

HOME NOWHERE: ASSORTED PROSE

by

REBECCA FORTES

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Thesis Chair: Cecilia Rodríguez Milanés, D.A.

ABSTRACT

Oftentimes, the children of immigrants find themselves straddling two worlds. As Americanized minorities, we navigate torn psychological landscapes in which uneasy dichotomies are formed: living up to our parents' expectations, or fulfilling our own; embracing tradition, or birthing a new culture; admiring the lives of our family, but wanting different for ourselves. These tough decisions are further compounded by identifiers such as age, race, and gender. My creative thesis, a collection of fiction and nonfiction, examines these issues through three central characters. In fiction, they are the Latina sisters Mel and Nena; in nonfiction, it is myself.

Through these stories, these young women struggle to feel a sense of belonging where they are, be it at home, work, or school; among friends or on their own; in places they choose, or in places where they are put. Each of these characters is forced to consider whether they will ever find a place to call home. They wonder whether that is a place to be found at all.

DEDICATION

For my mother, who inspires and amazes me more than words can express.

For my Abuelita, who has never passed up on an opportunity to tell strangers all about her nieta.

And for every writer whose words have given me a home when I felt very, very lost.

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Versions of two stories in this thesis—"Promising Young Students" and "Just Ash"—appeared in the Spring 2014 issue of the Cypress Dome, UCF's undergraduate literary magazine.

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PROMISING YOUNG STUDENTS

You and I stand in the driveway with our arms spread out like we're about to take flight. You saw the storm rolling in and begged me, Nena, grabbed my hand and pulled on it, crying please-pretty-please, would I go stand in it with you?

So, here we are.

It is August, and school has been cancelled again, over a category one or tropical storm, some pixelated blob of yellow, white and red creeping toward the tip of Florida on the news every night. Palm fronds from the trees out front flap violently in the wind, smacking each other and taking off like gigantic dandelion seeds that plant themselves all over our block. Rain pelts our faces and the palms of our hands. You open your mouth to catch some on your tongue, but the wind stops it from landing. Lightning pours across the sky, shatters it into thousands of electric fragments. We turn to each other, pinch our faces and wait for the thunder to fall, and when it does, it is the loudest thing we've ever heard, a colossal falling of something grand, of sound itself. The wind sprays water onto us and wails throughout our block. I want to run back inside. I have never been the one who thrives in turbulence.

Lightning falls again and you cup your palms over your ears and wait for the thunder, closing your eyes so they wrinkle like raisins. I think you've had enough, but the thunder falls again and you smile, all teeth, and clap your hands. "Why is it so loud, Mel?" You mean the sky.

That's when Mom opens the door to the house behind us and a fury of wind steals the doorknob from her hands. "Oye!" she says, fighting to keep the skirt of her nightgown from revealing her legs. "Estan locas!" she yells, half-statement, half question. Later, I stand in the kitchen, clutching my own arms and shaking as the rainwater trickles down my legs. Mom

smacks the side of my head and asks me what was I thinking, don't I know there's a tropical storm? That there are tornadoes? Don't I, at twelve, know better than to take my little sister outside? Then you run into the kitchen from your room where Dad stands at the doorway, reaching down for the towel he had placed on your shoulders, which you threw yourself from to defend me. "It was me!" you say. "I wanted to go!"

Mom stops and waits. "You need to be careful," she finally says before shuffling her slippered feet back to the living room to sit before a television set with no cable, its screen having turned black over the storm. Then you turn to face the big window behind the dining room and watch the murky sky shatter into pieces. Water creeps down your legs. Purple-lipped and with skin so cold it looks fluorescent, you watch the lightning fall, counting the seconds until the thunder roars again. Inside, the sound is muffled, but it rattles the windows, like a million hands applauding you.

We will grow up. We will talk less. Even in the car on that Tuesday ten years later when your English teacher, Mrs. De Leon, will hold you after class. She's the same one who will ask you, on day one, if you have a sister. You'll say she remembers me. "The one who did the reading, but not the work." You will tell me about your meeting on the car ride home, down the palm-lined streets we grew up on. Though eighteen, you're still afraid to drive. "It's just a little anxiety," you say, your right foot stomping on the imaginary brake on the passenger's side any time I approach a stopping car. You will recount how she looked at you over the glasses that make her eyes huge. Like a frog, almost. I remember those glasses.

I won't ask, but you'll tell me about how the class stampeded out, crowding around the door, waiting for the bell to signal their release while you stayed behind because Mrs. De Leon asked to speak to you, specifically, "and no one else." In the car, the air conditioning will whirr, exhausted in the August heat, and we will hit every single red light on Bird Road trying to get home.

"Basically," you will say, "there's a scholarship for prodigies called the McGenii Foundation Award for Promising Young Students, and she thinks I should apply." You will speak quickly, too quickly for me to follow, unable to hide the flattery behind your teacher's implication that you are prodigy scholarship material. "All I have to do is prove it." Your eyes will scan the e-mail Mrs. De Leon printed out for you, which you will have held in your hands this entire time, like it's treasure, though it will fit in the backpack sitting by your feet. You will hold the paper up to my face, like I might read it, but I will be driving, so I'll wave it away with my right hand, swatting it like a fly. "I have to create something," you'll say.

By now, our parents will have tried coercing you into medicine. "The cards are on you, Chiquita," they will have said. Though you are the smarter sister, you will not listen and claim, instead, that you don't know what you will study. I believe this and wish to reassure you that whatever you choose to do, you will not disappoint. The very worst you can do will not surpass the disappointment of their eldest daughter not finishing college and working, instead, as a translator for an insurance company. Not a bad job, by any means, but not what they had in mind for me, either. Certainly not what they left the island for me to do.

In the car on that Tuesday, I will ask you about your day and you will say it was fine. We will pull into the driveway of the townhouse we've always shared with Mom and Dad. The key

will crunch as I slide it into the lock on the front door, and the door will whistle as we enter.

Mom will be preparing dinner, the pots and pans cackling on the stove already, frying slices of chicken. She will kiss us both our heads, leaving her lips on yours a little longer. Later, the family will eat dinner in silence, and you will sit, smiling at your plate.

To win the scholarship, you must write an essay. “It should be easy,” you’ll say.

I won’t be interested in how you intend to win it, so I’ll ask, “How much is the award, anyway?”

“One thousand dollars.”

“That’s it?” You will nod, pulling blades of grass from the turf. It doesn’t seem like a lot, for what they’re asking. A prodigy: something, someone incredible. But then I figure that anything can seem like a lot when you don’t have it.

You and I used to share a bed, remember? We each had our own rooms, but any little noise sent you creeping into mine, tip-toeing toward my bed, standing over me in a blue darkness that enveloped us both. Sometimes I could feel you standing there and it scared the shit out of me. Other times, you would shake my arm. “Mel?” Then you’d shake a little harder. “Mel, wake up.” You always brought a pillow, crawling into the space between my body and the wall. “There’s someone outside the house. I can hear them.” So I would get up and twirl the wand tilt on the blinds between my thumb and forefinger. The blinds would clap, flapping open and shut. You’d raise the blanket over your head, not wanting to see whatever might be hiding there. Just in case. Then I’d walk over to the closet, swing the door open, hug all my clothes, and shake

them. Nothing ever fell out. The closet door would creak as I closed it (and I needed to close it, because an open door scared you just as much as a closed one). One by one, I would slide my dresser drawers open and slam them shut. Then I'd kick the laundry basket over to show you that nothing hid in there, either. And after that daunting routine, all you could do was look at me and say, "You didn't check the kitchen. And what about the air vent? Something might be hiding there, too."

It became a routine of ours, fighting off whatever might be hiding there. Our nightly prayer. We never found the monsters our storybooks told us to fear. I didn't realize then that what we had to fear wouldn't be in that house. It would be in the future. It would be in us.

We will pretend to value your privacy during the application process, pretend to respect the stress you're under. Your bedroom will become an academic dump, a receptacle for prep books and A-graded papers. You'll have nothing a bed, a bookshelf, and a desk. You'll have your own bathroom, too, which Mom and I will eventually realize is not a good idea ("Harder to keep an eye on her," Mom will say). There will come a day when I notice the bags under your eyes and hand you a tube of concealer. I could ask, "Are you getting enough sleep?" or, "What's wrong?" Instead, I will assume you will thrive in this turbulence and hand you the tube of concealer to cover up the purple below your eyes. My own brand of taking care of you.

But about a month later, I will be making you coffee just moments before, spooning grounds of black-brown powder into the red coffee maker that sits on our counter.

No one will be home to hear you accuse me of jealousy, of sabotage.

“You see that I’m working on this and you’re being super loud,” you will say from the counter, a big blue SAT book open before you.

“The world is full of sound,” I say. “I am doing you a favor, making you coffee so you can keep working on your essay.” I will slam the lid on the coffee maker shut. It’s supposed to be a joke, but you won’t take it as such.

“I’m sure you know all about essays,” you will say. “Why don’t you come and actually help me, instead? Didn’t you write essays in college?”

A better sister might ignore that, but I am going to laugh. Worse, I am going to walk around the counter to where you’re sitting and flip your book shut, hitting it so that it slides off the counter and lands beside you on the floor. I will lean over your chest and into your face, laughing until the smug look in your eye is gone, until your face folds into a scowl that pulls your eyebrows down and I think you might cry. I will sound like a horse neighing because I will laugh so hard, forgetting at some point that I was laughing to spite you, and suddenly I’ll be laughing because I mean it.

Later, in bed, I will think about your palms slapping my chest in an attempt to get me off of you, and how your hand reached for that concealer and beamed it at my face, but missed. Still, it got me to back off, how you saw your chance and took it, grabbed your book from below the table and ran to your room. I followed you, because you didn’t know the tube of concealer was made of glass, but your ignorance did not stop it from shattering all across the floor, a tiny supernova. “Come clean this shit up!” I will remember yelling, but the slither and click of your door lock turning will echo in my head and I will need to rub my hands against each other to erase the feeling of your door shaking under my slamming palms.

I will remember the sweet crunch of the concealer tube under the napkin once I finally cleaned it, and how the color never even matched your skin much, but you used it for a while anyway. I will think this means you care. You have to. Even if you hate me for it, if you think you don't want to be me more than you'd ever want to be me. You thought I had a good idea with that concealer, and I will cling to that when I fall asleep to the sound of you hiccupping on the other side of the wall our bedrooms share, wishing you'd come to me and talk, knowing you won't because I'm the one at fault here, but I don't have the gumption to do anything about it.

For weeks, your routine will be wake up, school, home, room, write. There will be days when I hear a muffled cry over the sound of the television, when a sad noise permeates the wall between us, but not long or loud enough for me to get up and check. Dinner will be taken to your room for you, because you'll say you need the time to work. If you had friends, Mom would probably consider talking to their parents, ask them what's going on. But we know better. Your GPA will be higher than the number of friends you've ever had, and the ones you do have are all blood relatives, myself included. I will suggest you go speak to someone but Mom and Dad will say, "Are you crazy? She doesn't need help. We don't need a shrink to tear this family apart." It is not the way of Cubans. We are shaken bottles of soda, contents under pressure. Sometimes we may pop, but we clean up and move on.

Which is probably why we will respond how we do, the day we find you cradling yourself with your knees folded up against your chest and your arms crossed, slamming your head against the wall our bedrooms share. You will smack your head like a metronome, a rhythm

so steady I think it is a car bass until I hear Mom knocking on your door, calling, “Nena? Nena, let me in!” Then you will whine and the thudding will get harder, more desperate, so Mom will break into your room, and Dad will trail behind her.

By the time I’m standing in the doorway, Mom will be squeezing your shoulders, trying to shake it out of you. Red-eyed, you will say, “I can’t. I can’t. I can’t.” You will shove your shoulder away from her touch, like her fingers spit fire. When you will stand, the mattress will creak under you. You will walk to your desk and grab the papers tacked to the bulletin board over your desk, close your palms over them and yank them down so it all comes crashing down, a whirlwind of notes and sound. Mom will cage you in her arms and we will stand in your doorway, a portrait of madness, wondering how we let it get this far. Soon, it will be over. But, for now, our biggest mistake—my biggest mistake—will leave you sprawled on the floor, crying silently in your hands with your palms spread out, covering your face, whispering that it’s okay, you’ll be okay, you can stop, honest. You just need a minute to calm down.

I think I ruined my chance with you when I was fifteen and you were twelve and you wanted to be like me. I sat on the couch, having just started high school, reading a book, and you sat next to me, also reading a book, a long novel you stole from my room. But you opened it straight to the center and stared at the same page for minutes, so I said, “I know you’re not really reading that.”

“No, you don’t,” you said. So I pointed out that you hadn’t turned the page in a while and you shrugged at me. I didn’t realize then that that was probably the last time you ever wanted to

be me, and that maybe I should have let you. Because when it's your senior year, you'll sit on the couch with a book open on your lap and I will come by and ask you, "What are you reading?"

And you will say, "Nothing." I will wish you would talk to me, Nena, because I will know I am wrong but I won't know how to fix it. I never had to, but you, you always know what to do. You put your eyes on something and once you want it, it will be yours, goddammit. So I won't stop myself from wondering, why won't you try now? Don't you miss sharing a bed? Sharing anything other than just a wall? I won't know.

Or maybe I ruined my chances even before that, when I was still in middle school, back when you still crept into my bed at night, and I took a computer class and learned how to use word art. I made a sign that read, "Keep out!" and taped it to my bedroom door. Mom said it wasn't nice, so I added, "Please," trying my hardest at bubble letters to match the word art. Then Dad told me it wasn't nice to you, and made me take it down. There was a thunderstorm that night, and the wind blew so hard it picked up the pebbles in the front yard and smacked them against my window. I thought the whole thing might shatter, and maybe something was out there waiting for me, and maybe, given the chance, it would come in. That night, I was the one who crept into your room. You didn't hear me, so I didn't bother you. Your warm body lied there under your cold, wrinkled sheets. Your palms covered your face and I heard you whispering a story to yourself about a girl who stopped a storm, just went outside and made it stop. I don't know why you didn't go and get me. I don't know if you needed me then, and whether needing is the same as love.

