the payphone. The white cut-off paper felt crusty against my cold fingers. I dialed the number and waited for a ring tone. The line was still busy. I tried two more times but I continued to get a busy signal.

I headed back to the empty apartment with my head hung low and my disappointment nearly choking my pride. I opened the door. The darkness crept inside my goose bumps and sat side by side with my thoughts, questioning their right to exist, and validating the results of my choices. Choices I was not aware I had made. Perhaps I didn't. Maybe they were made for me. Where had I been those eight years? Had I been blind? Did I really not know what was going on during those eight years? Maybe, I knew all along.

I walked past the empty foyer. I had wanted it to be a resting area and Jazz wanted it to be our entertainment room. He wanted the walls to be red and I wanted blue. I sat on the sofa. Eyes shut. I allowed my body to lose its balance and fall to the right side of the sofa. I accommodated myself into a fetal position as I hoped silently for nothing and everything. Empty.

I felt empty and drained. I looked at my cell phone and thought of a person to call: Mother, Grandma, or Josefina. I didn't know what to say to any of them. There was nothing that they could have said to me, that they had not already told me. I wished I could call Jazz but I didn't have the audacity to dial his number. I was too tired, of him, of me, of us.

My left hand wandered into my pocket and grabbed the crusty white cut-off paper. I didn't have the energy to go downstairs. Not a third time. I sat up and opened my cell phone. I contemplated the screen of the cell phone that indicated that it was 8:37 p.m. I analyzed the thought that was roaming through my head and the consequences of carrying out such actions. That day I was my mother's daughter. Mother always acted. Not me. I had to think things through to make sure I wasn't making a mistake. Not that day.

My mind became quiet as my emotions urged me to dial the telephone number. I had dialed it so much I almost knew it by heart. My heart began to beat as fast as a racing car. I hung up before it rang a second time.

I can't do this. I can't do this. This is not the way I was raised. But, I can't keep doing this to myself. I have to find the strength to do something about this situation. I have to find the courage to face my reality. I have to do this for me. I need answers. And I need them soon, I told myself.

I opened my cell phone and dialed the numbers one more time. I could feel the force of my heart uplift the center of my spine; creating lumps of fear and doubt in my blood stream.

"Hello." The voice sounded soothing and calm. I wasn't sure what to say or do. Mom had not prepared me for that. Mom did not tell me what to say in that situation. Mom is not always going to be there for you, I recalled her telling me once.

“Hello,” the voice repeated with no sign of frustration.

“Hello, with Tatiana please,” I heard my voice ask in a distant tone.

“This is Tatiana.”

Yes, she was Tatiana. But who was I? I was the woman who was about to change the rest of her life the instant I spoke.

“Hi Tatiana, you don’t know me. But I am calling because I believe that we may be seeing the same person or may have been involved with the same person at some point. I understand that this has to be very confusing for you. It is troubling to me too. I am just trying to find answers,” I heard myself say aloud.

“Who is this?” She asked perplexed.

“That’s not important,” I replied with a sense of detachment. It was not the easiest conversation to have. But I was determined to make an attempt.

I continued to speak, “I will tell you my name if it turns out that we are or were involved with the same man. But first, I need to make sure that this is indeed the case. If you have a few minutes to talk I would appreciate it. If you don’t, I completely understand. I can assure you that I will not inconvenience you again,” I concluded, as I played with the holes in my faded, blue, broken denims.

I waited patiently for her response.

Tatiana apologized in a genuine tone, “I’m sorry. I don’t know who this is. I don’t feel comfortable speaking with you.”

My heart felt trapped, restless, and relieved. I wanted answers but I couldn't force her to speak with me. I had to let it go. All I found the courage to say as I came face to face with humiliation was, "Thank you, I apologize if I inconvenienced you in any way, have a good night."

I looked down at my legs to confirm that they were still there. My entire body felt anesthetized. I felt as if my spirit had abandoned me and wondered off with the moment.

I looked at my cell phone and realized that she could call back and hear my name on the voicemail. I speed dialed my voicemail frantically. And selected the option to change my greeting to 'please leave a message and I will get back to you.' I felt relieved. I didn't want Jazz to know what I was up to. Just in case I was wrong. I guessed Lifetime movies were not completely a waste of my time.

As I finished, my cell phone rang. I was terrified to look at the number. What if it was Tatiana? What would I say? I finally found the guts to look at it, only to find 'pretzel' reflected on the screen.

"Hello," I said in an inaccessible tone.

"Luna, I'm on my way home, okay," Jazz said.

"Okay," I said without asking what changed his mind.

"Would you like me to order dinner or should I wait for you to get here?" I asked as I walked over to the TV stand.

"Just wait for me to get there. Marcus is driving me to the train station. I should be there in an hour or so," Jazz said and he asked "Are we watching a show tonight?"

Somebody was trying to call me. It was Tatiana. I didn't want to hang up on Jazz and wasn't sure if I wanted to speak with her at that point. I continued my conversation with Jazz and ignored Tatiana's call. I had hoped Jazz didn't notice my nervousness.

"Are you okay, pretzel?" he asked me.

"Yes. I'm okay," I replied. I'm not sure what else Jazz said after that. I couldn't help but wonder why she called back.

My phone rang again. Tatiana's number appeared persistently, demanding to finish a conversation I had initiated.

"Hello. Is this DeLuna? Is this Luna?" she asked puzzled.

"No," I replied confused. How did she know my name and nickname? Was I right all along? She wanted answers too. Maybe we were seeking the same answers, I thought.

She continued to speak in a composed voice, "I called back because I knew that I would not be able to sleep after your mysterious call. I would like us to speak," Tatiana said.

"Thank you for calling back," I said as I turned the TV off. "I'm glad you changed your mind. I will ask you a few questions. And I promise that in the end I will be honest and tell you if we are or were dating the same person, okay," I reassured her.

"Okay," she said.

"Are you currently in a relationship?" I asked as I walked to the empty library area.

"Yes."

“How long have you been in this relationship?” I asked as I walked back to the couch and sat down.

“Three years.”

My heart stopped. I looked down at the space between my crossed legs. My head felt heavy. Destiny was making its way towards me and there was nothing I could do to stop it.

“Hello, are you there?” Tatiana asked troubled by the long pause.

“Yes. Is he White, Black or Latino?” I asked with a composed voice and teary eyes.

“He is Black,” I heard her say.

“Does he have curly hair?” I took a long deep breath; already knowing the answer.

“Yes, he does.”

“Say his name, Tatiana,” I asked her softly.

“Jazz.”

