

September 2014

"I've Been Sucked into American Culture and Look What It's Done to Me!:" The Charms of Living in the Shadows and the Closet

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Recommended Citation

Delgado Cornejo, Diana Sofia (2014) "'I've Been Sucked into American Culture and Look What It's Done to Me!:" The Charms of Living in the Shadows and the Closet," *First-Gen Voices: Creative and Critical Narratives on the First-Generation College Experience*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 1 , Article 2.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/fgv/vol2/iss1/2>

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Within the first few days that my family arrived in the U.S. from Peru, we were all right away struck with a viciously nasty flu. My dad laughed in half-amusement, half-disillusionment, “Wow, *even first-world people get the flu*. We’ve been cheated!” My then-fetal brother lay curled up safely in my mother’s womb as the rest of us plodded through mountains of tissues and Vapor Rub. When the plague was over, little Daniel, the first in our family to be born in the U.S., decided to make his entrance into the world on the 28th of July—Peruvian Independence Day. Made in Peru, assembled in the U.S.A. I guess you can never really escape where you come from.

But regardless, we were here. Snot and congestion aside, we had beaten the visa lottery and were rolling in its splendor. My parents, armed with degrees in computer science, were positively swelling with pride at having given their children the ultimate gift: the opportunity to domestically enter a university in the U.S., land of best post-secondary school education in the world. My dad’s employers promised us green cards and citizenship in as little as six years.

Unfortunately, after 9/11, employers everywhere were suddenly afraid that every foreign worker of theirs was a terrorist, and, in a fit of xenophobia, we were left without work. Since our visas were dependent on that particular employment, our legal status was suddenly tossed into a sea of unpredictability. My parents soon found that foreign degrees were worthless in this country, as they were suddenly demoted to working in fast-food restaurants, valet parking, telemarketing—everything besides what they actually were trained to do. This magical world where we could drink water out of the tap and return items to a store had betrayed us.

The morning my dad was scheduled for his interview at Jack-in-the-Box, my mom laid out his best, most beautifully-pressed suit on the foot of the bed.

“You always must wear your best attire to an interview, no matter how humble the job.”

And that’s how my dad entered the establishment with all the pride of a self-made man, straight-backed and cocky, and was mistaken for an applicant for a position in management. When he explained himself, they gave him the job on the spot and handed him the dumb little red apron and hat, which he put over his suit. He spent the rest of the day learning how to fry hamburger patties and chicken tenders—cooking, women’s work!—in his suit. And when he finally came home, greasy and exhausted, he ran his fingers over the small holes in the front of his suit from the splashing oil. My mom giggled guiltily, and he gave her a *look*.

There was a certain indignity to going from rags to riches to rags once more, and my parents despised reliving their poor upbringings through their own children. My mother remembered as a child making fun of her own mother for speaking Spanish with a Quechua accent; she grimaced as karma emerged maliciously in her struggles to learn English (“No Mami, the fingers on your feet are called *toes*.”) And I watched my outspoken, opinionated mother retreat back into the safety of home, into the role she had long feared was her destiny—a housewife. My mother had always been

claustrophobic, and she was suddenly physically and linguistically trapped inside our tiny apartment.

But I've always liked small spaces. I didn't mind that we needed hardcore Tetris skill to fit all our beds in one room. What was stifling to my mother was cozy to me. What was *déjà vu* to them, was simple childhood to us.

I had trouble making friends in school. Not only was English was an indomitable monster, but I was also blessed with a good number of idiosyncrasies that elementary school kids found unacceptable. I talked to trees and insects. I had a huge overbite so I found it difficult to chew with my mouth closed. But perhaps, most of all, it was my jiggly leg.

My leg, even now, has unfortunate habit of shaking uncontrollably when I am deep in thought. It upsets everyone, especially during exams. Back then, kids would giggle and say I was in a constant state of wanting to pee. Or was having some sort of seizure. But my dad, also accursed with the same jiggly, thoughtful leg, sat me down and told me it was an affliction of a smart person. That, because my brain had swollen with too much intelligence for my tiny little skull to house, a little piece of my brain had oozed out and fallen down my body and into my foot. And when I was thoughtful, all areas of my brain were activated, including that chunk in my foot. He called it my "little brain".

My leg was jiggling frenziedly one unusually warm spring night in the car with my dad as we drove home from buying Mother's Day presents.

"Ay, Dianita, your little brain is distracting me. Think when you get home, yes?"

"Papi, why don't we ever go back to Peru to visit our family?" I asked suddenly.