You will know you won the scholarship on a Saturday. Your phone will ring and your voice will be groggy, so you will clear your throat before answering the call from an unrecognized number and launch yourself out of bed as soon as you hang up. Your cold, bare feet will smack-smack-smack the tiled floor as you run to the kitchen to tell mom, who you'll find pouring herself coffee. She will clap her hands and shake her fists at the air, celebrating, not like when I got the job at the insurance company and with relief, she said, "Oh, thank God. I've been praying since you went into the interview."

The reception will be at a banquet hall. Soft jazz will play over thirty dialogues that bleed into a single pervasive murmur. People in black suits will stand in clusters of four or five, and you will sit at a table at the end of the banquet hall with all the other recipients. Each of you will be called individually for special recognition. We, your family, will hope this is the end. We'll hope that we can stop praying, stop holding our breath.

When asked, I will tell people that I am your sister, and that I am very proud of you, having watched that application swallow your life whole. What I will not tell them is how, when you received that phone call, I knew you wanted to tell me about it first, because through the slit of light under my door I saw your feet pause in front of my room and thought I felt you press your ear to listen for movement. But you thought I was asleep and I didn't pretend otherwise, even though I heard your entire side of the conversation because we've shared a wall all our lives. I will not tell them about how I am not a good enough person to pretend to be happy for you, or about how, when you tell me that you've won, all I will say is, "Great. How much money is it again? Great." And how when I say this, I avoid your eyes, both hoping and not hoping you

notice. I will not tell them about how all the money in the world was not worth watching Mom claw at your shoulders, trying to pull you from the wall you kept throwing yourself against.

People will network, a bunch of black suits bouncing off each other like balloons. You will be uncomfortable, and it will show in the way you stretch your hand out to shake theirs, how you sometimes change your mind halfway and end up waving at them from two feet away instead. When the people in the black suits approach me, I will spare you the embarrassment of revealing that the clothes you are wearing are my work clothes. When asked, I will tell the other attendants that I haven't finished my degree. "College is supposed to be the golden years, right?" I'll say. "Why not make them last?" They won't laugh.

You will pose for pictures with me and Mom and Dad and when we pull those pictures up on the computer later that night, you will not think, just from looking, that something swam beneath the surface. The lines below your eyes will have etched themselves a little deeper, but no one who sees this will suspect anything. "You seem a little tired," is all we will say.

I will float by the pastry table, eating scone after tiny scone, funneling them into my mouth like treats on a factory assembly line. My stomach will punish me later, but I will not stop because I remember what I saw and it terrifies me. Nobody here will have watched you throw up every night for the past few weeks. They will not have stood looking in through the crack in the bathroom door while you sat on the floor, straddling the toilet, your head resting on your left hand while your chest heaved and you hiccupped, staring down at your own tears and puke swirling in the toilet water.

They will not have seen the way your bathrobe lay open and you didn't bother to cover it, despite looking back and seeing me there. And I will not want to tell them about how I pushed

the door open then, pulling at your arm and forcing your half-naked body under the shower, bathing you for the first time since we were girls.

A better sister would do more than just sit on the toilet while you shower and sit up with you in bed until she knows you'll be fine. When your crying got too loud, she'd let you let it out. She'd say something, anything other than, "Relax. You're going to wake everyone up." And when sitting up in your bed next to you with her feet under the sheets gets to be a little too much, when the silence gets a little too heavy and demands to be filled with words, she wouldn't stand up like I did, letting the mattress creak under her weight before walking back to her own room and, without speaking, locking the door behind her. Or at least she would kiss your forehead and reassure you that she loves you, and you're amazing, and fuck anyone who says otherwise, fuck anyone and anything that makes you think you're anything other than the girl who thrives in turbulence. I won't know how to convince you of it then, Nena, but please understand that I will have wanted to.

No one here will know about any of that because I will not tell them. Instead, I will float by the pastry table, chewing scones, letting my mouth go dry and moving my jaw mechanically, forcing myself not to say a word.

One day in the summer, Mom will tell me to take you out. "To get her out of the house," she will say. You will not have left the house, not even to pick out a comforter for your dorm, because you are just tired.

You will drive, because we have decided, as a family, that you need your license. “You cannot be a prodigy,” Dad will say, “without knowing how to drive a car.” At the time, I will wonder if that is really the case, but suspect that really, we want to know you can still learn something, start from scratch, build from there and be okay.

Over ice cream, sitting on a park bench, we will exchange more words than we have done in the entire last month. I will begin to tell you about my job, and you will cut me off and say, “I’m sorry for worrying you all.” The sun will pound on our skin, pulling sweat from the pores on our faces. I will not have finished college, and you will have nearly not-finished high school, having taken seventeen-too-many mental health days.

You will not walk at graduation. The sting of losing valedictorian will be more than you can stomach, even though we knew this was a possibility, with a graduating class of at least 900. You will not attend prom because you will not be asked. When it comes up, you will say there were better uses for your time, anyway. You will have spent your senior year trying to escape this place, and now that you finally do, I will try not to look at it as desertion. I will try not to think of how easily you can forget me, the girl in the bedroom next to yours. The wall we share. The blood we share.

“Are you scared?” I will ask.

“Of what?”

“College.” I will scoop the ice cream dripping down my cup with a spoon and bring it to my mouth, avoiding your eyes. “If this one essay was so bad, do you think college will be any easier?”

You will pause. Eventually you'll say, "I said I was sorry," so I'll assume it wasn't the right thing to say. And for that I, too, will be sorry. I never know what to say.

On a night before you leave for school, I will enter your room and sit at your desk, wondering how many hours you spent at it, trying to perfect the words that would, in your head, prove you're a prodigy. You will not have put up the bulletin board you ripped off the wall so many months ago. A legal pad will sit on your desk and I will grab a pencil from your pencil cup and write at the top, "What I know About My Sister." I will write, "She is so smart," and, "She's leaving in a week," which will make me think, "I hardly know her," and, "I feel like I failed her." Then, I will walk over to your bed and let myself lie down. Your sheets will smell like violets and there will be a book on your nightstand. I will open it to the page you have bookmarked with a picture of us, as girls, laying side by side on the couch downstairs, me eating an orange creamsicle and staring at the TV, you looking straight into the camera. I will close the book and close my eyes, just for a second, and will wake up to the sound of the front door opening, you and Mom coming through the front door with shopping bags full of dorm stuff. I will make a quick escape to my room and later that night, I will lie in my own bed, remembering how the pencil felt in my hand, hard and empty, and I will wonder if that's me, too. Hard and empty. You will knock on my door, and I won't answer, so you'll slide the legal pad under my door. When I wake up, I will see a third item on the list: "She loves and misses her older sister."

I will never apologize to you. Not verbally, anyway, not even on the day you're set to leave for school. Outside, it will begin to drizzle while Dad loads your things into the car you've been given. "For when you need to come home," he will say as he hands you the keys the day you finally get your license, two years behind schedule. He will push your things in their blue plastic boxes into the trunk of the car, which will nearly not-shut over all that you've packed. Mom and I will watch in the kitchen, and she will be packing a sandwich so that you will not have to stop on the road. I never really had to travel to get to school, so Mom and Dad won't know what to expect.

"I'm worried," Mom will say.

"She'll be fine," I will say, half-convincing myself. Because as much as I want to believe it, we won't know it at the time. Mom will pull the last clear sandwich bag out of the cardboard box, stuffing a sandwich into it before sealing it shut.

"I guess the rain is kind of dangerous," I'll say.

"She should have stayed closer."

"It's not that far—"

"It's at least three hours. And if there's traffic, five. If it rains? Forget it. A whole day she'll be driving." Mom will reach back into the now-empty box, remember she used the last of the bags, then smack the box across the counter with the back of her hand in frustration.

Dad will come through the door and ask you why you're standing there, leaning against the blue wall in the hallway with the framed pictures of us. That's when I will know you are standing in that hallway, but still won't tell you what I know you need to hear.

Mom will suggest we follow you in my car, just to make sure you make it there. “Or maybe go halfway there and then turn back,” she will offer. Dad will consider it as he rubs his chin with his hand, staring into the sink. But I know that you will have heard this exchange and will want to drive yourself, to prove that you can get yourself there, let us know you’re okay. Our parents will douse your car hood and each individual tire in Holy water. “Would you also like a rosary to hang on the rearview mirror?” I’ll ask. But they won’t laugh. They just want you to be okay.

Before you go, Mom will point out that the rain is picking up. Dad will put his arm around Mom’s shoulder and for the first time in your life, you will see him cry. You will leave, and we will watch you drive away for a few minutes before realizing what a grave mistake we might have made. We’ll hop in my car and follow you to the Turnpike. It won’t take too long for us to find you, and when we do, I will pull up behind you and honk. Mom will slap my hands—I guess she doesn’t want you to notice us behind you—and I will ask, “Should we follow?”

“She asked us not to,” Dad will say, and Mom, she’ll stay quiet. But you will look at us in your rearview mirror and furrow your brows, like you’re asking, “Why?” I will shrug, and you will smile.

I will decide we’re following.

I should have torn that wall down, Nena. I should have punched through it any time I heard you cry, smashed my hands through it so the plaster cracked and my fists poked through. Then, even on your worst nights, you could have turned to the wall we shared and remembered I was sitting just on the other side of it, and if you ever dared to forget that, you would see me sitting there anyway. I wish I could have written this and taped it to my door so that maybe

instead of that “Keep Out” sign, you’d find this and read it, know what’s coming and navigate accordingly. I just want you to be okay, Nena. Even if that means being as unlike me as you can manage.

You will drive a little too fast, which will make Mom worry, because the rain has picked up, though it looks lighter up ahead. We will trail behind you until we know you’re there and safe. The rain will pelt my windshield so my wipers have to work at full capacity, fumbling over the glass to clear the way for us. We will stay in your dorm if we have to. You and I will share a bed for the first time since we were girls. I will help you unpack. I will do anything to tear the wall between us down like I should have done years ago. And I will be sorry I chose not to be a role model for you, Nena, but know that I will try. From here on out, I will try. I will continue to drive behind you, even when you try to lose me and accelerate, snaking through the other cars on the highway. I will think you’re testing me, but I will keep up. Because in my mind’s eye, we are younger, standing outside during a thunderstorm. Your arms are outstretched, trying to catch the rain, and the drum of the thunder forces you to cup your hands over your ears. You and I dance in the streets, among the palm fronds plucked by the wind. You run ahead and I can’t keep up, but, just as we hear someone yelling at us to come inside, I look at you. The sky is clearing where you’re headed, just as it is now.

A HOLE IN THE SHAPE OF AN ISLAND

I see it for the first time when I'm cleaning my room, wiping dust off the marble of my window sill and from the blinds that spill shafts of sunlight onto my bed. A hole, right at the base of the window, right where the window meets the rest of what it belongs to: our house. It's a hole in the shape of the island of Cuba. A baby lizard must have crawled through it because the dry carcass of one sits on the cold white marble of the windowsill, stiff and crunchy as an autumn leaf. I raise the lizard to the light, and its dead, dry body is translucent. The glow of the outside world reveals to me its skeleton, its lungs long since having released their last breath. Long since having breathed the smell of home.

We essentially built our home. My mother bought it in cash on the brink of foreclosure, at which point nature had done its best to reclaim it. When we saw it for the first time, grass twice my height grew alongside the front of it, and in the backyard, the grass was so high and overgrown that we couldn't even tell that half of the backyard was paved in concrete, or that there was a shed full of hydroponics supplies, which explained that the ceiling in my room was not a ceiling at all, but rather a gaping hole gutted of all electrical wiring in favor of tubes. It had been a grow house.

"We got a weird vibe from that house," our neighbors said the day they brought a cake covered in white frosting that read, "Welcome to the hood." They said cars, many many cars, would come and go in the dead of night. "And nice ones, too!"

So we exorcised the house, rid it of its toxins, took machetes to the overgrown grass and let black garden snakes slither out of land that we decided was ours, no longer theirs. We erected walls where there weren't any—which is to say that when we bought the house, all the bedrooms

were technically one big, connected room—and painted them the colors of our lives. My family all chose a neutral palette for theirs, greys and soft greens. I chose red, like a firetruck. We claimed the house for our own.

I've always wondered what makes a house a home. Having a piece of paper from the bank that says so? A street address occupying two lines on your driver's license? Chasing the snakes out of a backyard? Hanging school pictures and family portraits gallery style along the stairs? Is the difference between a house and a home the difference between a nice new sweater and an old one, worn with love? The one that you refuse to part with in spite of that hole on the left sleeve and the little bleach stain on the back?

When I call home, the first thing my grandmother—who thinks I'm moving back home when I graduate—is, “Y cuando vienes?” That's assuming, of course, that home doesn't call me, first.

And when I visit home from school, I tend to feel like a guest. Just visiting. Maybe it's something about the spiked steel gate in front of it, and how it's the first thing I see when I round the corner after having driven approximately two hundred and fifty miles, usually without stopping because “I just want to get there already.” I told my parents I hated that gate the minute we bought the house. “It reminds me of the Virgin Suicides,” I said. But my stepdad insisted it would keep us safe. “Especially living on the corner,” he said. “If a car takes the corner flying, it could crash through the house and end up in our living room. The gate will stop it.” And because he was the man in the house, it would be so. The gate would stay.

This little hole in my window is the very shape of the island my parents tried to escape from. The same island they no longer call home. There's nothing left there for them. We lived in

four houses before this one and there's nothing left of us there. There's nothing left of me in the dorm room I lived in as a college freshman, or the apartment I lived in after that. And in a few months, the apartment I live in now will contain no trace of me. These were never my homes; they were merely shells. Spaces to occupy, dispose of, and forget.