Every vision, every dream, every feeling suddenly made sense. I had seen it all and discarded it. I didn't deserve to cry or hurt. I should have known better. I wanted the crevices of the wood floor to swallow me and spit me into a space where nothing existed. I couldn't understand why he would choose to hurt me. Perhaps, he never wanted to be saved to begin with. Maybe, I was too afraid to save myself all along.

That evening Tatiana came to my house and we waited for Jazz to get home. We confronted him together. After three hours of talking about all the things that didn't make sense,

it finally made sense. The days he wasn't with me, he was with her. She waited for him, while I waited for him to leave.

"Luna, I love him too much to leave him," Tatiana sobbed and whispered to me as she kneeled next to me by the sofa.

"You don't have to worry about me. I refuse to dedicate him one more day of life."

"I wish I were as strong as you."

"I'm not strong. I'm just tired."

"Jazz, you have to go."

"I don't want to go."

Tatiana cried as she waited for him by the door. He wept for me, while she wept for him. And I didn't weep at all. They left the house and I cried like life had robbed me of time.

October 2005

So many things died in me that evening; that I had nothing left in me to give.

One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, *nine*, I lifted my head to find a door. I stared at the knob. I grabbed it softly, trying to keep my warm hands from disrupting its coolness. I wondered if things felt. Did physical things have feelings? Did objects have their own dimension of emotions? The door was closed and opened and opened and closed at least five hundred times a day. It didn't complain. The door didn't say, "Don't slam me so hard." It simply did its job, open and close when needed. I wished I was a door. No emotions and no pain.

One, two, three, four - another door, it was better that doors didn't have emotions. But those two doors were closed to each other. If they did have feelings, they would be content and even grateful to have each other at first. But at some point, they would grow tired of each other. They would become too comfortable with each other's presence and will easily become irritated, annoyed, and disrespectful. They would grow to resent each other and would fail to appreciate each other's attributes. It was better that they had no feelings. Doors didn't hurt. They didn't smile, but they didn't cry either. They just stood and obeyed. Nothing bothered them because nothing existed.

The cement on the sidewalk was dark. I wondered about the last time someone cared to clean it. It was covered with fresh and old saliva that people disposed from their mouth as they pleased. Plastered with gum, as if they were New York City fallen stars. The garbage was piled in front of buildings. I looked up to find a beautiful blue sky in comparison to the dirty streets. I couldn't touch the sky, it was too far. I couldn't feel the floor, it was too dirty. But I could smell

the pissed mixed with mud odor. I wondered if angels really existed, the sky was too clean to be inhabited by angels. Nothing like the city, I could tell that people lived on earth. Many had left their trademark. I wondered if the cement could feel me. Could I leave more than saliva, gum or garbage? Could I leave that pain? Could I have laid it on that ground to never find it again? Could the knot in my throat be transformed to spit? Could it have gotten lost among the already existing saliva? Did Jazz ever spit in the streets? Did he toss his gum on the sidewalk when it became too bland? I couldn't remember if he ate gum because I couldn't recall a moment when I saw him chewing gum. I wished he didn't. It wasn't a nice thing to do to the streets or to the gum. It was inconsiderate and selfish to enjoy the gum when it was sweet and fresh and to throw it in the middle of a dirty city when it was of no greater use. Even a gum deserved a better home than a sidewalk.

I raised my hands to my eyes and wiped the tears that eluded me as I crossed the street. It was early, I couldn't call mom. I wasn't ready to hear her say, "I told you so." Not yet. I was hurting in places I didn't know existed within me. I grabbed my phone and I found no missed calls. No messages saying 'morning pretzel, have a good day, love you.' That was no longer there and it never would be. It was gone. I wasn't sure if I was angry, relieved, or scared. What would happen to Jazz? I couldn't protect Jazz. I had no choice but to let go. All I had left was the memories. And I wasn't sure I wanted to keep them. I knew that his face would begin to fade along with his smile and his hands. I would remember moments but I wouldn't be sure if they were truly mine or if they were truly his. How would I know with time that I really lived those moments? How did I know that I wouldn't lose that too?

I dialed Josefina's work number.

“Morning Sunshine,” she said enthusiastically as I heard her chewing gum on the other end.

“I don’t want you to hear it from anyone else. I left Jazz.”

“What happened? Are you okay? Where are you?”

“You were right. He had another girl for three years. I’m going home,” I replied in a cold and robotic tone.

“I’m going to go to your house as soon as I get out of work. Okay. Stay strong Mama. He doesn’t deserve you. You’ll be fine,” She said sounding like a motivational speaker.

“Okay. Bye.” I hung up.

You’ll be fine. He doesn’t deserve you. Knowing that he didn’t deserve me didn’t make me hurt any less. Understanding that I deserved better, didn’t make the pain any less, it hurt the same. I knew that I would have to leave, but I never expected the farewell to be so painful. Grandpa would be happy and Grandma probably knew. She knew all along that it wouldn’t work. She knew that my story wouldn’t be different, that it would be just another sad love story.

My head didn’t have the flexibility to look up at the sky again. Why should I, I couldn’t touch it anyways and I didn’t want to see what came next. What was the point of knowing? My feet felt light, like they could fail me any second.

“You Win,” I said aloud.

October 2005

Josefina:

I remember us seating in DeLuna's kitchen table later that evening; Luna, Leslie, my sister Ana, and me. Leslie had bought two bottles of chardonnay and had lit a red candle to create a rendezvous' mood.

Luna didn't say anything. She sat quietly with a glass of wine in front of her. I could tell she had not touched it because her lip prints were nowhere to be seen in the glass. She looked straight ahead at the white wall that needed painting. Any color would have done, but it needed color. I wondered if she knew that it needed color. Jazz never cared that she was extremely pale for a Latin woman. He always said he had enough color for both of them. Color my ass. He was a dark shadow that sucked the life out of her.

The girls had drunk two glasses of wine already and were very free spirited about their thoughts, myself included. I had arrived late but was already on glass number three.

"Let's make a toast, gals," Leslie said as she raised her glass.

We all raised our glasses except for Luna. She looked at our nearly empty glasses and shifted her eyes back to her full glass. As if it were as heavy as all three of us put together, which would have been a total of about 394 pounds, myself, being the fattest portion. I placed her hand at the bottom part of the glass and lifted it with her until I felt she was ready to hold it on her own.

"To a new beginning," Ana said.

“To leaving assholes behind,” I added.

“Hallelujah,” Leslie said as she raised her left hand pretending to praise the Lord.