There are creatures who carry their homes on their backs—hermit crabs and snails—but even they leave their shells sometimes. Turtles don't, and they can live to be a hundred. What does that say about permanency? What does that say about home? Is home a feeling of safety? Is it what you remember to take with you? Maybe home is just the space you want to rid of vulnerability; where you stay and fix, instead of run. Or maybe home is something you carry. A sense of belonging somewhere, even if I don't know where that is.

JUST ASH

I find Junior having licked an ashtray. I left the ashtray on the window ledge a few minutes ago, after the kids were on the playground for a while. I snuck a cigarette in then, though I knew I shouldn't, but I tried my best to hide it, honestly—I opened the window and blew the smoke out so it wouldn't linger on the kids' things, wouldn't slither into the spaces in the stitching on their backpacks so they wouldn't keep having to breathe something awful long after I'm done doing damage. And usually I'd take the ashtray into the bathroom and tap the ashes into the toilet bowl. They'd float like fish flakes, then I'd wipe the tray off with a few squares of toilet paper before hiding it back in my purse and flushing my evidence. But today I just forgot, probably because I'm on my own, another teacher having called in sick. So now Junior stands before me, feet shoulder-width apart, his doughy hands clutching the ceramic dish with the bare-chested woman straddling a palm tree, the words Key West dancing in pink script at her feet. Junior opens his mouth with an, —Aaaahhh. His tongue reaches for his chin and there's a black patch right in the center of that spitty pink flesh, and he's showing it to me like it's a paper with a gold star.

I ask him, —Why, Junior? Why?

Meanwhile, a black snowfall of ashes—the residue of what didn't make it into his mouth—rests at the head of his feet, nestled in sneakers secured by strips of Velcro. Shoes for the young, the defenseless. The not-smart-enough-not-to-lick-ashtrays. And here's a group of them, my class—Can I call them mine? At least for today, I guess, when I'm their sub and their other teacher is out and it's just me—a class full of kids who eat ash instead of paste, who eat

peanut butter at their own peril because when reminded of their own allergies, they ask, —
What's allergies?

Junior holds the ashtray so that his left thumb rests on the naked woman's boobs, and I ask him again, —Why? But it feels like I'm really asking myself.

Why this job? Because I had the time and wanted the money, wanted to move out since my little sister went off to college, leaving my parents with a half-empty nest, scrutinizing my every move. And despite my minimal qualifications—not even the proper certifications to be around children—I am bilingual, and the managers at this particular location of Little Harvard Daycare—all old Cuban women with skin like a catcher's mitt, who pronounce Junior's name like Yoon-ye—needed a translator, a native speaker of English. The parents who dump their spawn here, barely bilingual themselves, complained that the kids weren't learning enough English. —Ya they know Spanish, they said. —But we aren't teaching them English at home. They only learn English from the muñequitos on TV, so I want them to speak English at school.

Coincidentally, I am a part-time translator elsewhere. Thus, I am here.

And why is the ashtray here, in Junior's hands? It goes where I go. I carry it with me everywhere in case I need it for a smoke, and especially given that this job involves kids who eat ash, sometimes I really do need it. But then I remind myself that the ashes wouldn't be licked without the ashtray being there in the first place, so which came first?

The ash tray did. I found it on my lunch break weeks ago at a Goodwill, stashed beside abandoned ceramic mugs and trinkets. Walking through that stale thrift-store-stench of the discarded and the unwanted, there had been this little boy—maybe five or six years old—exploring the maze of steel shelves by the back of the store where adapters and cordless phones

go for pocket change. He reached for what he could on his tippy toes, picking things up and placing them back with a loud ding, like the sound of falling quarters. No one watched him. He could have smashed everything he touched, a tiny Godzilla, and no one would have corrected him, but I saw the ashtray—the one with the boobies and the palm tree—and realized that in five-ceramic-cat-trinkets' time it would be in his gaze, possibly in his hands. I didn't want him to touch those dirty little boobies, didn't even want him to see them, so I picked it up and stuffed it in my purse. It was my brand of protecting him. I could have just held it and put it back later. I could have just lifted it to a higher shelf. But I wanted it—no, needed it—as far from this little boy as possible. You can only imagine my horror, finding Junior's sweet little thumb on those boobs, knowing the ash on his tongue was likely cleaned right out of this ceramic woman's cleavage.

I ask him, —Why did you do that, Junior?

He smiles. —Because I'm the bad kid.

—No, I say. —There are no bad kids in this class. It's a dumb little mantra spouted around here, that and, —Are we making good choices? or, —Are we being good listeners?

—Yes, Junior says. —I am the bad kid because I do this. He licks the ashtray again, then he spits at his feet.

It reminds me of being little, when I was just four and my grandma would take care of me and Nena. I used to watch her smoke. Never indoors, as far as I can remember, but she did leave the cigarette cartons lying around on the coffee table, the dining room table, the top of her dresser, the kitchen counter. So sometimes I'd untuck the flap that kept the box shut and take in its contents.

I loved breathing the smell of those unsmoked cigarettes. Minty, like a musky cologne. Like I shouldn't be smelling it. Like danger was near. But once, my grandma caught me with that box pressed against my nose and slapped it straight out of my hand so it skidded across the tile of her floor. She said I shouldn't touch them. —Eso esta muy feo! she said. Doing that was ugly, it was bad for me. But she didn't stop smoking them, which seemed dumb then (and even now). What was so bad about consuming something I loved like that? It couldn't be too bad if Grandma still did it. If she really wanted me to stop, she would have stopped, too. So when she didn't, I came to reason that Grandma was bad. And I was bad, too, for liking something so bad. But I get her now. She couldn't stop harm, no one can. We just try and put it off before time forces us to bear witness. I guess that was Grandma's own brand of protecting me. Pushing me toward good, even if she couldn't be it herself.

Junior's tongue reaches for the remaining ash peppered on the woman straddling the palm tree and I want to, have to intercept. I clutch the ashtray and snatch it from his hands with an, —I can do that too. Then I lick it, and I understand why "smoked" is a flavor of meat. It is exactly what you might expect ash to taste like. Burnt acidic garbage, so unlike those delicious unsmoked white sticks at Grandma's, which makes me think, now, with Junior, I should quit.

Now we're both black-tongued, and Junior's mouth forms a perfect o. It begins setting in that I have not only licked an ashtray, I have licked the snail trail of Junior's saliva, pressed my tongue against the spit that once clung to his. My heart beats and my body shakes with the adrenaline that comes with getting pissed at a kid and sinking to his level.

—Does that make me bad? I ask him.

He licks his lips, blackening them with his ashy tongue. Staring at his feet, he says, —I guess not.

—Then I hope we understand that there are no bad kids in this class. Because we can fight the bad. And you're going to clean up our mess, I say, pointing at the mountain of ashes by our feet.

And since it's just a little ash on his mouth, I reach over to wipe it from his lips with my palm. It comes off easy.

SUMMER IN MIAMI, 2012

Despite your best efforts to avoid the city, you need to spend the summer in Miami.

“Your hometown,” your mother loves to remind you. Decide one night in May as you’re sitting at your computer in your bedroom-in-Miami—not to be confused, of course, with your bedroom-up-at-school, the one you made for yourself like a bird making its nest, a safe haven assembled out of books and ambition and discount furniture from IKEA.

Mom will come into your room and sit on your bed with her head in her palm and ask you when you intend to start packing. Tell her that you don’t know yet. Don’t tell her that you’ve already dropped your summer class, an anatomy class you enrolled in for the sake of playing catch-up because you decided at the end of your sophomore year that you would switch your major to nursing. Your poor grandmother, she was hoping you were done with your degree—“Ya acabastes?” she likes to ask, hoping that the start of the summer means you can finally move back home like a good Cuban daughter. Little does she know you are thinking of starting over and becoming a nurse. “A nurse?” Grandma asks you when you explain your change of heart. “You want to be a nurse? And why not a doctor?”

You, of course, do not have a good answer, but you know that your desire to be a nurse is a half-hearted attempt to save your grandfather, who has recently fallen ill, his health spiraling out of control after 92 years of fierce independence and seeming invincibility. But do not say so out loud; Abuelita probably does not want to hear that her only granddaughter wants to be a nurse—not a doctor—to save her ex-husband. Instead, calmly explain that your summer needs to be spent back at school, taking the appropriate pre-nursing requisites.

This conversation—the one about why you need to spend the summer at UCF—happens before you notice you’re broke, that you do not have \$210 per credit hour to take that anatomy class. Hell, you don’t even have \$210, and you don’t want to borrow more student loans for a summer semester, so stay home for the summer. When Mom catches you in your room that night in May, explain nothing. Your decision is made for you. You’re staying home, which really means, you’re going back to work.

Mom will thank you. “I really need you here right now,” she’ll say. “I know this is a huge sacrifice for you.” Nod and smile with just one corner of your mouth; avoid locking your eyes on hers because you know that you are a complete asshole and this is not a selfless decision. This is not about your sick grandfather, nor is it about family. You aren’t selfless. You’re scared.

But don’t share any of that. Tell her, “I just feel like I need to be home right now,” and shrug. In your selfish little heart, you know it’s not that simple, that this isn’t home. You don’t know where that is or where you want to be.

By now you will have called Alvaro, the man for whom you worked last summer at Little Swimmers, a swimming school for young kids. It’s already May. No one else will hire you on such short notice.

Tell yourself you’re glad to be back. Most teens and twenty-somethings fold shirts at their summer jobs, serve frozen yogurt. But not you; you work at Miami’s first-class Killian Palms Sports Complex, giving swimming lessons to young kids in two gorgeous Olympic-sized swimming pools with walls so brilliantly turquoise, water so shimmering, you have to shade your eyes just to take it all in. Neighboring the pool deck, there are rolling green hills from the golf

course, crawling in little beige golf carts. Ask yourself why you ever thought you shouldn't return.

And on your first day, remember.

Remember the awkwardness that comes with meeting a student's parents for the first time. Explain the curriculum: "The first twenty minutes of today's lesson are spent totally above water, since it's their first time, and the last ten minutes, we will have the kids put their heads under water, so if she begins crying at that point, please understand that it's normal and remain in the viewing area so that I can hold her attention." Watch them nod. Hope that you seemed confident enough, and know that their nods don't mean shit, because if the last summer working here taught you anything, the first thing they're going to ask when their kid gets out of the pool is, "Is this normal? This amount of crying?" And you will have to convince them of what you have already learned: that it is.

Elizabeth—a plump three-year-old with the most perfect golden curls you have ever seen—will be your first student of the season. She will be fine until, of course, the last ten minutes, as you anticipated. That's when you know that coming here was, indeed, a huge mistake, because Elizabeth will not put her head under water, and the sheer force of her fear will keep her bobbing in the pool like a buoy, lips puckered, eyes shut tight, face just piercing the water's surface so that her puffed up cheeks—she's holding her breath—and button nose stay afloat.

Scream, "Kick kick kick! Kick, Elizabeth, kick!" and, "Open your eyes!"

But she does neither, shrieking, “Mommy! Mommy! Help!” Her parents shift in their seats in the viewing area, probably doubting whether you can really teach this little girl how to swim.

The second day of her lessons will be even worse. They always are, because your students always remember the first day. On day two, endure half an hour of straight-up sobbing, the sort of crying that comes in hiccups, like the bearer of sadness is too tired to shed tears over it, even, and instead hangs her head and slumps her shoulders like she’s given up.

Wait for the change on Wednesday—it always comes—and by the end of the week, watch her happy and swimming. Forget what it was like on day one, and after handing Elizabeth her Little Swimmers Graduate certificate, wipe your body with your towel and hang your swim shirt to dry on the chain link fence behind the tiki hut that serves as an office. Notice how Elizabeth’s parents speak with their faces very close to each other’s, obviously so that you will not hear. Pay attention as they tell their daughter, squealing like little piggies, “We’re so proud of you, honey, you swim so good.” Pretend not to notice how Elizabeth’s mom reaches into her purse and grabs a wad of green money, walks it over to you and says, “Thank you for your patience.” Take it. Nod and smile. Say, “Thank you.” Say, “My pleasure.” Then hug the girl goodbye.

In your car, check your reflection in the rearview mirror and touch your right cheek with your index finger. Watch it stamp a hot white imprint into your skin, a stamp that will slowly fade to pink. You are burnt, and the soles of your feet lack a layer of skin, for the prickly concrete of the pool’s floor has scraped red dots of vulnerable flesh onto all five of your toes so your feet are a cheetah print of pink and white.

Tell yourself nine more weeks. All you have left is nine more weeks, and plus, you're only working the afternoon shift, making just shy of two hundred dollars. Not a whole lot, but don't pick up another shift. You don't want the money *this* badly.

At home that night, ask your grandma where your mom is. Don't get mad when she says, "With her father." Understand that she needs to spend as much time as possible with him before anything, well. You know. Happens. Pull a beer from the fridge and take it with you in the shower. It is Friday. There is no work tomorrow. Drink to that.

Once Dade County Public Schools let out in mid-June, realize that you are working in a septic tank. The brilliantly blue turquoise walls looked that way weeks ago from months of not being used, but now the water fogs with the constant flow of rainwater, urine, puke, and feces inherent in a Little Swimmers summer. Sympathize with the pool's piping and filter system; built in the 1970s, it cannot keep up, an incompetence compounded by the fact that only more seasoned instructors do any maintenance on the pool. Little Swimmers wouldn't hire a pool guy, so it only undergoes a nightly ritual of pouring chlorine and fishing puke chunks and turd nuggets out with a net. To pass the time, wonder: if you worked for Crayola, what name you would give to the debatable color of the perpetually fogged water? Seafoam? Peefoam? Forest of Algae Green?