We toasted and took a sip. Luna barely tasted the wine. She sat still, like a photograph waiting to be framed. I had known her my whole life. She was never quiet, never. Not when she was sick, tired, or scared. She wasn't even quiet when she was shy. But she was silent. She was hurt because good for nothing Jazz walked out of her life with another woman. For the first time I didn't know what was going through her head. I always knew, even when she didn't tell me, I still knew. But I didn't know that night, maybe, because I didn't know that type of pain. We had gone through everything together. But that time, like the time in the Dominican Republic, she was going through it alone. These were not experiences I understood. All I could do was sit next to her while she explored territories unknown to me. Although I couldn't understand her struggle, I knew I was angry. Angry at Jazz for putting Luna through a heart break she didn't deserve. Luna was so calm and passive, that I had no choice but to be mad for her and me. I was as mad as the Russian woman that had placed fire crackers on her husband's dick while he was asleep.

My irate spirit sank back into the conversation Leslie and Ana were having. I didn't care much for Leslie's shabby story about some dude she had met some time ago, who had lied to her about being married. The scrupulous idiot was with Leslie during the first months of his marriage. Now, that was a motivational speech for single women. She was distraught that a man could do that to her and his wife. And on she went. As if Luna should hear that, it should have been only about Luna and her pain. However, the story sparked an idea in me.

“Ladies, it’s not fair that Luna is hurting and that the idiot of Jazz is fine and dandy with his stupid girl,” I said.

“Let’s break all his clothes,” Leslie suggested.

“I love it. Let’s cut it up into pieces,” I added as I stood up from my chair and grabbed a big kitchen knife.

“I don’t want to,” Luna said as she looked at all of us with watery eyes.

It was my first time meeting vulnerability up close and it wasn’t a pretty image.

“It’ll make you feel better, Luna,” Ana said in a sales tone.

“He deserves that and more,” I added.

“It’s not going to change how I feel. It won’t change anything.” Luna looked at Ana for support.

“Try one sweater and see how you feel,” Leslie said.

I got up from the table and walked towards the foyer. His closet was neatly organized. I found a nice gray polo sweatshirt with a teddy bear in the middle that I saw him wear on some random occasion. The smell of his cologne lingered in his clothing. Part of him was still there haunting my cousin; reminding her of a man that was not worth a thought, nonetheless her tears or consideration.

“Ladies, let’s have fun,” I passed it over to Luna.

She grabbed it and tried to break it with her hands but she couldn't and she didn't want to.

"I don't feel any better. I don't want to hurt him." She took a sip of wine.

"Is okay Mama, you love that fool, but I don't. So I'll do it for you. Okay." I grabbed the knife and attacked the sweater like a wolf.

My wrath craved more. I passed it along to Leslie. She was angry too. The charming and flamboyant side of her had turned to a Shirley temple meets Cat Woman. We need to do more harm I kept repeating to myself. I had to think for Luna, she was too hurt to think or act. That is when she needed me the most. And I wasn't about to be soft.

"Let's break all his clothes," I said as I imagined his face once he found out.

"Those suckers deserve to be hurt," Leslie added as she followed me to the Foyer.

I opened his closet space and pulled all the jeans and sweaters from the closet and threw them on the floor. All those years of hard work he had put into buying iceberg, polo, and more polo were now in our hands. I recalled Luna pulling a sweater from me and trying to get me to stop, but I had gone mad. I pointed the knife towards her and told her to stay away, "You don't know what you really want. You'll thank me one day. He doesn't deserve for you to love him so much after what he's put you through. He's fine now, but he won't be, trust me. He will think of you everyday when he wakes up and has nothing to wear. So go drink some wine. I got this." I had lost control of my emotions. I pretended not to see the tears that rolled down her cheeks. Her eyes as red as the blood that was boiling inside my veins. I couldn't stop to think about her and the truth is that she was too lost to think about herself. She was still thinking about him. She

was still protecting Jazz from his own consequences. That was his result. He had worked hard to earn that outcome.

Leslie gathered all his CDs and some of his expensive shirts and put them in a bag. She stood in front of the building, “Sir, would you like a CD? Here, have a shirt and another CD too.” Ana didn’t do much. She stared at Luna and tried to get her to understand why we were acting that way. But Luna was too tired to understand or fight back. She sat there and let the tears fall as she drank the wine. Her shoulders were slump down towards the floor. Her chest so sucked in that it could have touched her spine. While her left arm just lay on her lap motionless. Luna was defeated. You could see it in the distance of her gaze and the swollen bags under her eyes.

The \$3,000 suits from work, did not survive my rage. Those were the suits he wore to the job she got him at a corporate office. Maybe I went overboard with the shoes and sneakers and coats. Luna managed to hide his X-box and a book of CDs he had. She hid the X-box in the dirty laundry and the CD book under the bed. He didn’t loose everything though, I forgot to get the dirty laundry and the socks and underwear he had in the bedroom. I couldn’t break the radio because we were listening to music or else, I would have tossed it out the window along with his X-box games. Leslie went to the grocery store and bought black garbage bags and Clorox, “We’re celebrating the farewell of a coward,” I shouted.

The Clorox combined with his clean and torn up clothing smelled of glory. There was no turning back. The shoes had no laces and were soaking in the bathtub with Clorox and Ajax. And the clothing had as many holes in them as Luna’s heart.

“Now, who is wearing the balls?” I asked Luna as I raised my hand to get a hi-five.

She stood still without looking up at me. I knew she was mad at me and I was okay with that. I rather live with knowing she was mad and disappointed at me than knowing that Jazz got away with hurting her and I did nothing about it. I grabbed her hand and gave her a hi-five.

“You don’t get it, Josef. This is only the beginning. The worst is yet to come. This is nothing compare to what awaits me.” Luna walked away.

It took me years before I was finally able to understand what she meant that night. Luna was not only hurting for that moment. She was hurting for what was to come. After some time had passed she confessed that what she felt that night was numbness. She couldn’t feel the pain. For that brief moment she had stopped fighting. I needed to fight for her, and I didn’t regret going mad.

Luna’s feet dragged as she walked to the bedroom. She looked down at the floor afraid that it will vanish before her. I followed her to make sure she was okay.

Ana went to the liquor store and arrived with three big bottles of Armaretto under her arm and an Ipod. All selected songs for Luna. The evening turned into a mourning party. The music was so intense that it would make you cry even if you had a perfect life. Ana and I took turn playing songs, competing to find the saddest songs.

“Long live DJ Butters,” Ana said as she raised her glass with Luna.

“I got the next one,” I said knowing that the song I was about to play was closed to Luna’s heart.

“Good one DJ Break it all,” Ana said toasting with Luna.

We toasted until we couldn't toast anymore and Luna was hugging the toilet for her dear life.

I still remember vividly watching Ana and Leslie singing with Luna in the middle of the dim lit living room. Her arms opened wide when the song asked about a lover that had been forgotten. Her small hands hit her chest repeatedly when the singer hit a note about feeling distraught. Her eyes and face filled with tears as Ana tried to wipe them off her face. But they kept flowing with the same intensity of a river. There was nothing I could do other than sing along with her.

I also remember Jazz tried to call her that night.

“Why are you calling Luna?” I asked him angry.

“Josef, please put Luna on the phone,” He said with little energy.

“You and Luna have nothing to talk about. So don't call her again.”

“This is none of your business, stay out of it, and put her on the phone.”

“You made it my business. She's more than a sister to me and you better stay away from her.” I hung up the phone.

Luna's eyes met mine as I held her phone in my hand. She looked me in the eyes, looked down at the drink in her hand, took a sip and walked away. I didn't know what went through her head. I know that Ana was the only wise one among us that realized that Luna had two days without eating. She grabbed a salami and Jazz Jamaican spicy sauce and made a *locrio de salami*, which was basically rice and salami mixed together. That was Luna's favorite food. That was the spiciest *locrio* in the world. I was still burping the spicy salami four years later.

Ana grabbed Luna by the hand and dragged her from the living room to the kitchen. She sat her in a chair and placed an orange plate with food in front of her. Leslie and I joined them. I had to drink three coronas and four glasses of water to keep my mouth from burning and my nose from running. Luna looked at it, wiped the tears from her eyes and took a sip of corona.

“I don’t want any.” She got up and walked to the living room to sing and dance by herself.

We all slept over that night. And I was happy to know that she had survived that painful first day.

The weeks and months that followed were a struggle for Luna. Especially after Jazz found out all his clothing were gone. She was devastated when he told her, “I hate you! Why would you want to hurt me like this? You knew that was all I had.” Luna was mad at me and Leslie for breaking his belongings and at Jazz for hating her after everything he had done to her. He had made himself the victim. After receiving many angry emails from him, her only response to him was, “I loved you past my pain and you hated me past your guilt.”

Dream of Dark Room

2006

I ran down a dark street with no lights. I had no idea where I was going or what I was looking for. Curtly, I stopped in front of a six story building unsure if I had ever been there. I walked up the stairs, slowly, counting every step to make sure there were not extra steps when it was time to come back down. The staircase behind me disappeared as I found myself on the sixth floor with four doors. I walked towards door number 29 trusting that it would guide me.

Upon entering, I continued to walk down a narrow dark hallway. Everything in me was tempted to turn back. I reached an empty living room with old and shabby furniture, a mirror hanging from a wall, extravagant vases from Europe and China, and a piano. At the end of the living room was another door. I peeked inside unsure if I should go in. In the far corner I saw Jazz standing up. He was standing still, staring at the dark wall, with his body tied from neck to toe.

“Jazz,” I called out to him.

“Luna? Get me out of here. Please get me out of here.”

Suddenly I felt the force of a million on my back. I shook myself and I shouted uncontrollably, “You have no place in me, I rebuke you!” The shadow moved like a snake around the living room.

“What do you want with him?”

He threw three vases at me at once, one of them brushing my shoulder and cutting me. I threw one at him back and as he moved the mirror behind him broke. An evil splendor came from him causing the floor to tremble. He moved passed me like lightning towards the room where Jazz was. Before I could run in, they were both gone. I walked over to the broken mirror and gathered the broken pieces, placed them on top of the piano, and played a piece that I had never heard before.

I was tempted to call Jazz to make sure he was okay but my pride wouldn't let me. He had started a new life without me, leaving behind only the pain. Part of me wanted to offer something in return for his protection but I didn't know what and I still owed them one favor. I wasn't sure if he was born into that dark place, if I was the cause of his darkness, or life had driven him there. I just knew he was there and I had no idea how to get him out.

That summer afternoon I walked the NYC streets aimlessly. My thoughts were blank and my spirit felt numb. Something in me was leaving me and I didn't know how to stop its departure. I couldn't hear the loud music playing out of the cars, the group of guys standing in the corners, the compliments that guys were giving the pretty girls passing by, all I heard was nothing.

I stopped in a calling center to contact Mom who was in the Dominican Republic. She had asked me to go with her but I had to work. As I hung up I saw the image of my cousin Wellington on the wall. I called his cell phone to make sure everything was okay with him.

“Cuz, are you okay?”

“Yes. Why?”

The image of a man sitting in a small room appeared on the wall.

“Where are you?”

“I'm at a friend's house.”

“Cuz, is there a man sitting in a small room, a bed behind him, dark complexion, black hair, has a piece of cloth across his shoulder, and a full glass of water in front of him?”

“Yes, how did you know?”

“Go ask him what he wants from me?”

“Okay, I’ll be back.”

“He wants to speak with you.”

“Put him on.”

“*Hola Pitisa!*”

“What do you want?”

“Be nice, I’m here to help you. Do you want him back, yes or no? If you don’t take him back now, you’ll lose him forever.”

“Let destiny decide.”

“Luna, do you want the ship to sail or should I throw the anchor.”

“I can’t sail in that ship any longer.”

“Your wish is my command, *Piti*. You’re sure?”

“Can you put my cousin back on the phone?”

“Cuz, what happened?” Wellington asked me confused.

“Leave that place now. I don’t know who that man is but he is very powerful and you don’t need to be around him.”

“Why, what happened?”

“Just trust me on this one, Cuz. If he can reach me while we’re an ocean apart, what do you think he can do to you if you’re in front of him, leave!”

“Okay, okay. I’ll leave now.”

“Don’t tell him my name or anything about me.”

“Okay.”

A Dream of Forgiveness

January 2009

The rooms were dimly lit, giving them a cozy and warm feeling. A mixed scent of vanilla and rum lingered, making me drowsy and relaxed. The string on the short red jumper I was wearing kept falling off my shoulder; tired of fixing it, I let it hang as it pleased. Suddenly, I was standing in front of a long mirror with black edges. A queen size bed was behind me and a rack of shoes hung next to the long mirror. I stood still, looking myself in the mirror, focused only on the red of the jumper. I noticed that I wasn't wearing shoes. I looked at the shoe rack without moving. All the shoes were black with square heels with the exception of a pair of red flats and a pair of purple flats. I walked over and grabbed the red shoes. The soft texture of suede felt like silk against my thin fingers. I put them on and walked back to the front of the mirror.

Jazz was standing next to me; his smile genuine and sincere, but his eyes distant and sad with a hint of spark for me. He was holding the purple flat shoes in his strong caramel hands. He looked me in the eyes; his eyes watery and full of longing. I didn't move. I whispered the words, elephant juice, under my breath. I stood still as he knelt down and put the purple flats on my feet. The smile on my face was interrupted by a tear.