When a student poops in the pool—and a student *will* poop in the pool at least once a week—tell your boss, and follow his orders: "Did it stay in the diaper? Yeah, it stayed in the diaper. It's fine. Just have her parents change her and finish the lesson."

When your friends claim envy of your caramel skin and ask you how you get so tan, resist saying, “Shit. Lots of it.”

You will visit your grandfather in the hospital three times: once on the night of the surgery, once for Father’s Day, and once on a Sunday afternoon when you wake up at eleven and Mom is gone, has been for hours, out the door and on her way to the hospital more or less as soon as she woke up. It’ll rain as you drive to Kendall Regional and you’ll expect him to be better because he had woken up a few days prior and finally, he was breathing on his own. There was talk of him cursing up a storm. Assume this is good news, that he’s back to his old self, and when you get there, realize exactly what it means for Intensive Care Unit Psychosis to befall a patient, because when the nurse accidentally pinches his testicle while giving him a catheter, and he insists, not jokingly, that he’s going to pinch one of her tetas and see how she likes it. It isn’t funny.

You won’t make eye contact because once he calms down, Grandpa doesn’t open his eyes. Mom will stroke the clouds of his white hair back and tell him, “Look, your granddaughter came to see you,” and the noise that will come from his mouth will be far from human. Mom will tell you to talk to him. “He can hear you,” she’ll say. But you have nothing to share and this is not what you thought you’d see.

While Mom stares out the window of his room, out toward the Turnpike, pressing a fist to her mouth and letting herself cry, try and help. Pick up a small bowl of water and the equivalent of a craft brush to wet his dry lips. Let your mom take over when your grandfather tells you that

you aren't doing a very good job. It's nothing personal; it's just that your hands won't stop shaking. Tell yourself they wouldn't shake if you were actually a nurse, if your patient was just another *person*, not your grandfather.

Leave when Mom tells you, "You can go, if you want," because you're deeply uncomfortable, because you aren't helping anyone, and because, you tell yourself, you have work the next day.

Tell yourself that this job is about the kids, that they make it all worth it. Especially the ones who return across summers, the ones who you started from scratch with. Those are the most rewarding—tell yourself—because you get to see their *growth*. Of course, that also means getting to witness the malleability of memory.

The quickest way to be reminded is to be requested by AJ's mother. AJ himself will greet you with a, "MS. REBECCA!" a toothy grin and the highest of high-fives. Remember AJ. You taught him last summer, when he was just two, and he cried for five days straight until you gave him a tennis ball to play with. Then, he was learning.

Take him by the hand and lead him to the pool. The minute he touches water, he'll go off like an alarm. He'll make a big show of it, waving his fists in the air, his wrinkled face growing purple with the sheer force of his wailing. Think, "Raisin. He looks like a raisin," and consider calling him Raisinet from now on. His mom, concerned, will run to the poolside, reprimanding him for crying. "He loves baths," she says, apologizing. As if baths are comparable to swimming pools full of instructors and their crying students.

Tell her you appreciate the sentiment, but he's going to be fine. Show her. Stand three feet from the wall and, little by little, lower his body into the water, counting, "One...two...three..." until his head is under, too. Watch as his screams ripple the water's surface as water gushes into his little mouth. Watch him turn around and kick his way to the wall. Tell his mom, "See?" until his head shoots out of the water and his throat makes an awful noise, caught between wanting to cough and wanting to cry. Wipe his wet hair back from his forehead. "He's just nervous, but with a little practice it'll all come rushing back to him." Don't laugh when AJ looks at his mom with a face that best reads, "Fuck you, Mom. Fuck you." Smile and nod, resting his head on your shoulder and patting his back to let him burp.

Should you feel compelled to stick a stick a finger in his open, shrieking mouth, make sure his mom doesn't see. Turn your back to the viewing area, maybe, or hide behind the box beside the pool that hides the chemicals for the water. Call another instructor. "Hey, look," and teeter your finger in his mouth hole between his little round teeth to see if he clomps down on it like an alligator. Smile as you ask, "Is he going to bite?"

Laugh, because if you don't, you'll cry, cry and never stop, cry until both of these pools are brimming with your tears. After all, you have twenty-seven minutes left with AJ and thirteen other students left today.

Your youngest student will be a sixteen-month-old named Sebastian. On your first day together, resist thinking that he will not learn. Try not to let it taint your judgment that he greeted you by tossing a Thomas train at your face and crying, his eyes shut like tight stars.

On Thursday, throw him into the deep end of the pool because you have to. You're not a sadist; it's part of the curriculum to simulate an accident, to verify that your students are learning, that they can kick their way back to the wall, back to safety.

Earlier, his mother will have told you that since starting swimming lessons, Sebastian walks right into his pool at home, like a baby Jesus trying to walk on water. You'll notice how your stomach plummets—if he drowns now, it's on you, really—and decide you need to go harder on him. Tell yourself that he will learn, in spite of his age; he may not be self-aware, but he will learn to swim, dammit.

Cut his breaks down to 30 seconds, then try and have him swim from you to the wall. When you see he isn't kicking, don't intervene. He cannot learn that you'll be there to help him if ever he drowns; the notion that not-kicking will get you to safety absolutely cannot be reinforced. Blame his mom for his lack of muscle coordination. After all, she brings him in a stroller every day. The kid doesn't walk; he doesn't even stand.

At the end of the lesson, rest his head on your shoulder, like you're trying to get him to fall asleep. Tap his back with the palm of your hand, burping him in case he swallowed any water. Realize as his mom asks you, "How did he do?" that he did, indeed, swallow water, because he projectile vomits onto your face while your mouth is ajar.

Excuse yourself with a, "Let me go clean this up." Dump pukey Sebastian into his mother's arms and walk briskly, very briskly, toward the hut that serves as an office. Slip because the pavement is wet. Get up. Distract your mind to avoid getting sick yourself: there are no chunks of hyper-acidic coagulated milk dripping down the side of your face, clinging to your swim shirt in clumps, not at all! Run to an instructor on break and greet them with a, "Oh my

God, get this shirt off me, please help me, oh my God it is going to touch my face,” because the only way to get the swim shirt off without the puke touching your face is to cut it. You don’t feel like shelling out another forty dollars for a uniform, and you know Little Swimmers won’t provide you one.

Remember the moment you decided you could not be a nurse, when you visited Grandpa the night his colon would be rerouted so that he would poop out of a hole on the side of his stomach instead of his anus. Recall the warning sign: a swollen belly. The same thing you have to look for in your students, by way of pressing your thumb against their abdomen to check for...squishiness? Who knows. You never understood this practice, but it’s supposed to be a way of checking whether they’re swallowing water. Grandpa had been retching up a spit’s worth of weird black bile and you couldn’t even hold the kidney-shaped pan in front of his face, didn’t even have to wash it out for him to realize what you said out loud as your mother stood at the foot of his bed with her arms crossed and her mouth in a straight line: “I can never be a nurse.” You couldn’t look at it then, but you’re swimming in it now.

Finish hosing yourself off like some animal, then walk back to Sebastian’s mother. She will ask, “So, do you think he’ll benefit from another week of lessons?”

Snap. Say, “After the first few times he walked into your pool, you didn’t think to buy a fence?” Nothing in her face, her scrunched eyebrows or pursed lips, will change. She’s genuinely curious. Consider that she’s just a parent, that while you think you’d do a much better job in her shoes, you do not yet know what it’s like to love another human so much that you sometimes forego common sense. Tell her that Sebastian’s a smart kid—after all, he cries at the very sight of you, an indication that some associations are being made—but that his method of learning is

probably not an endless game of dunk-the-baby, and until he gets a little older, swimming lessons will traumatize him more than they will teach. She will appreciate your honesty. On your last day together, she will bring you a protein bar (“You always look like you need a little energy at around this time,” she’ll say) and a Starbucks gift card. As she walks away, Sebastian’s head will peek from behind her shoulder. He will be wrapped in a towel like a wet burrito. Wave goodbye to him, watching as he stares, unresponsive, his eyes saying, “I am never coming back here,” yours responding, “I don’t blame you, kid.”

Decide mid-July that you’ve had enough when you’re told there will be a group CPR class after work next week. Feel angry. As it is, you’re out of the house by eight in the morning to be at the pool by nine to be on lunch break by one-thirty to be back in the pool by three and get off work at seven-thirty. How dare they schedule a CPR class for nine o’clock after work? You’ll be lucky if you’re home by eleven that night.

Protest. Be indignant. You were only supposed to work afternoons, anyway, and you don’t recall how it got to over forty hours of work each week. “Do you realize my grandfather is dying? I never see my mom as it is anyway.” Ask yourself who you’re asking when Alvaro shows you the obvious: “It’s just going to be one night.”

Don’t bother asking whether you really need the CPR certification, considering you worked all of last summer without one. Even to you, it sounds unreasonable.

On the drive home, cry. Grip your steering wheel so your knuckles whiten. Drive all of five miles over the speed limit—for you, this is enough to feel dangerous—reveling in the whirr

of the road below you, your car engine's cry. On your exit, see a homeless man without a nose begging for money. Tell yourself that if he wants to earn some money, he can have your job. You two can switch spots. Picture yourself training him as an instructor with a wailing child slamming his knotted little fists into the man's chest. "It isn't you," you'd say. "Or your nose, or your lack of one, I guess. Whatever. There's nothing you can do about it! Nothing you can do to change anything!"

Cry into the night and when your mom suggests you quit, don't yell at her for not knowing the thoughts you've tried suppressing for weeks: that this job gives you an excuse. Without it, you have no reason not to go visit your grandfather; nothing to do at home; no excuse for not knowing what it is you'll be doing when you return to school in the fall; nothing to assign your pervasive discontent to.

Tell her you're fine, you're just tired, you just needed to let it out.

The next day, watch your coworkers. Tell yourself you are not like them, these girls who whisper to each other about different guys on their shifts, who leave on their lunch breaks in giggles and return dappled in hickeys. You know these girls. They won't leave home until they are married; won't leave, in fact, probably even after they're married, and getting married is probably all they have left in life to look forward to. You are not them, and you are not the thirty-year-old whose job title is "substitute teacher," who has returned every single summer since he was first hired, who still lives at home with his mom. Sit through the dreaded CPR class and find yourself having fun. Laugh when Alvaro grabs the plastic infant you're supposed to practice on and pretends to burp it, faking disgust as if he's been puked all over. Pretend to kiss the grown plastic man—"Un besito!" you say, posing for pictures with the thing.

And so, when you're invited to a purse party at Kharla's house, agree to go. She has a friend who sells purses, some imitation, some that "fell off the trucks." Invite your mom. You don't care much for Coach and Louis Vuitton, but she might enjoy herself. Try not to get hurt when she declines the invitation she'd previously accepted in favor of spending time with her father at the assisted living facility. Fail, of course, because stifled hurt resurfaces as rage. Tell her, "I spent the summer here so we could spend time together and I never see you." As if the hurt on her face is not enough, say, "Do you realize I'm leaving in, like, five weeks?"

When she responds, she looks downward as if she's addressing the floor. She says that you need to go see your grandfather. Hold your arms out and shrug. Say, "Fine." But tell her you're going after the purse party, because it's a Saturday afternoon and *you're* not one to go back on your word.

At Kharla's, look at the purses drowning her couch. Pick them up, try them on. Let yourself be flattered when your coworkers tell you that you have style. "But like, a rocker bohemian style," they say. Tell yourself you won't buy anything, then realize you're violating basic Miami purse-party etiquette and settle for a pair of sunglasses, Ray Ban Wayfarer knock-offs way overpriced at twenty dollars—you'll regret the purchase all week.

Wear the sunglasses on the drive to the assisted living facility. Once there, plant a kiss on the cheek of every ALF resident, even though they're senile (your mother, who knows them all very well at this point, told you so). They probably won't remember the little kindness, but you will. You'll want to. It will smell very vaguely of urine and cleaning supplies, so don't breathe from your mouth because you'll think you can taste it.

Grandpa will be awake when you get to his room. Kiss him and say hi. When he smiles and tells you how pretty you look, just smile back. It's enough, and anyway, you won't know what to say in return. In the bedroom next door, an old man wrapped in a blanket lies in his bed groaning. "No one ever visits him," your mom tells you.

Show Grandpa your new glasses and when he says, "Ah, muy lindo," put them over his eyes. "You're the only one who pulls a smile from his lips," Mom says, and you realize how few times you've been here to do exactly that.

Scream internally.

Grandpa looks at you and his eyes are warm, knowing, so take a picture with him wearing your gaudy imitation sunglasses and upload it to instagram with the hashtag "love." Cropped into a square, you can't really tell the photo was taken at an ALF, and that's how you want to remember him (or, at least, how you want the world to see him). A few days later, when a friend from high school accuses you of tastelessness through a passive aggressive status on Facebook—"Why do people take pictures with folks in hospitals?"—comment and tell her what you've only just noticed: that this is the only known photograph of you with your grandfather since you were a very little girl.

Go back to work and blame your job: in teaching over seventy kids to swim in one season, you have neglected to fulfill your duty as the sole person who can pull a smile from your grandfather's lips. You have also accumulated more pictures of yourself with students on the

Little Swimmers Facebook page than of you with your own grandfather over the course of a lifetime.

Do not yell at the parents of your students when they're five minutes late to their appointment and want you to give them five extra minutes. You've given these kids your summer, ten weeks that should have been spent with your ailing grandfather and your grieving mother. Don't they know that? You've read a single book and, approaching your junior year, your major is still up in the air.

Your last week will be the toughest because even though you had the good sense to request half-days in order to prepare for your return to Orlando, another instructor catches pink eye. Alvaro will ask you if you can cover her shifts. Say yes because, well. Because you still don't know how to say no. Then, muster up the courage to decline an additional week of work as a secretary at a satellite location, having learned that you don't need this job, you don't need the extra couple hundred dollars. What you needed was an excuse, and you found one, and now, you're trying to stomach the fact that you've been unabashedly selfish for an entire season.

So when you visit your grandfather for the last time before driving back for your junior of college, sit on the green recliner chair beside him for a long time. Think of what Alvaro said when you left, how he lifted his chin and said, "I'll miss you." And you, confused, asked him what he meant. "You aren't coming back next year," he said.

Avoiding eye contact, you crossed your fingers behind your back. "Well. We don't know that."

"Yes I do," he said. "I have a feeling about you."

Think about that as you sit beside your dying grandfather and be content with the truth of Alvaro's words, words whose truth you had not yet discovered.

Be content with the silence in the room, filled only with the sound of his breathing. Know that you have lost your summer, yourself, your sacred time with your grandfather. But sit there—stay longer than the accumulated thirty minutes you've given him all summer—so that when you leave the next morning, you can tell yourself that even to the end, you did your best not to avoid what awaited you, and your return to Orlando won't be a desertion or an escape.

RESOLVING CONFLICTS WITHIN FAMILIES: A GUIDE

The important thing to remember is this: conflicts will happen. They indicate a family's love for one another about as much as the colors of a cereal box affect the taste of its contents. In spite of disagreements, remember that your family loves each other, and what matters is not whether your family fights, but how they fight. Ask yourself: what is the source of this conflict? For example:

Nena found a dog,

Or, Nena found a dog and brought it home but her dad does not want it there,

Or, Who the hell does Nena think she is, guilt-tripping her parents into letting her bring an animal into a house that isn't hers?

And, Didn't her parents tell her, no more animals in the house?

She found the dog—a small, sad-looking, mangey little thing—on Saint Lazaro's Day. Well, actually, it was about three days after Saint Lazaro's—she actually Googled it to be sure—but it so doesn't matter. By the time she thought of this, the dog was already sitting in her backseat anyway, so that's what she told her parents: that it was Saint Lazaro's Day.

That's another thing: try and avoid manipulating.

And we'll give Nena credit: she tried to avoid conflict, manipulating herself, even, referring to the dog strictly as Dog. Not Chica, Negra, not even Perra. Dog. Cold, impersonal English—capable of beauty and grace, but generally not inclined to it. Plus, where names are given, ownership is claimed and affection is held. The closest thing Nena will get to personal is

calling the dog “a she,” because with this, she identifies; as the youngest daughter, she finds her voice so overpowered that only a will like a donkey kick has gotten her anywhere. She knows that to be female often means a perpetual state of being invisible.

Nena drove Dog to Petsmart to be scanned, because initially, she thought it would be a quick thing. She was driving down 157th avenue, just past the Bark Park, when she first saw it, a small black dog with a purple collar (and, she would find, no tags) tottering on the sidewalk, its little pink tongue hanging out, shaking with every step it took counter-traffic.

“Should I stop?” she asked to no one in particular. Her car was devoid of company, and her day, devoid of plans, because since she went away to school, coming home became an endless affair of awkward encounters with people from high school and uncomfortably avoiding conversation with family. “How’s school?” they would ask.

“Good.”

“What are you studying?”

“English.”

“English? Pa’ que? You already speak English.”

Avoidant behavior is to be avoided itself, but one can empathize with her decision to go for a drive, get out of the house.

There was no reason not to, so yes. Nena made the u-turn. Also, she would’ve wanted someone to stop if it were her dog—empathy is crucial to get through disagreements—though she knew it would *never* be her dog. She wouldn’t allow it. And plus, did it matter why she did it, when it was the right thing to do? It’s important to remember good intentions. Because her thought process was this: *A dog with a collar walked past a dog park. The owner of said dog has*

not yet noticed that his dog is missing (they can run free, after all). I shall get the dog and drive it to the park and reunite it with its family.

She might even post a status about it. Mentally, she had already drafted it.

So she turned the car around, and as she did, the black dog dashed across the street. She thought it would get hit for sure, which made her think, *What a stupid dog. Is it even worth saving?* Her car muffler roared as she sped up, hoping to get to the dog before any other cars might, then slamming her foot on the brakes once it reached her, bringing her car to a crawl beside her on the sidewalk. She couldn't get out here; from her side mirrors, she knew that too many cars approached. For lack of better ideas, she honked. What else do dogs respond to, right? Traffic lulled behind her and cars honked at her honking at the dog, only to pull out from behind her, stall beside her, throw a birdie out the window like confetti, and speed away. If cars could speak, these would have probably said, "Fucking estúpida."

Do *not* resort to name-calling in the midst of a disagreement. More on that later.

The dog, well. Dog walked on, bolting off the sidewalk and into a field beside the road, pinstriped in rows of black tarp sprouting strawberries. Nena pulled up beside the field, just before a sign that read "Official Use Only" and led to unpaved road, smacked the button on her dashboard to turn on her hazards, and ran off into the dirt. Her ankle twisted as the terrain dipped, where concrete from the sidewalk stretched out over the dirt and unkept grass like a cliff, where two worlds collided: grass and rock, nature and order, wild and tame. She knew her shoes—her nice shoes, the golden little Steve Madden sandals, purchased on sale on Black Friday just a few weeks prior—were fucked. Still, she ran, and when she caught up to the dog, it froze. Since it didn't growl, she cradled it in her arms and walked back to her car, realizing only

as she turned to face it that she left her car door open and the keys inside. Gracias a Dios que no one did anything.

But God was not watching for long—and certainly, one shouldn’t rely on God to fix their problems for them!—for no one at the park claimed the dog. “Is this your dog?” Nena asked, only to be greeted with, “No,” “She looks really old,” and, “Someone must have dumped her here.”

All this she explains to the young girl behind the counter at Petsmart, which she drove to in hopes of scanning Dog and tracking its shitty owners down. In her pink scrubs, the girl knelt down to face Dog. “Poor girl,” she said, running perfectly manicured nails over the dog’s black fur. “We can scan her.” She turned around to retrieve the scanner. Nena thought that only a Miami vet technician would wear uñas postizas—fake nails—to deal with animals all day, and that’s another thing you should do: avoid passing judgment.

The scanner went off and plastic-nail-girl said, “She’s microchipped!” and, with a raising of the eyebrows: “Now let’s just hope the chip is registered.”

Nena then imagined that the inventor of the microchip did not have Miami in mind, because Miami is a city bred for the type of people actively not-returning calls, not-RSVPing, not-registering microchips, probably not thinking they even have to. What are veterinarians anyway? “In Cuba there are no veterinarians,” her parents’ friends used to say. The animals roam the streets, happy. Feliz y contento.

The chip is not registered, so Nena walked out of Petsmart without returning the leash handed to her at the door. She put the dog into the backseat of her car and dialed her Mom’s cell

phone number, tells her it's Saint Lazarus's Day and she found a dog, and it's totally a sign, and please, Mom, could she keep the dog overnight? Just one night? Please?

It's important for families to try and look beyond the incident. Is this really about an inconvenience birthed by the finding of a stray dog? In such cases, each stakeholder ought to share their thoughts.

For Nena: it is the inconvenience of feeling like an inconvenience.

For her parents: it is the inconvenience of their youngest daughter inventando.

But healthy communication is crucial, so when Nena pulled into her parents' driveway on a night with air so hot and so thick, like Miami sat at the top of a teakettle's spout just as steam began pumping out, she practiced her I statements. *I would appreciate it if I were allowed to keep the dog here, and, I just need one night and I can find her a home, and, I don't think I would've stopped and saved its poor little life if I'd known it would be such a hassle.*

On the phone, she said, "I think this is a sign."

"A sign of what?" her father asked.

"A sign from Saint Lazarus. You didn't even honor the day this year."

"Yes we did. Your mother put a vela in the sink and everything."

Of course, she thought. Put the candle in the sink. If anything catches fire the faucet will turn itself on and save us all.

"Well, I think this is a sign," she said.

Now, she watched her mother's face through the orange glow of the window above the kitchen sink. She thought she saw disapproval, but pushed that thought out of her mind as she opened her car door and leaned into the backseat, reaching for the dog in the darkness of the night, fighting against its refusal to leave the safe book between the backseat and the passenger's. With Dog's belly hammocked between Nena's arms cradling it, Nena bumped her car door shut with the side of her ass.

Fumbling with her keys at the front door, she considered placing the dog on the floor, mostly-convinced it wouldn't run away, but why risk it? The door opened with a high-pitched yawn and the keys landed on the floor with a jingle. Certainly, her father heard the keys fall, but remained on the couch in the dark living room, unmoving, his legs spread before him on the chaise lounge, one hand draped over his belly and the other resting on the remote. His chin pressed into his neck and the light from the television illuminated him like ghosts dancing on his body.

He, too, had practiced his I statements: "I told you that I do not want a dog here," he said.

In from the kitchen came Nena's mother, licking a wooden spoon shiny with oil and peppered in seasoning. "I really don't think we have the room for it."

It's worth noting that the consideration inherent in I statements is negated by the tone with which they are spoken. Nena, for example, replied, "Really? Because I'm pretty sure Mel's room has been totally empty since she moved out, so I think that for sure there is room for the dog."

Her mom cocked her head to the side and her father remained unmoving, at which point they, both highly experienced in getting through conflicts, opted for negotiation, a strategy used when seeking compromise. Through compromise, nobody gets what they want, which makes everyone a little happy and a little dissatisfied, but still a little happy.

“Can’t it stay outside?” her mom asked.

“Oh my God,” Nena said, placing the dog on the floor and pressing her left palm to her forehead. “That is super arbitrary. Why are you going to force the dog to sleep outside when there is literally an empty room upstairs?” Her mom said nothing, an answer in itself, but Nena continued. “I’m disappointed in you guys.”

A rolling of the eyes and a throwing back of the head on her Mom’s behalf.

“No, really, I am,” Nena said. “You always taught me to do the right thing, so I did what was right, not even thinking the dog would need to come here and—“

“Oye,” her mom interrupted. “Do not forget that you are 19 years old and you are speaking to your mother, so do not be condescending.”

Her feet rooted in place, Nena felt a fruit pit of dread sprout in her stomach. She sailed on this ship alone, wanting to save the dog’s life just as desperately as she wanted to disprove her parents, show them that this doesn’t have to be a hopeless situation in a cold and uncalculating world, that a lack of intervention isn’t necessarily worth more than a pound of all the head medicine they would have to take for getting involved in the first place.

Sometimes, in conflicts, it’s important to acknowledge the power structures inherent in a family dynamic. It is unwise for someone to overstep a boundary and force the hands of her

superiors. Someone with relatively little power, like Nena, for example, might not want to say, “We’re going to play this by ear then. I will bathe the dog, and then we’ll see what happens.”

Once each party has aired their grievances, seek solutions to change the situation. Again, listen intently to each party, keeping in mind to steer the discussion away from infantile behavior that might surface during the conflict. For example:

- Nena may challenge her parents to push the dog back outdoors themselves,
- Or, Nena may bathe the dog to make it harder to push the dog outdoors.

Because even if she hadn’t chased Dog down, Nena didn’t want to be the puppy-hating demon who throws her back out onto the streets, and why put it in the backyard? So that it dapples the perfectly maintained grass in holes and turds and Nena gets blamed for it?

Nah.

Thus, Nena bathed the dog. Sure, Dog stank, but Mom and Dad would really look awful if they put the dog outside *after* the fact. And, again, you have to give her credit: she was trying, not wanting to let a dirty dog dirty her parents’ home.

Before placing Dog in the tub, she took pictures for Facebook, having to hold her face in her hand because she wouldn’t lift her head, like her snout was magnetically attracted to the tile. Nena noticed after the fact that the photo she posted—“Found this dog on 157th avenue; please share!”—contained an unemptied trash can at the top right of her picture. She considered

deleting and retaking the photo, but it already had three likes, the social media equivalent of nothing, but still, it was something, and why make it weird?

She placed Dog in the tub, realizing the house contained nothing with which to wash her and settling, instead, for the bottle of pearly green handsoap sitting on the rim of the sink. Through it all, the dog did not move. Even with the fan in the air vent breathing its endless exhausted whirr, even when the roaring of the tub's faucet reverberated through the tiny bathroom. Even when Nena reached for the handsoap, knocking over the tall candle with the saint in the sink so it clattered like marbles falling into a ceramic bowl. Dog did nothing except blink and let a shiver rattle her small frame.

Nena pushed Dog below the running water and there was some effort—Dog brought one foot forward, her nails tapping the tub—but just as easily, she gave up. Silver beads of water trickled over the dog's black fur, sprinkling the tub with little bursts of grayed water. Nena pumped the soap dispenser and thick globs of soap landed on the dog, clinging to her fur like phlegm. As she massaged Dog's coat, black bristles of hair loosened, clinging to Nena's wet, soapy hands.

She said, "What the—"

She said, "Ew."

But then she said, "Good girl! Good Dog!" cooing at Dog like she's a baby, realizing that her parents probably listened, probably shook their heads, whispering to each other about how Nena would see. "Ella verá."

It's important, during conflicts, not to be too shy to ask for help. Unlike Nena, put your pride aside. As she bathed, more and more of Dog's hair fell off in clumps, until Nena refused to continue washing a disintegrating dog, despite how badly she stunk ("Like a motherrrrr!" Nena used to say as a child, extending the r to compensate for the missing f-bomb, because her parents would kill her if they heard her uttering the latter half of that cuss).

Nena stopped the water and turned for a towel, only seeing the ones put there for decoration, not even for drying your hands with. What does one do with a melting dog? She picked it up, of course, carrying Dog to the room formally occupied by Mel, her legs jutting out stiffly like the naked branches of a sad and broken tree. With Dog wet and cradled in her arms, Nena's clothing grew splotched in soiled patches of water. She looked like a mother to the dog, a mother for the wild and lost and homeless.

It's worth reiterating: reach out if you need help. With Dog in the room occupied by Mel, Nena called her sister, wedging the phone between her shoulder and the right side of her face as she scoured the house for towels, eventually having to settle for a used towel mop. She'd previously given her parents tons of shit for not yet having upgraded to a Swiffer, but now, she was grateful. Her mom's nice not-even-hand towels would have been next, a decision that would have surely birthed more tension.