“Wear these,” he said as he stood next to me.

“I want the red shoes.” I attempted to move but couldn't.

“Please.” He looked at the floor.

“Forgive me,” Jazz said as he tapped my arm with his elbow in a playful way.

I walked away from him, wearing the red jumper and the purple shoes. When I reached the hallway, he was waiting for me by the door, wearing only a towel.

“Please forgive me.” His face lit up. I was having trouble staying mad at him.

My silence made him anxious. Unexpectedly, Jazz took off the white towel hanging around his waist and let it fall on the beige tile floors. He turned around; his nude body exposed, and began moving his ass from left to right. “Lalalalalala,” he sang as he moved. Before I knew it he was standing next to me, his soft hands touching my pale face.

“Please forgive me.”

“Go away. Leave me alone,” I told him as I attempted to get past him.

“Come on pretzel, you know you want to.” His hands tickled the side of my waist making me laugh.

“I need you to forgive me.”



I woke up without getting a chance to say yes I forgive you or no, I don't know how to. He was so concerned with getting my forgiveness in the dream and I with not knowing if I had given it to him after having woken up. It had been three years since we last spoke. He would have probably laughed at me if I had called him about a random dream, he always did.

The dream could have just been a reflection of my feelings; the need to hear him apologize for all the pain he caused me. But it could have also been a warning that he was in danger. I had learned a long time ago in the world of dreams, that when you see a naked person with their back towards you, it was a way of saying goodbye.

I grabbed my cell phone and began to dial his number but hung up before it rang. The tears filled my face slowly as a feeling of helplessness invaded me. I closed my eyes and prayed to *Nana*. As much as I wanted to call Jazz, what could I say, “Hey, remember me! I had a dream.” I used to love him long ago, but love was not enough.



2009

*We are who we are for a reason.
DeLuna*

How was I supposed to know that my last memory of Jazz would be a dream? I had stopped paying attention to the meaning of my dreams; stopped looking for the hidden messages and warnings. They existed because they chose to exist. If I had called him I would have been a fool and if I didn't I was a fool too. In the end, I ended being the fool who didn't call, who ignored the stupid superstition, and heard the news the next day.

February 2009

My blackberry curved beeped at 1:23 a.m. I grabbed it from the night table to my right as I lay in bed. The TV was on and the book laying next to me made me feel guilty, *Fathers and Sons* by Turgenev. So far, I wasn't sure why it was titled *Fathers and Sons*. It was a great book but I was too lazy to read it. My political novel professor had made it one of the eleven mandatory books we had to read and discuss in class. I looked at my phone curiously when I found a text from Charles.

“Hey Luna, it's Charles, Josefina's ex, I need to speak to you ASAP!”

“Are you okay?” I replied concerned.

“Call me at my cell.” I added intuitively as I lowered the volume to the TV. I immediately worried about Jazz. They were still friends. But, maybe he had an argument with Josef and was just calling to complain. Maybe he was drunk and missed Josef and wanted to vent about it. Maybe Jazz was okay and I was just overreacting.

“Uh hell no, you haven't heard the news yet?”

I could feel his nervousness. I sat up in my bed with my legs crossed. I ran my right hand through my hair as a devastating thought crossed my mind. Maybe Jazz had been driving drunk and had an accident, maybe he got arrested, or maybe he was sick in the hospital. Why was I so worried about Jazz? I had not spoken to him for nearly two years. He tried to apologize via text and email but I couldn't find it in my heart to forgive him. Why I still worried about him was beyond me. Although he was no longer in my life he remained a gray outline in a perturbing

way. I had worked hard to move on from him and everything. I refused to date for fear that love could be a weakness used against me by the spirits. I stuck to what I knew best, school and work. I had stop drinking, dancing, and hoping for more, genuinely believing that this would distance them from me.

“What news?” I asked terrified.

“Okay where are you exactly?” Charles replied.

What did the news have to do with where I was at? I thought. It didn’t make sense. Maybe he was just drunk and still upset over his breakup with Josef.

“Why? Just call me at my cell.” I replied a bit frustrated. What was the mystery? Why all the ambiguous questions.

“I don’t think you want to hear this over the phone, honestly!” Charles replied.

My heart started beating faster. What was going on, what news? I lay back down and sat up two seconds later. I lowered my head and sustained it with both my hands as I muttered to myself, “Please give me strength.”

“I’m home,” I replied confused as I looked at the television and realized I couldn’t hear the characters of ‘up close and personal’ speaking.

“Where are you?” I asked.

“Are you alone? or busy?” Charles asked before he had a chance to answer my previous question.

“I’m alone.”

I lay back down. He was probably still upset about the breakup with Josef and wanted to vent. He was probably having a rough day and needed to talk. Why else would he need to speak with me? Jazz was fine, he had to be. I left his life so that he could be happy. He was fine and happy and I was happy too. Because even though we were not together, I knew he was okay. He had to be fine.

“I am in the neighborhood, I can meet with you if possible, I can visit you!” Charles replied. I could picture him agitated, waiting anxiously for my response.

“Okay,” I replied, disregarding that it was 1:30 a.m. and I was alone.

I grabbed my phone and looked at it like it was a crystal ball with all the answers. I text Josef at 1:31 a.m. “Did Charles call you or reach out?” I asked her.

“Text me your exact address.” Charles wrote. “Got it, I’m on my way.”

“Where are you?” I asked confused. He said he was in my neighborhood. Was he lying?

“In a cab,” he responded at 1:40 a.m.

He did lie and was not around my house. I put my phone down and lay down only to hear my phone beep again. I guessed I would not be reading *‘fathers and sons’* that night, so much for being discipline. I paced around the room not sure if I should get dress again. I threw on some jeans and was tempted to put on my gray Americana sweatshirt but opted for the bright orange NY sweatshirt. I walked around the apartment and picked up a bit in the foyer by the desk. I didn’t know why, but I had the sense Jazz would be coming over with Charles. Why? Why did I get the sense that Charles was with Jazz? I could had sworn he was.

“No babe. He doesn’t have my new number,” Josef replied to my earlier text.

“Oh okay. He text me and said he needs to speak to me in person urgent. He’s coming over just in case you don’t hear from me,” I replied jokingly.

“What’s his phone number? And when is he going over?” Josef asked. I knew I had concerned her. Beneath all the armor lived mother-nature reincarnated.

“Now, he said he was around the way and needed to speak to me in person.”

Suddenly, I realized that I made a bad judgment call. Why would I agree to have him go over while I was alone at two in the morning?

“He said it was very important. I had not heard from him in a LONG time. It was weird.” I added with the end purpose of not revealing my poor decision.