After four rings, Mel picked up. "Hello?" she said.

"Hey. Wait up," Nena replied, casting a glance at her parents who watched her from the couch of the living room, rolling their eyes at the sight of a mop towel in her hands.

She reached the empty room again and closed the door behind her, rushing toward Dog shivering in the room's dead center. "Okay, hi," Nena said. "Look, I found a dog, and I don't want to keep it or anything, I thought I could just take it to the Bark Park because that's where I was driving when I saw it and they let them run loose, you know? So, I thought I could just pick the dog up and take it back, but apparently some asshole just dumped it there, and the chip isn't registered or anything, so I need help.

Mel remained quiet for a bit, then said, "So nobody at the park claimed it?"

"No."

"And you had the dog scanned?"

"Yes."

"And that didn't lead anywhere?"

"Are you freaking serious, Mel? I just told you all of this."

"Well," Mel said. Nena could tell she was driving by the sound of air funneling through her phone. "I can be there in a bit and I'll check it out."

Good, Nena thought. They always trust Mel because she's older. Dumber, but older.

Resist the urge to point fingers, as Mel did to sister on this one. Their parents probably wouldn't care about keeping the dog for a night if they hadn't caught the PTSD that comes with having two daughters highly sympathetic to animals, constantly finding strays and dumping them on the house, never even buying a can of food for those pobres animales desgraciados. And they were always cats, too. Filthy cats who walked on the counters, jumped on the tables even when dinner was being had, with not even one ounce of respeto for the humans. When Mel moved out

she took the cats with her, but her parents were scarred. “Don’t bring any animals into this home,” became the new family mantra.

Nena picked some lint fuzzies from the mop towel before wiping the dog down, clearly without realizing the severity of the dog’s disintegration, because she found herself in a cloud of black hair slowly wafting down, sticking to her face, tickling her nostrils. Only after she wiped her face with her arm could she see the damage: that Dog was not so much a dog now as she was a living, breathing, four-legged map of hair and flesh rather than land and sea.

Her father knocked on the door and peeked his head in. “Your sister is here.” Then, with his eyebrows raised, “Wow. You shaved it? Did it have fleas?”

Nena glared at her father and patted the dog with the mop towel, careful not to strip it of even more hair.

Dinner was a silent affair of Nena, her sister, and their parents, staring at their plates and pretending to hear only the clatter of silverware, not the dog’s yelping from the empty room.

“So, how is your new place, Mel?” Mom asked.

“When are you inviting us over?” Dad followed.

“You still haven’t gone over?” Nena asked. “Aren’t you the two who ask me when I’m coming home literally any time you call?”

“You’re the youngest. You need more taking care of.” Dad pointed his head in the general direction of the crying dog.

“I didn’t even bring the other animals!” Nena protested, knowing it was a lot like whining. “Mel did!”

“And she took them with her and she resolved it.”

“And I’m resolving this.”

“Go resolve it now, because the dog me tiene loco.”

And so, Nena went back to the room, casually taking her plate of food with her. “So I can finish eating,” she said, though just as soon as she entered the room she placed the food by Dog’s snout. It was rice, beans, and a plate of ground beef, but it would have to do.

A knock on the door, then Mel entered the room with a, “Holy shit. What did you do to it?”

This is where good communication is key, where I statements are important and the tone should generally be lacking any condescension or sarcasm. The following, for example, is not ideal:

Nena: *What did I do? I saved her.*

Mel: *Whoah, okay. Sorry. She’s super old, though.*

Nena: *So since she’s old I shouldn’t have done anything?*

Mel: *That isn’t what I said. What the hell is your problem?*

Mom: *Why are you two arguing?*

Nena: *Because Mel isn’t helping.*

Mel: *I don’t have to help you.*

Nena: *But you should want to.*

And so, the best thing that could’ve happened is exactly what did: Mel left, seeing herself to the door with her palms up, saying, “No, no, I don’t know what this girl’s problem is,” and

Nena put the dog in her own bedroom, fearing it would wake everyone. Plus, she had done enough damage already, in a house that wasn't even hers, which she spent nine months of the year living out of, which was little more than a line on her license, at this point.

She set a few blankets below her desk, but Dog only walked to her bedside, where it remained staring and motionless. The blankets were thus moved to the bedside where the dog—who not only smelled like a dirty street dog, but now also smelled like wet dog—finally curled into a ball and slept.

There was quiet, then, a thick and heavy guilt that blanketed Nena and clogged her throat, restricting her breathing, like Dog sat on her chest.

Because now, there were multiple conflicts, which she began to count. For example:

1. *Nena found a dog and brought it to her parents' house though they did not want it there, and*
2. *Nena stripped the dog of its fur and let it eat off of a plate for humans, and*
3. *Nena asked her sister for help and then was super mean to her, and*
4. *Nena feels guilty because, for Dog, this house is the closest thing to a home.*

Suppose she found a place for Dog, given her age and state of near-hairlessness, it would have to be a no-kill shelter. But she knew this sort of dog was unadoptable. It would only know a metal kennel for the rest of its life. It would be incapable of finding a home. Was it better off on the street, fending for itself?

She wondered.

Nena closed her eyes and whispered into her room, “What have I done?” Dog raised her head to look, but Nena closed her eyes and before she knew it she was gone, gone, asleep.

Ideally, your family will come to an agreement about what triggered the conflict. For instance, Mel and her parents all agree that the dog seems to have died overnight.

There’s confusion.

The dog was very active at night, the sounds of its nails on the tile like a light raking. It woke Nena and she sat up, frightened by Dog’s movement, how it walked around her bed, from one side to the other, over and over and over and then stopped before the foot of Nena’s bed, staring.

She hadn’t noticed that the dog walked funny, its legs skinny like gnarled tree branches. The front of Dog is the part which did the walking; her hind legs dragged behind, keeping up strictly because they needed to, not because they wanted to or even necessarily could. She was a Dalí elephant of a dog, almost.

Nena woke up at around noon, having ignored two hours’ worth of alarms silenced by snooze buttons. She thought she’d wake up early to find a shelter to place the dog in, but there would be no need. Beside her the dog rested, curled up like the patchy black shell of a snail. She draped her hand over the bed, trailing her fingers along the dog’s spine.

“Good morning,” she’d said, her voice muffled by the pillow. Hairs clung to her fingers and she scratched the dog’s belly, feeling it’s mountain ridge ribs below her thin skin. “Wake up,” Nena said in a sing-song voice. But the dog didn’t move, and the airy whisper of her

breathing was gone. Propped up on one elbow, she watched the dog's belly for movement, holding her own breath.

There was none. Just a skeleton coated in a thin layer of skin, dappled in patches of brittle black hair.

So she got up and walked to the kitchen, her bare feet cold on the tile. Her father at the counter. "Um," she said. "Good morning. I think the dog is dead."

"The dog is what?" her mom said, tilting her head forward. "How could the dog be dead?"

Without sarcasm, Nena said, "Because it died. She died. She's dead."

Their three bodies drifted to Mel's former room, where they all agreed: the dog was dead.

And so the slow funeral procession to the backyard began, Nena carrying Dog's corpse in the mop towel while her dad dug a hole open in the ground. Because it was already noon, the sun pounded down on the three of them, and as Nena placed the dog into the ground, she began to cry.

Her mom placed her hand on Nena's shoulder. "Is it because you got attached?"

Nena shrugged. "It's because it's not fair to Dog." She wiped her eyes with the backs of her fingers. "She never knew home."

"You don't know that," her mom said. "She had a home but she lost it."

Her mom pulled her in for a hug while her father asked, "Are there any words you want to say?" before taking Nena's shaking head as a cue to scoop the dirt back over Dog's makeshift grave. "You probably won't believe this, and it isn't what you need to hear. But she's better off

dead than without a home,” and he scooped the dirt off the ground and onto Dog, off the dirt and onto Dog, until she was covered in Earth.

HOME NOWHERE: THE UNAUTHORIZED AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF ME

When I am born, my brother looks at my hands and says, “Those will never be big enough to play football.”

When I grow up, I will use my hands to spread concealer over the bags below my eyes. My hands will run pencils of brown eyeliner along my lower lids, guide tweezers to pinch runaway hairs out from under the runaway arch of my thick Cuban eyebrows.

And when the body they are attached to—my body—makes its way downstairs, ready to leave for the party, it will be asked, “You aren’t going to wear high heels?”

So I will climb back upstairs to my room, put on five-inch yellow platform pumps with faux-wooden soles worn only once before. My toes, sausaged and curled, will jut out from the peep toe at the tip of the shoe, trying desperately to keep my foot in place. When I walk back downstairs, I might hear, “You aren’t going to paint your toes?” Wanting to avoid birthing any tensions, I will go back upstairs and paint them—at the very least, paint the ones that show, because I am a good daughter. On my way out, I will put a book in my purse, not because I intend to read at the party, but because I want to carry the comfort of words with me.

My hands will save stranded animals. They will cook meals. They will bring me happiness more than they will bring me money, hold pens that bleed stories in blue and black ink. They will never play football, and they may always be judged by what they don’t do, in spite of what they can do. This is how you know that they belong to a Latina.

It is a hot Miami afternoon, and my brother Albert and I play softball on the slab of concrete next to the townhouse we're growing up in, our "yard." I am six, and he is seven years my senior. Grandma, who lives with us, says I shouldn't play baseball, but I want to be just like Albert, mushroom cut and all, so my mom says, "Let her."

The ball escapes us, bouncing twice before rolling into a bush. I go after it because I'm little, I can crawl through that greenery. A palm frond smacks me in the face and I feel it in my eye, a sort of pinch, like someone took a needle and pushed it into the hard-boiled egg white of my eyeball.

Hours later, I am in the emergency room and no flushing can get the splinter lodged just millimeters from my cornea. An emergency surgery will be necessary; not once will I cry.

My parents divorce before I am old enough for it to affect me. I think it's normal to hang out with one or the other, but never both. My brother is not so lucky. Movies are expensive, so Dad often takes us to the library. I am the only student in my Kindergarten class who can read. I go on to consistently be the only student who likes to.

In middle school, I grow irritated of teachers who have accents. My friends and I call them refs, short for refugees. If someone is particularly Hispanic, we call them "reffy." I decide to state my grievances while doing my homework at the dining room table one night as my mom

cooks dinner. Food sizzles in the pan before her and I say, “I wish refs tried harder to learn English.”

“Don’t forget that your mother is one of those refs,” my mom says, casting me her side-eye while waving the wooden spoon she cooks with at me. I think I needed to hear that.

English is the tongue of my consciousness, but Spanish demands my cooperation. It is the primary language used at home; when speaking to each other, my extended family uses Spanish, first; when addressing me, or my brother, those who can speak English, do.

Growing up, my Abuelita did not correct my Spanish. Either she thought it was cute, or she thought it was good enough. I developed a habit of using hasty and made-up translations for words I could not remember. If I said I would do my homework eventually, for instance, I might say I’d get to it “eventualmente,” a word which does not exist. Once, in middle school, I told my grandma that I tripped on someone’s backpack and fell over in front of the whole class, but in place of “embarrassed,” I said I was “embarazada.”

Embarazada is Spanish for pregnant.

My stepdad’s family is not as kind as my grandmother; they correct my Spanish and laugh at my efforts. I never correct their fractured English, despite the temptation. I stay quiet, and I wonder whether I’m doing any harm, or any good.

In the third grade, I own a doll whose hair is brown and braided into pigtails, with a blue checkerboard dress sprinkled with sunflowers, like the clips my mom puts in my hair. I like this doll. She looks like me, and she has those eyes whose plastic lids flutter shut when you lay her down to sleep. Sometimes, though, when you sit her up, her left eye stays squinted. I learn to hate her for this. I scream, shaking her so that her plastic eyelids *clack* in the hard shell of her head and her braids fly everywhere like angry tentacles. One day, my mom gets tired of me yelling at the doll and says, “You have one bad eye, and I don’t love you any less for it.”

From then on I love that doll. She and I read together, and I tell everyone she is my daughter.

In the fourth grade, I ask my mom for plastic surgery. I don’t want to have a mole; I want my face to be symmetrical, like everyone else’s. When I tell my godmother she says, “Good. That thing is about to eat your face.” But when I visit my brother, whose collapsed lung has placed him in the hospital, an Asian nurse with short black hair and teal scrubs pushing a cart stops and smiles at me. “You know,” she says, “in my culture, a birthmark by your mouth means you will be very, very rich.” I don’t know if she is lying, but finally, I think, there’s something to like about my face.

A revolutionary act: loving yourself in spite of thinking that you shouldn’t.

1. An incomplete list of writing I am raised on: Stories from the Bible. Dr. Seuss. *The Giver*. *A Wrinkle in Time*. *Go Ask Alice*.

2. Writing I am assigned throughout school: *The Bell Jar*. *The Great Gatsby*. *Holes*. *Jane Eyre*. *Night*. *The Taming of the Shrew*.

3. Writers who shift the axis of my world, who convince me it's not such a lonely place: Sherman Alexie. Gloria Anzaldua. Jennine Capo Crucet. Junot Diaz. Toni Morrison.

4. Writing that I don't read until college, and only in specialized classes: see number three.

Spring 2014, last semester of undergrad. I enroll in a Latino lit class because I have never really read anything by Latinos. The class designs the syllabus; we are encouraged to argue in favor of readings we want to study. I raise my hand: "I think we should read Judith Ortiz Cofer's *The Story of My Body* because it lies at the cross-section of ethnicity and gender roles, examining how arbitrary standards affect young girls, especially young Latinas." I don't know who this girl speaking is. I am home nowhere, except among words.