“What’s his number?” Josef asked again. I could picture her shaking her head as she smacked her hand against her thigh. “I want to have it just in case woman,” she added

“646-234-1238. Don’t call him now, I’ll text you when he gets here,” I replied almost hesitantly.

“And also, why’d you agree to him visiting you so late?!!!” Josef finally asked.

“I don’t know to be honest. It sounded very URGENT.” I replied as I realized it was 1:49 a.m.

I walked around looking for my jeans and a sweatshirt. I didn’t want him to see me in pajamas and realized I had already changed. I went out to the living room and picked up around a little more. I felt nervous, uneasy and vulnerable. I began to think that maybe Jazz was drunk and was using him to get to me.

“I don’t think that you want to hear this over the phone, honestly! That was the text he sent me.” I forwarded to Josef with the hope that she would help me decipher the mystery.

I lay in bed with *‘fathers and sons’* against my chest, my thoughts blank and my heart raising. I looked over at my cable box and noticed it was 1:55 a.m. and had not heard from Charles. I opened the door to my apartment and was tempted to go to the first floor, but I stared for a second and closed the door. I went back to bed and wrote Charles a text, “Thought you were around the way. What’s going on?”

“Hey Charles, I just tried to call you but you’re not picking up. I’m not sure where you are or what’s going on. Just give me a call,” I wrote him at 2:15 a.m.

I started to worry. It was late. Maybe he was drunk after all and he just wanted to vent. Maybe he forgot he was going over to talk to me because he was too drunk. Maybe Josef called him to ask him what was going on. Maybe something was wrong.

“Charles are you okay?” I texted him at 2:28am because I was starting to worry about him. I hoped that nothing happened to him.

I put the book on top of the night table and continued to watch ‘up close and personal’.

At 3:13 a.m. my phone beeped. “Hey...what happened? You ok?” Josef texted me.

“Yes, he didn’t show up. Said he was in a cab but didn’t show up and didn’t answer his phone when I called. Very strange,” I replied. “Thanks for checking in love.”

“No prob. Just wanted to make sure you are safe. See you tomorrow!”

“I’m sorry mama. I’m heading over, okay.” I heard Josef said as I sat numb in my bed. That wasn’t a day I wanted to live. I wished that day had not been included in my destiny. I fought so many battles only to lose the war. They had won. Not Jazz. Not pretzel. Jazz was a good man. He was always Suga. He didn’t look for trouble. Not Jazz.

The emptiness felt so immense. His new absence had absorbed all of me. I was alone, and felt lonely, scared and broken. I felt broken. What was the point of fighting? I had lost a battle that left nothing in me but defeat and emptiness. For the first time in my life I heard silence and what a sad melody it was. My hands held my face as I rocked myself back and forward in the bed, as I sat Indian style. I wanted to run fast and far away to a little place where nobody knew me. I wanted to run and scream as I ran wild through the streets. But my legs wouldn’t move. My chest felt like it had a million rivers with rocks running through it. The rhythm of my breathing changed forever. There was a beat missing. A beat had died in me. I would always be off beat. Life and time had finally met in the same place. They were one the same and they sat still next to me.

February 2009

The buzzer rang. I had never paid attention to it before. I knew that it wouldn't be Jazz. It would never be Jazz because he was gone. He was gone forever and all I could feel was the huge void pinning me to its walls.

I walked across the living room and looked at the corner where the 63" television used to sit. The one he bought me a month after we moved in together, on credit, because he knew how much I loved watching movies. It was his way of making up for all those times we had to watch the blurry bootleg version of a movie with a little head popping at the bottom of the screen. It had turned into an empty space, with nothing to decorate it.

I sat on the cold wood floor with my back against the beige sofa. The one Jazz and I bought two weeks after moving in together. I didn't like it. It was too bulky and masculine. But he was so excited about it accommodating his 6'2" frame that I agreed to get it. I opened a notebook lying on the floor to a random page. It welcomed me with a quote I had written three years earlier, "It is of humans to fall and of wise men to get up." I repeated the words to myself, "It is of humans to fall and of wise men to get up." I listened to the echo of my voice hoping to find more than a question mark as I contemplated the dryness of the page and the ink. Nothing changed. The quote was still there. I was still there. The classy and fashionable oversized coffee table that sat nostalgic in the middle of the living room was still there. I fell in love with the details the first time I saw it; the crossing of the vertical and horizontal sticks at the bottom. The glass at the top was delicate and simple but the dark brown wood gave it a surreal strength.

That day, it seemed to have lost its elegance. It would have appeared big, hideous and unnecessary in a black and white photograph. What was the purpose of a coffee table anyway? I didn't drink coffee. So, why did I have one? Why was everything still the same, the sofa, the table, me? But Jazz wasn't, Jazz wasn't there.

I walked to the foyer and sat on the red suede ottoman. The white walls were now a light green. I preferred green to yellow. After Jazz left I had a friend paint those very same walls yellow for me. And after looking at the color for half an hour, I felt its nostalgia creeping up my back and neck, yelling at the top of its peacefulness, "Let me out, let me out!" The paint had not dried soon enough when the walls were White again. Two weeks later I opted for green. At least the walls had color, but Jazz didn't. His dark brown skin was now as pale as mine was, it lacked pigmentation. His veins lacked blood and his heart didn't beat. I sat there as my thoughts drifted into nothing, waiting quietly for the knock on the door; drifting silently to the unknown.

That was the last place where we hugged. It was the last place where he kissed my forehead. The place where we both decided to let go of eight years of joy, sadness, confusion, growth, plans and memories. I didn't know that I would sit in the same room three years later to cry for him. That was not supposed to be the ending to the story. Grandma didn't tell me it would end that way. Did she know? Why didn't she tell me I would hurt this much? Why didn't she warn me? Why didn't she use magic to keep him away from me, to keep me from falling in love with him? Why didn't I stay? Why did I leave? I wasn't supposed to sit in that room and cry and he wasn't supposed to die. Who would want to hurt him? He never raised his voice. He never fought. He was always happy.

It must be a misunderstanding, I thought. It was best if I looked it up on Google to make sure. And I did. His name in bold letters, a yellow tape across the picture of a suburban street

with the tracing of a body on the floor next to a white car, a picture of a gun below that picture, and the words; shot twice in the face and twice in the body. The screen on the thin apple mac laptop became blurry. I felt the weight of time on my thin ankles, as if I was made of rocks instead of bones, of metal instead of veins; suddenly of thin air. And like air, I collapsed. I collapsed inside out. I hit the floor with such intensity that the tenderness of my knees felt like stones colliding with glass. I disintegrated. Pieces of my heart and spirit peeled slowly away. I felt the coldness of the wood floor pulling me towards it, with authority, drowning me with its loneliness. My body filled with goose bumps as I thought about the details over and over again. I couldn't erase the picture from my head. It wasn't true I kept telling myself. It's not true. This is not true. Oh *Nana*, please tell me this is not true.

I wondered if Grandma knew all along. She always knew everything. Why didn't she tell me?

February 2009

Josefina:

The door was opened. I walked inside the apartment in a rush, afraid of confronting Luna, terrified of confirming what she already knew. She was on the floor, her eyes swollen from the tears she couldn't fight back. I stood still as she fell apart before my eyes unable to hug her for fear that her fragile body would break in my arms. And I wished that I could go back to the day when we were six years old and cotton candy and bumper cars were enough to comfort her.

I knew better than to agree with Grandpa. I was an educated woman with a college degree. We learned all about slavery and the hatred for the Black race in America and in other parts of the world. Grandpa didn't have a choice. He was a victim of the Trujillo Era and the persistent believe that White was better and that it was our responsibility to improve the race. Even though he contradicted himself, Grandpa left Grandma Pecuezo, a green eyed, light skinned, blonde for Grandma Bella who was VERY dark skinned and Haitian. I always found it ironic that they named Grandma Bella when she wasn't pretty. That may explain why he never had children with Grandma Bella. He had all his children with Grandma Pecuezo. He said Grandma Bella did voodoo on him but he was married to her for 55 years. That was some strong voodoo if you asked me. I guess she was the exception for him. But Jazz was not Luna's exception. Jazz had been nothing but a *baltazar* in Luna's life, *un zero a la izquierda, un pedaso de mojon* that was probably in some way related to her father. He didn't deserve her tears or pain. He was nothing but a shadow in her life; a punishment she thought she deserved, a curse from the gift she rejected, and a man that she just couldn't save. And I knew I was to blame for

introducing her to him and encouraging her to date him. But how the fuck was I supposed to know. I didn't know what to say or what to do.

The family was starting to arrive to show Luna support but she didn't get up, she stayed on the floor staring at the wood. She was lost in a world of memories I didn't own.

“Mamacita, you did everything you could.”

A two inch black square made of cloth with a white cross on it felt out of her hands. She looked at the object on the floor as she wept desperately.

“She told me, Josef. She told me I did everything I could six years ago in the Dominican Republic. That lady who saw me, she told me, “Always carry this with you. Never take it off. It will protect you. You can love him all you want but you can't save him. Josef this hurts so much. I don't know how to stop hurting.”

I stayed with her that evening. The bed was a horizon of regrets holding her together. I lay by her side and didn't move. Her eyes fixed on nothing, navigating a space and a time far from that room. I patiently waited for her to return, to let her know that I was there for her. I wanted Luna to know that she wasn't alone, but she was.

Nothing was as it seemed. My feet left no footprints and my breath birth no life. I could feel the shadows of time walking behind me, waiting for me to crumple, eager for a new beginning. I had never thought about my thoughts until they were absent. I existed in the peripheral of nothing and everything, longing for a moment that would never arrive.

Dwell my child on the decisions you made. Dwell all night until the sun meets your day. Dwell for me in whom nobody believes. Believe and dwell in the beauty of your dreams.

Everyone always wonders where the dead goes. They never return. But what happens to those of us who stay behind living between what we used to know and what we will never know? Is there a place for us? For those of us who have no choice but to accept the departure of the ones we loved or the ones we didn't love enough. As he rose, I remained intact, a spec of sand in his eyes, never to be recognized again.

The streets were all the same and there was no sound. I felt everything from miles away as if those feelings didn't belong to me. They dug deeper and deeper into my veins and my bones, hoping to find a home, afraid that if they seized to survive they would become extinct. They cut through me so profoundly that I could hardly find them or feel them, but I knew they were there. They were building a home, made of scars, memories, and uncertainty. I tried to contest them, but I was too tired to fight.

Every now and then, a scar got too close to the surface and the edges to the walls of my heart expanded. They swelled until the blood tore the barrier I built to protect myself. Creeping like a ghost. Rearranging the order of each memory and reminding me, "Never stop feeling.

Feeling keeps you going.” But I went back to numbness. Detachment kept me from giving into a battle I could possibly never win.

I wished I could always keep my eyes closed, my head low, and my sleep oblivious. Never again to see what others are blind to.

He flew to a space unknown to me, while I lived in the casket that I never saw him in. I couldn't hide him from the world; he lived in the sorrow of my eyes, the oldest sadness that I owned. I cried a million times but his spirit was not in my tears but in the obscurity of my retina, haunting a future indefinite to him.

October 2010

Josefina:

I sat in the sofa with the phone in my hand. Contemplating the choice of words to use; I'm sorry, I have bad news, or I don't know how to tell you this. But they all sounded cold and lacked authenticity. I had been the one to give her the news about Jazz; that day I took something from her that never belonged to me. She had not been the same since then. Her smile was distant. Perhaps because the cause for his death was a secret that Jazz took with him. I tried to cheer her up but for the most part I just remained present and persistent. This call would break Luna apart and I wished she never had to find out. She meant a lot to me, but Luna didn't only love her; she needed her. Luna knew that she would always find wisdom, guidance, and understanding from her. All that would remain is the deferred teacher of experience.

Every family member had agreed that it was best to leave without Luna but I knew that she would go as soon as she found out. I had made arrangements for us. I dialed her number hoping she didn't pick up, but bad news hates to wait.

"Hi, Luna."

"Hey Josef, you're okay? What time is it?"

"I have some sad news to give you."

"I don't want to know. Please don't tell me!" Her voice quivered.

"Mamacita, Grandma Bella suffered a heart attack. She passed away this morning at 4am."

I felt her exclamation in the core of my soul, shaking every inch inside of me like thunder.

“I’m going to pick you up. I booked a morning flight for us.”

“Josef, I can’t do this anymore. I can’t lose anyone else. I can’t be her.”

There were no drinks, no laughter, and no plans, simply the unexpected. We arrived at Grandma Bella’s house to a multitude mourning outside and inside the house. In the living room was an opened brown casket. We walked up the stairs like two brides that never want to reach the altar. Each step we took, lead us closer to a truth that tore Luna down. Grandpa waited by the door, lost in his pain.

“She left us. She left us!” He cried out as we both embraced him and wept with him.

“You’re okay?” I asked Luna as I held her hand tight.

She shook her head, no. Her hands held on tighter and tighter to mine with each step we took.

When she was five steps from the casket Luna turned around and ran out. She sat on the steps as she held her face in her hands and wept. The old and wise say life is not forever, but some things, should never end. Love should never have to end. The sun greeted us with its customary heat, ignorant to the circumstances or our emotions. Everything looked the same; the people, the streets, the scent, the trees, and the skies. But the house behind us felt empty and smaller. Emptiness was an object of the unknown.