2006. For the science fair, I have to design an experiment with environmental implications, so I decide to compare the boiling points of fresh water and saltwater, somehow convinced that global warming can bring the ocean to a simmer and, consequently, feed tropical storms. This experiment is a way of disproving Mr. Perdomo, my eighth grade science teacher,

who calls me stupid for putting a sticker from a plum on my shirt. “Your papers tell me you are smart,” he says, pointing at the sticker. “But your behavior indicates otherwise.”

For comparison: Ms. Naranjo, my English teacher, submits my creative assignments to youth fair competitions and lends me books privately. Mr. Perdomo calls me stupid. Mom nearly has Mr. Perdomo fired.

We cannot find a pot to boil my experiment water in. Grandma offers me the little silver pail she uses to rinse her body, the one she’s had since she lived in Cuba. As the water begins to bubble, I pierce its surface with a thermometer. Grandma comes up behind me and says, “You can tell that teacher of yours that you did this project with what I use to rinse my culo.”

My grandmother’s sister once told me that my godfather told her—this being the nature of communication in my family—that the best thing my mom has is her children.

My padrino. The one who, when deployed to Afghanistan in 2010, posts a picture of himself smoking a cigar, and of a rifle next to a bag of Café Pilon. The one who, across the sea and amidst a war zone, sends me a postcard during my first week of college. It reads, “Remember that the Earth is round, and the end of one thing is usually the beginning of another,” and he returns home with a leather journal for me that Christmas. He’s the only man—the only person, really—who I’ve ever felt truly understands me.

Christmas Eve 2010. My brother and I get matching tattoos. Forte symbols, because forte sounds like Fortes, the name we inherited from our father. My grandma tells me I shouldn't be "painting myself all over," but I like the tattoo, and I tell her that in music, forte means loud, which she is currently being, as a Cuban. Forte means "play strong," and Albert and I both agree that this is fitting.

For Christmas, our dad sends us cards containing some money, a short message and an "I love you". My envelope reads, "Rebbeca," and I cry myself to sleep because my father can't spell my name.

Christmas 2013. Another card from my dad. This time it has less money, but my name on the envelope is spelled right. It reads, "May you get everything you wish for this holiday season. As for me, I already have you as my daughter."

I don't know what has changed.

Most Latinas mark their fifteenth birthday—an arbitrary finish line to womanhood—with a Quinceañera, a huge party. I do not have a Quinceañera because I have learned that since I like books, I should not like femininity. I agree to take the pictures, though, so we rent a white dress with a huge billowing skirt. I wear sneakers under it.

When my grandmother sees the pictures, she sighs and clicks her tongue. "It was always my dream," she says, "to throw a big party for my granddaughter." Not to see her attend a university. But to throw a big party for her fifteenth birthday.

I think I am disappointing her.

I agree to a Sweet Sixteen. The party is fun, but what I enjoy most is the presents, especially the four hundred dollars I receive—more money than I’ve ever personally owned!—and with which I mostly end up purchasing books.

That’s my problem with my culture. You should be pretty before you are smart. To be both is ideal, but the thoughts of a girl are not there for consumption. What is free thinking, if not a catalyst for independence? And what kind of man would want to marry one of those?

In the fall of my senior year of undergrad, a friend of mine signs up for a Latina Lit class at FIU. He says, “I think we should read it for reasons other than that the authors are Latinas.”

I ask him what he means, though I’m not sure I want to know.

“For instance, look at *House of the Spirits*,” he says. “It does much more than just talk about being Latina.”

I argue that he’s being unfair. “No one tells Steinbeck or Salinger to write about something other than being white men.”

“That’s fair,” he says. But it isn’t enough.

I respond: “Latinas write about being Latina because their stories aren’t being told and they have something to say about the human condition. There could be a young Latina out there who feels like she isn’t represented in literature, so where is her story supposed to go?” He says nothing. It still isn’t enough. “Saying that you read works by Latinas solely because they’re written by Latinas says more about you than it does about your course.”

That same semester, I am nominated for a prestigious award for honors students across the state. When asked to write a one-page essay about my goals, I write about how I live to tell stories, to empower others to share their stories. I write about how writing can save us, how fiction is a practice in empathy—a line I’m particularly proud of—and how I really believe that if everyone had a means of sharing their story, I truly think there would be more kindness in the world.” The woman reading my essay asks, “But how do you think storytelling can benefit society?”

She has me write two more drafts before notifying me that the selection committee has decided to nominate another student. I wonder whether I should be insulted or jealous. Instead, I am relieved. I have never doubted that words have power. I cannot fathom how one can ever think they don’t, or how to go about convincing them otherwise.

When I apply to college, I sprinkle my essays with Spanish, eager to appear *diverse*. I write about *café* and *Celia Cruz* and *hard work*. To be Cuban is to have a Spanish-speaking grandmother, to accompany your stepfather to buy international calling cards so that he may contact what’s left of his family in Cuba. Clearly, I do not really understand myself.

When I first meet my college roommates, they ask me how I get so tan. How do I explain that the skin on my face spends more time exposed to pages than to sunlight?

“I’m just Cuban,” I say.

“Lucky.”

We live together for two years. Summer of 2012, they are angry. They have received an e-mail about a scholarship, but it is only for Latinas. “If only we had scholarships to help white people,” one of them says. My roommates celebrate my physical appearance, but want to halt any attempt to celebrate my mind. A familiar sentiment.

I stay quiet and make a mental note to apply. I don’t get the award that year. In 2013, I reapply and win.

January 2014. I am driving northbound on I-95, on my way back to UCF. In a few months, I will graduate, the first in my immediate family with a Bachelors degree.

My back tire blows out and for a moment, I consider ignoring it—if I can’t see the flat tire, then it isn’t there, right?—but I pull over anyway. By the time I call my mom, it has been taken care of. “Yes, I’m okay. No, I’m not hurt. Exit 180 northbound. Left shoulder. Forty minutes for roadside assistance,” I tell her. She is at my godmother’s house, and when she hangs up, my godmother says, “You need to start getting tougher on her.” Because my tire blew out while I was on my way to UCF, where I study English, which I could be doing from home, and with which I am unlikely to find a “real” job, so why am I up here struggling with a flat tire? I blew it out with the sheer power of my bad decisions.

Other relevant facts: my brother lived at home until he was 28 and finished an Associates degree in four years. No one—myself included—criticized him for it. But I do everything right,

and I still need a tighter leash. Because to a Cuban family, daughters who think and act independently are wild horses, creatures who need to be broken.

Fall 2013, Advanced Fiction Writing Workshop. Determined to write a story about a girl that doesn't involve a romantic relationship, I turn one in about Latina sisters living in Miami. I riddle it with Spanish, refusing to italicize any of it, bracing myself to defend my creative license. No one mentions it and my peers applaud my efforts to breathe cultural identity into my characters, complimenting me for providing the proper context to figure it out. One peer says, "Yeah I get that, but like, I don't get where that aspect of their character comes from? Like, where did they learn Spanish? Back on the island?"

The story contains no mention of my characters ever living in Cuba.

The last time I was home was winter break of my senior year of college. I marathon-watched *Say Yes to the Dress* with my grandma, and when I finally pulled myself off the couch, I told my mom that if I ever got married, it would be in a museum or a library, and certainly no one would walk me down the aisle. "I'm not a goat," I told her, "For my father or stepfather or whoever to be giving me away." Plus, me marrying a Cuban man? Far from likely, though I'd never say it aloud.

Later, when the family came over, I heard my mom relaying what I said. "She says she isn't a goat and won't be traded off like one." Some laughed, some rolled their eyes.

I spent my last spring break of college working on my undergraduate thesis. On one of those nights, my mom pushed my bedroom door open a crack and wedged her head between it and its frame, holding a basket of dirty laundry under her left arm. “Are you ever going to write a book?” She asks it like she expects me to, like I’m supposed to. Like she might just as well be asking, “Are you going to boil that water before cooking that pasta in it?”

Oh, Mom. If only you knew what that means to me.

I still feel guilty every time I visit Miami on my breaks home from school, because I know I’m just visiting. I know I will have to leave. And when I do, the tears that well in my mom’s eyes put me in a waking nightmare, one in which I’m pulling the string from the stitches of my last departure, the string holding her together, and I’m not trying to unravel her, but I do. I can’t stop. So what’s left of my mother is a carcass of skin, lying crumpled and sad at my feet.

I know she worries. She always draws a cross on my forehead with her thumb, and once, I called to tell her that I’d arrived safely in Orlando and her response was, “Oh thank goodness, now I can call everyone and tell them to stop praying for you!”

But I know that she’s proud, because once, she told me that she admired me. She said she was always scared—scared to go back to college, scared to take any promotions at work, scared to defy her parents. “But you!” she said. “You went away to a city you didn’t know, where you

didn't know anyone, not even your roommates! And I think that is so brave and I admire that. I wouldn't have been able to do it myself."

Admiration. To think that my mom views me with even a fraction of the admiration I view her with. My mother is a true Cuban revolutionary: she raised a daughter who loves school, loves herself, loves to think, and she was selfless enough to let her go, to let her have everything that she never got herself.

I still have the postcard my godfather sent me. It sits on my bookshelf, propped up against the spines of my books, the friends I've held closest. He still sends me things, mostly links, to news articles that we talk about.

My mom still cries every time I drive back to school. "But I know that you are happy and you love it, and I can't take that from you." And I'm so grateful that in the face of our culture, she never even tried.

I still carry a book in my purse anywhere I go, even though the first time I ever actually read in public was during lunchtime at a pizza restaurant near campus in the spring of my senior year, and it was *Annie John* by Jamaica Kincaid. A book lent to me by my first real mentor.

I always walk with my professor after Latino Lit. "I love my culture," I tell her one day. "But I think we can be better to our girls." She presses her lips and nods. As we walk, I watch my feet carrying me forward.

AFTERWORD

When Pulitzer Prize-winning author Junot Díaz addressed an audience at the University of Central Florida in October 2013, he asked his audience to identify by certain criteria, asking us to raise our hands if we identified as Hispanic, immigrants, of the African diaspora, students, and so on and so forth. He wanted to know who in the audience he shared things in common with: similar backgrounds, experiences, and identifiers. When he described students, I was shocked. As he put it, we are “probably overworked, and up to (our) nostrils in debt” (Lecture). While my cohorts and I still were not quite cast in a positive light, for once, it felt like he gave us something we were not used to getting: the benefit of the doubt. It was a far cry from how I am used to hearing my generation described: technology-addicted, taking “selfies” the way we ought to be taking our vitamins; entitled, somehow having the audacity to expect some form of employment after being raised to think nothing other than, “I am going to college”; and lazy, a label so broad even I cannot comprehend how anyone has deemed it fit for a group that encompasses an entire third of America (reared, mind you, by another third of America). So when Díaz questioned his audience at UCF in October 2013, I found myself determined to write about myself: a Millennial, a student, a woman, a person of color. I realized that because of my identity as many of those things, I was, in many groups, an “other,” and that my identifying as such presented me with unique challenges.

Millennials—individuals born between 1981 and 2000—hold a shaky place in the hearts of those who judge us; sometimes we’re terrible, sometimes we’re celebrated. In May 2013, *TIME* Magazine released an article on Millennials, titled it “The Me Me Me Generation,” and then argued in its headline that despite how awful they are, Millennials would be the ones to

“save us all.” Despite its claim, the article failed to address why Millennials will save the world. It did not, however, fail to portray us as negatively as possible. Early in the article, reporter Joel Stein describes defines Millenials as teens and twenty-somethings; he claims he has to specify our age for us since we “grew up not having to do a lot of math in (our) heads, thanks to computers” (1). He does not address that the median age for readers of *TIME* Magazine is actually forty-eight, according to *TIME* Magazine itself, so he is actually doing the math for his own generation, but I digress.

Stein cites facts and figures about narcissistic personality disorder (he claims it’s nearly three times more common among twenty-somethings than adults sixty-five and over) (1) but correlation does not imply causation. At some point, Stein even borders on insensitive when he describes “poor Millennials” as having “even higher rates of narcissism, materialism and technology addiction in their ghetto-fabulous lives” (2). He does not define “poor” or “ghetto-fabulous” (which is probably for the best).

I could argue against many of the claims Stein makes in his article, but that is not the intent of this thesis. The intent of this thesis is to explore the ways in which Millennials navigate through psychological landscapes, and how that navigation is made more difficult by the unique challenges we face. I will not hesitate to point out the following, however: that a 2010 Pew Research Center survey of over two thousand adults aged eighteen to twenty-three found that fifty-two percent of those polled claimed “being a good parent” as their highest priority. Thirty percent reported that having a successful marriage was their highest priority, and in third place, twenty-one percent claimed it was most important to “help others in need.” And where did

having a high salary, free time, and acquiring fame rank? At fifteen, nine, and one percent, respectively (“Millennials”). It’s almost like us Millennials are trying to save our own worlds.

Millennials are a generation brimming with potential. We have more information at our fingertips, on our phones, than someone might have come across in an entire lifetime just a century ago. We are technology-savvy, digitally social, and capable of reaching hundreds of people at once. For many of us, higher education is not only a privilege; it is a standard, even if it means taking out thousands of dollars’ worth of student loans.

Despite this, we are constantly criticized, and I do see our faults. For one, we are pathologically lonely; we feel compelled to share any mediocre detail about our lives with hundreds of friends through a handful of social media platforms. A single scroll through my Facebook newsfeed, for instance, reveals little more than a few pictures of my friends’ pets, a few pictures of my friends’ lunches, a few cool articles, and a lot of “selfies”. We have difficulty facing ourselves—as Díaz put it in his lecture to the University of Central Florida, “if you are even remotely cute, you are in a perpetual state of dating, talking to someone, or thinking about talking to someone. We date like being single will get us shot” (Lecture). Even Stein readily admits that we are a generation raised on participation ribbons and inclusivity, constantly seeking validation. We are an ironic generation, but I like to think of us as not unlike Yuniór, a recurring character in Díaz’s work, who thinks of himself as “...weak, full of mistakes, but basically good” (*This Is How* 4). Despite his scathing claims, I think Stein would probably agree. He claims Millennials are nice—“more accepting of differences, not just among gays, women and minorities but in everyone” (7).