Luna and I sat on the corner of those steps for hours. We watched as they served the multitude food, coffee, bread, and soda. Our mothers, aunts, and uncles said prayers for

Grandma, lighted candles on her behalf. At 11pm when the multitude left, we sat quiet, along with the rest of our family, who remained silent. Luna and I didn't see Grandma that day. We felt asleep in our usual room, on the first floor, 25 feet away from where Grandma's casket stood closed with her stoic face.

"She can't breathe in that casket, is too dark in there!" Luna shouted in the middle of the night when she woke up sweating.

"Luna, she's dead."

"I know she is. But I don't want her to be alone on her last night with us. Can we sit in the living room? Can you come with me? I don't want to be alone. I just want us to sit in the rocking chair so that she knows we didn't leave her alone."

"Okay."

We walked out of the room and found Grandpa sitting in front of the closed casket. Luna gave him a kiss on the forehead. She opened the casket, tears rolling down her eyes like a river that knows no end, kissed her in the forehead and whispered, "I love you Bella." We sat in two rocking chairs, grabbed a bottle of rum, three cups and stayed up drinking and talking. Every memory of Grandma drew us closer to a sunrise that dictated a painful farewell.

"*No somos nada,*" Grandpa said aloud.

"Why do you say we're nothing, Grandpa?" I asked.

"One day we're here, the next, we're not. Luna almost wasn't born you know. Your Mom wanted to abort you because your father fled the country to get married the day after he found out your mom was pregnant. She didn't have a job, no money, and no place to live. I

begged her not to abort. You were going to be my first American grandchild; the first one of us to be born in the country of opportunities. I knew you were going to be special, you had to be. Your Mom said she would think about it. I pray for two weeks to *San Gregorio Hernandez* and all the saints for your life. In a moment of desperation I told them, I offer her to you in exchange for her life. She should not only be my grandchild, she should be a daughter of the spirits. I didn't know what that meant and when I found out it was too late."

Luna didn't say anything, she remained quiet. Her eyes fixed on Grandpa. If her eyes could shoot needles every inch of his body would have been covered.

"She wanted you to have her sanctuary. It's yours. You can do with it as you wish."

Luna grabbed the bottle of rum and ran out the door without shoes. Grandpa lowered his head, closed his eyes, and held on to his wife's hands as he wept in shame.

I walked past the casket to the room where I usually slept. Grandma's scent lingered on the wood, the sheets, the pillows, and the curtains. Josef was still sleeping and had the sheets over her head. I grabbed a black dress and a pair of black shoes from my suitcase. I walked past the kitchen towards the bathroom. I ignored the image of *San Gregorio Hernandez* that was reflected on Grandma Bella's sanctuary; my second debt to pay. There was no fancy shower, just a bucket filled with water and a small canteen. I couldn't stand and meditate while the water fell over me and removed the weight of my sadness. I had to eliminate it one canteen at a time.

I got dressed, pulled my hair back, and sat alone in front of the casket. Grandma's face was sterile of emotions. Her hands folded neatly one on top of the other. I touched her hand, tracing the lines that led to her still wrist. I kept hoping to find movement, but all I found was the remains of a brave woman, who had never been afraid to be herself. Two hours later all my aunts, uncles, cousins started arriving along with friends and neighbors. I sat still, unable to move.

"Luna, do you want coffee or a hot chocolate with bread and butter," I heard mom ask me.

I tried to say no but the words were lost somewhere inside of me. Four men stood around the casket as they prepared to lift it.

"Luna is time to go," Josef and Mom told me standing close to me.

I felt my body embrace the casket with all my strength as I shouted, "Please don't take her. I can't do this without her, please don't leave me alone, Grandma!"

Wellington and Darwin held me to the side as they took her out and placed the casket in a black car. Josef, Darwin, Wellington and I drove to the cemetery in a different car.

“It’s going to be okay, Mama, she’s in a better place.”

“I don’t want her to leave, Josef. Please don’t let them take her!”

“I know you don’t. I know it’s hard.”

I stared at the hole where the casket was placed slowly. As each inch of the casket disappeared part of me broke. She waited until the very end to hear me promise that I would look after her sanctuary and I couldn’t do it. It tormented me that she had worried about it to the very end but it worried me even more that I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t know what had taken her; time, destiny, or my stubbornness. I just knew she wasn’t there. People placed flowers, roses, tulips, rosaries, images of the Virgin Mary in front of her tomb. I placed an open can of coffee.

One hot evening, on the fifth day of the nine days, Elias showed up in front of Grandma Bella's house.

"Josef, I'll be right back."

"Where are you going?"

"I'll be right back."

I hooked my arm into Elias as I walked down the street with him. For a while neither of us said anything.

"I told you I'll be here during your harshest moment."

"I never thought it would be this hard. I thought Jazz was painful enough."

"What are you going to do?"

"I want to go to the river tonight."

Nature knew nothing of humans' fears. It was brave, strong, and powerful and it never lowered its guard for anything or anyone. I took off my black shoes, allowing my feet to feel the texture of the soil, grass, mud, and rocks. We crossed a river which currents were no higher than my ankle. But its rocks were steady and sharp, cutting the edges of my feet every chance it got. We walked up a path with only trees until we reached the rock, which was seven floors high.

"I can go alone from here."

"Are you sure?"

“Yes, I’m sure. Thank you for being such a great friend.”

“Be careful, it’s an Indian River.”

“I know.”

When I reached the top, I removed every item of clothing I had and sat Indian style on the rock. The coldness of its hardness caressed my delicate skin almost warning me of its danger. The stars and full moon were out, ready to play with young lovers, while I shadowed time. The trees danced slowly with the wind while the birds chattered. The current of the water could drown five clouds in its wrath, but all I saw was water.

Dear Indian River:

Everything looks different from here. You look less threatening. As if the wrath of your secrets lay at the floor of the water. I spent so many years running away from your deepness, while awake and asleep, clinging to the wood of the trees and the solid of a rock. Hoping that the current of the stream would subside and the sun would dry your waters and mysterious force. But it never did. And here I am, ready to finally immerse myself with you. I don’t know where to go or how to go. If I had a hold of time, I wouldn’t know what to do with it. You’re part of me and yet I fear you. This may be the beginning or the end, but I’m ready to meet you.

I stood on the rock and glanced at the world as I remembered it. *San Gregorio Hernandez* and Elias observed from a distance as I stretched my arms, took three steps forward, and jumped. The air hugged my body and spirit as I felt the sharpness of the cold water penetrate my skin.