Examining my identity as a Millennial forced me to examine other labels with which I identify (namely, my identity as a Hispanic female). I want to write about female protagonists for two reasons. The first is that in readings for my classes, my peers always notice (and question) when a story is told from a female's point of view. When the protagonist of any given reading is a male, however, it goes unchallenged (and largely, I believe, unnoticed). The second reason I choose female protagonists is because to be a young female in 2013 is a wholly unique experience. We are, in a sense, expected to be Wonder Women. There is an immense pressure to be both pretty and smart—we are often the daughters of liberated women, after all, so we have no excuse for not being educated and self-sufficient. If we're *too* pretty, however, we are viewed as probably not *actually* smart, and in the event that we are both pretty *and* smart, we're intimidating, maybe even threatening. And if we *are* really smart, but not very pretty at all, then forget it all, abort mission. Sometimes, it's like our accomplishments are contextualized by our aesthetics.

One of the first books I read when I began to write this thesis was Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*, which narrates the sentiments of a slave girl in the 1600s. She writes: "To be female in this place is to be an open wound that cannot heal" (Morrison 191). I was struck by how that line resonated with me, though I come from a position of privilege. Unlike the novel's protagonist, for instance, I am a free person; she and I are literally hundreds of years apart. So what is it about being a female in 2013 that made me feel like an open wound? It is plain fact that even in 2013, women are discriminated against. According to the Center for American Progress, for instance, women still earn seventy-seven percent of what their male counterparts earn, even though women are outpacing men in acquiring college degrees. Pay inequities even exist between

women of different races. (Glynn and Powers, “Top 10 Facts”) Also, the New York State Coalition Against Sexual Assault reports that one in four women will experience sexual assault during her academic career (“College Campuses”). It may not be the case that women are still viewed as inferior to men (or at least, no one would readily admit to holding such a belief), but there are certainly institutional powers at play to indicate that the sentiment exists. Although I am a free woman in 2013, I still face unique challenges; those challenges often make me feel vulnerable, like an open wound.

Morrison was not the first of my literary influences to liken being a female to a perpetual feeling of vulnerability. Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street*, for example, explores what it is like to come of age as a Hispanic woman. Esperanza, the book’s protagonist, is sexually assaulted, and following the attack, she tells her older friend Sally: “Why did you leave me all alone? I waited my whole life. You’re a liar. They all lied. All the books and magazines, everything that told it wrong...Sally, you lied, you lied. He wouldn’t let me go. He said I love you, I love you, Spanish girl” (Cisneros 100). In this scene, Esperanza’s desire for romantic love (as it is portrayed for her in books and magazines) makes her vulnerable to attention from men (and by extension, in this case, sexual assault). Young women today are similarly vulnerable, not just to physical assault but emotional assault as well. This emotional assault comes in many forms, including oppressive standards of beauty portrayed in popular culture.

Prior to beginning my thesis, I experienced little desire to read works by Hispanic writers. I told myself that I could not relate to their experiences, the experiences of immigrants, or the

experiences of children of immigrants with parents working blue-collar jobs. I found myself drenched in privilege relative to the characters in these works; my mother, having emigrated from Cuba when she was just a child, speaks flawless English. She belongs to what Gustavo Pérez Firmat calls the “one and a half generation”: children born abroad, but reared in the United States (4). I, having been born and raised in the United States, learned English first and utilize it far more than I use Spanish. I grew up surrounded by American and Cuban culture, which meant that I straddled to selves: the American, and the Latina.

In telling myself that the work of Hispanic writers was not relevant to my interests, I completely dismissed the notion that fiction can be an exercise in empathy. I failed to consider the huge opportunity that writing and language give to oppressed and marginalized groups: it lends a voice to the otherwise voiceless. As Alma Gómez writes in “By Word of Mouth,” “we (Latinas) need una literatura that testifies to our lives, provides acknowledgement of who we are: an exiled people, a migrant people, mujeres en lucha” (7). Other scholars have expressed a similar sentiment. Victor Villanueva writes, “The narrative of the person of color validates. It resonates. It awakens, particularly for those of us who are in institutions where our numbers are few” (15).

With this in mind, I gorged myself on writing by Hispanics. Three authors influenced me the most: Junot Díaz, Sandra Cisneros, and Jennine Capó Crucet. In a lot of ways, my narrow-minded beliefs were confirmed because I really did not share the experiences many of these authors’ characters had. Unlike Yunior—a recurring character in the work of Díaz—I did not up grow up dirt poor, raised by a blue-collar working mother married to a missing father. Still, I could relate to his feeling like an outsider. Unlike Esperanza in *The House on Mango Street*, I

had never experienced sexual assault. Still, I could relate to the way she craved freedom, escape, how she described herself as “a red balloon, a balloon tied to an anchor” (Cisneros 9). Esperanza wants a life that is drastically different than the one the trapped women on Mango Street live. My own experiences relate to this; growing up in Miami, I desperately wanted to forge a different life for myself, and like Esperanza, I eventually did through writing and education.

A similar sentiment—that is, a desire to achieve something greater than what is laid out for us—is expressed in *How to Leave Hialeah*, which has perhaps influenced the direction of this thesis the most. The book contains stories, some interrelated, and most of which take place in Miami, Florida. Using Miami as the setting for this collection provides the stories with a cultural context, as they feature the dynamics of Hispanic families and Spanish speakers. As a writer, I often struggle with setting, choosing to focus instead on character and conflict. Consequently, some of my work tends to read like it takes place in a vacuum. Like Capó Crucet, however, I chose to set my collection in Miami for two reasons. For one, I grew up there, and am familiar with the area and many of the sentiments Capó Crucet’s characters express. In the titular story of her collection, for instance, the narrator states that after four years away at college, she says claims she had to leave her hometown in order to realize she ever wanted to return (Capó Crucet 159). I view Miami as a weird sort of Promised Land. It opened a Pandora’s Box of opportunity for my parents and the parents of my cohorts, but it also did a fair amount of soul-crushing, revealing the American Dream as an ambivalent promise.

As previously stated, growing up, I wanted to escape badly, to leave behind the obligations of quinceañeras and Nochebuenas, to shed my fractured Spanish (which was always, always accommodated by my well-meaning Grandmother). I knew I wasn’t white, but I didn’t

want to be Latina. I saw myself as an American (whatever that means), and to validate my heritage for scholarship purposes I'd write a killer essay and pepper some Spanish words here and there to make myself sound ethnic. Such was my narrow-minded stance on my own heritage. When I came to Orlando for my undergraduate degree, that all changed. Whether I had actually earned my scholarships was never a topic of debate until I got to college and many of my peers didn't qualify because they were not Hispanic; many of them claimed I'd been given a "free handout." Once, a porcelain-skinned friend asked me, "So, is your skin always that color? That is *so* cool." In that moment, I felt like a unicorn. Perhaps that's why the following passage in "How to Leave Hialeah" resonated with me so strongly: "...claim Hialeah fiercely since it's all people ask you about anyway. They've never seen hair so curly, so dark. You have never felt so Cuban in your life, mainly because for the first time in your life, you are consistently being identified as Mexican or something" (Capó Cruet 160).

I finally truly embraced Cuba, Miami, Spanish, palm fronds, quinceañeras and Nochebuenas the night my roommate, with whom I shared a dorm in my freshman year of college, stumbled upon a Hispanic game show in a spree of brainless channel surfing. Her reaction was a bored, "Ew." I assumed her reaction was in response to the language being spoken and quickly grew angry at her reaction toward what was likely also playing on the television at my own home in Miami enraging. Suddenly, I claimed my heritage fiercely; I was Alice, and Miami, my Wonderland. Interestingly, I then found myself stuck in a hyphen. To my friends, I was Hispanic; to my own family, I was American. It's true that I don't fit neatly into either category, and so I prefer to think of the hyphen the way Pérez Firmat does: "...not a minus sign, but a plus; perhaps we should call ourselves "Cubans + Americans" (16).

The other reason I—and so many other writers—chose to utilize Miami as a setting is because it’s an inherently fun, vibrant city. In one of Crucet’s stories, “Animal Control,” a character states, “This Miami es una locura” (164). And it’s true; Miami is absolutely insane, but its people are well-meaning, hardworking lunatics (myself included).

In terms of craft, there are two experiments in particular I’ve taken from the Hispanic writers I’ve studied. One is that I enjoy writing dialogue without quotations. On one hand, quotation marks are not used in Spanish writing. On the other, I am amazed at how—when done properly—dialogue is clearly conveyed without needing quotations marks to indicate conversation between characters. I view it as a testament to the malleability of language—just like the dialect of English used in Miami is slightly different from what one hears in the rest of the country. More importantly, however, I have chosen not to italicize my Spanish because I find it pointless. Speakers and readers of English do not need a word italicized to recognize that they are unfamiliar with the term. More over, many Hispanic writers whom I admire choose not to italicize their Spanish. Among these are Sandra Cisneros, Jennine Capó Crucet, and Junot Díaz.

In “Promising Young Students,” the first story in the thesis, I wanted to explore the concept of how our loved ones view us in light of our failures. This story is told in an epistolary nature, narrated by Mel, the older sister of a girl named Nena. Mel is forced to watch as her sister unravels under pressure. Nena’s pressure has many sources; in her senior year of high school, she struggles to maintain her academic excellence, while trying to find money for college, while trying to decide where she is supposed to go next. Does she want to go away for the purpose of

escaping as far from her mother's and sister's lives as humanly possible? Or is it something she wants for herself?

I was interested, in part, in exploring how a family might feel watching their beloved—and, in a sense, their most baffling—possession unravel, and not knowing how to help, having viewed this person as impenetrable and in a perpetual state of having-it-under-control. I chose to make Nena a Millennial through and through. She is a young woman who might go to college hoping to learn, rather than to learn how to do something; she is the daughter of immigrants, the first in her family to go to receive a degree. She is a young woman bursting with potential who feels like she is wasting it, surrounded by an enabling family and not a single example of who she wants to be like. It is worth noting that her name is a nickname in Spanish, a term of endearment (or condescension, depending on your politics) which means “baby girl”; indeed, I wanted Nena to come off as being someone who has been pampered and is trying desperately to break free, even if she has to suffer (and even if her family has to suffer in bearing witness to her self-imposed misery).

I chose to explore the sibling dynamic because Nena's breakdown—anyone's breakdown, really—holds a nearly seductive, self-indulgent nature. But I wanted to explore Mel's pressures, which mirror Nena's own (though Nena may not even consider that they exist). While Nena might feel an unendurable pressure to be successful and tread new territory, for instance, her family—and her sister Mel, especially—might feel obligated to be role models, or might realize that they could have done more in Nena's upbringing to alleviate some of her pressures. And while Nena's family is great and loving, they have to realize and come to terms

with the fact that that Nena doesn't want to be anything like them. It ought not reflect on them, though.

I wanted Nena and Mel to be recurring characters in my thesis. I was interested in experimenting with epistolary storytelling, and in writing stories narrated by the individuals who interact with Nena, who may pass judgment on her behavior (and be victims of it). I inherited this desire from Junot Díaz, who frequently casts the same characters in his work; while one story might be a narration of Yunior exploring the strange boy in his town who was attacked by a pig, an entire novel might be narrating Yunior's experience living with an overweight nerd who wants to be the next J.R.R. Tolkien. Though these stories are about other people, they are Yunior's, and plenty is learned about him through his narration. We learn, for instance, that he loves books almost as much as he loves women (and having affairs with them, too). The picture we get of Yunior's personality is just as clear as the story he tells us. Yet sometimes, readers are told the same story—or a part of the same story—from another character's point of view, altering the story entirely. Still, what happens is that a missing piece is added to the puzzle that is the larger story. While each of Díaz's works can stand on their own, for example, collectively, they create something larger: a portrait of an immigrant family living in the United States. Ultimately, I chose not to make this many stories about Nena because I had a fundamental issue with having a voiceless protagonist (especially one who is a Latina).

In another story of my thesis, "Like Ash," I wanted to explore the same concept explored in J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*. I was inspired by how Holden Caulfield expresses a sentiment of wanting to save children from running off a cliff (and metaphorically, from growing up), and how he desperately to save these children from growing up and experiencing the same

pain he experiences. But Holden goes insane; the premise of the novel is that he has landed himself in an asylum. Is there a way, then, to convey this sentiment without a protagonist going insane? After all, most of us are aware that even our best efforts cannot save everyone. Despite this, we manage to keep functioning. I was curious to see how a narrator (in this case, Mel) might convince a child to choose to be good in a world full of bad; how she might stop a child from running off a cliff, so to speak.

The thesis changed direction when I wrote “Home Nowhere,” an autobiographical piece told in vignettes. In finishing the piece, I realized how nomadic my culture and experiences had made me feel. This is a recurring sentiment in my stories and characters, and what I ultimately decided the overarching theme of the thesis ought to be. With that, the thesis became a cross-genre endeavor, an interweaving of fiction and fact, a hybrid of my own experiences and those of the characters that live in my imagination.

The titular story of the thesis is derived from a line in “Home Nowhere,” which reads, “I am home nowhere, except among words.” The line is the thesis of that autobiography and, perhaps, my motivation in completing this thesis.

In *Life on the Hyphen*, Firmat states that exile breeds writers (159). Though I have never experience exile from home the way many of my ancestors have, I have felt exiled due to many of the labels I identify with: Millennial, Hispanic, and female. And so, my intent with this thesis is to examine how people like me come of age, and to provide a voice for myself, and for my

generation; to paint us not as statistics or personality disorders, but as what we are: fully-formed, well-intending, promising young students, who feel they are at home absolutely nowhere.

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