I expected the usual responses—"Oh, but it's so expensive." "When would we find the time?"

But this time, he stared straight ahead at the street before him. "Because we're illegals, hijita."

My blood ran cold. I instinctively yanked my knees up to my chest, curling up into a ball, trying to take up as little space as possible.

"Why?"

"It's complicated," he sighed. "They messed it up. They wanted us here, they recruited us, and they messed it up. But what's important is that this is temporary, only temporary. We'll fix this before you start applying to colleges, Dianita. I promise."

When we got home, I tried not to take too many steps, because I thought I would erode the ground a little more than it was meant to be. I crammed myself under the bed, and I cried, and I tried to not breathe, because I did not want to be accused of taking air away from an American citizen who could be breathing it. I really did think I didn't deserve to be there. I did not want anyone to blame me for taking up space.

Eventually, Mami found me under the bed accidentally suffocating myself. She pried me out and let me sob into her chest until I could choke out coherent words.

“Why didn’t you tell me? Why didn’t you tell me we were illegals?”

Even in the moonlight, I could see her face become yellow with panic. “No, we’re not illegals!”

“But Papi said—”

“Your Papi is exaggerating, we just have visas that are frozen, they’re frozen in the process, they can’t be moved right now, I mean we don’t exactly have green cards, but that doesn’t mean we’re illegals! Your dad has a work permit. We came here on a plane, we didn’t cross any border like those poor people. Don’t worry about it, Dianita.”

I needed to believe her. I trusted her. I put it from my mind. If anyone asked, I told them what Mami had said: work permit. Non-expiring tourist visa for six years. Young kids don’t question these things.

My mother started to look into private schools for me after the one year my school district slashed their budget so mercilessly that our already-fifteen-year-old-textbooks could not be replaced for another three years. My teachers called me “brainflight”, and did their best to keep me from transferring, saying they needed me to keep test scores up and the school’s reputation afloat.

But my mother was adamant. “I don’t want to make the school better. I want the school to make my daughter better. We owe you nothing.”

And that fall, I found myself on a full scholarship to a truly foreign land—private college-prep school.

I made some of my best friends at this school, but it was rough to assimilate to. Everyone seemed to live in either a mansion or a beach house. Or multiple mansions and beach houses. In gated communities. Whereas my brother and I still played “guess if that sound was a gunshot or a firework” every night.

I made the mistake of divulging this game to one of my new friends once, and I’ll never forget the look on her face. Her mouth stretched out into a horrible, contorted O.

“Oh my god, someone could be getting murdered right now and you make it a game!”

“... but it happens every night,” I mumbled, trying desperately to shrug away my apparent insensitivity. I decided right then to never invite my friends to my apartment. Ever.

It was at this school that I met Galina. She was the only one of my friends who could understand my mother’s accent.

Mami *loved* Galina. She said she was my foil. I wanted to be a writer, she wanted to be a programmer. She was rich, I was... lower middle class. She was a bit more sophisticated, while I was unashamedly childish. She was sometimes a bit violent, I was a total pacifist. She stood up for herself, I let her stand up for me.

And as we got older, we started to see it more and more. It's funny, how I couldn't have ended up falling for a girl who was more like my mother in every way.

All it took was for her leg to graze mine, sometime in high school, when we were curled up in a large decorative hole in the wall, lazing around outside of the dance studio. It had happened once, a million times before, in the four pubescent years we had spent together, struggling to grow up. But this one was different. One touch. And I felt a sudden warm shiver.

I panicked. "Oh, it's because I've spent so much time with her," I thought frantically. All those sleepovers, all that emotional proximity. I've only ever liked boys before, I'm so *confused!*

But then, it kept happening. A swooping sensation in my lower stomach when she smiled at me. Goosebumps when she leaned over to ask for the history homework, the ends of her long hair tickling the skin on my arms. A sudden, inexplicable draw, a need to spend more and more time with her.

I largely shoved it from the forefront of my mind; I had bigger fish to fry. We, the student elite, were preparing for our entrance into college.

But my peers were equipped with something so seemingly insignificant, yet it meant a world of difference between me and them—a social security number. Without it, I had to apply as an international student, with no federal or state financial aid. Without it, it would seem that all my parents' sacrifices had been for naught, and our entire migration here suddenly became rather pointless.

I sat helplessly as my friends breezed ahead of me in their college processes, meeting deadlines head-on, planning trips to visit far-off campuses. My counselor, try as she might, had no idea what to do about my status; it was unheard of in such a privileged community. Several of my colleges asked me to send in TOEFL results to prove my proficiency in English—the 800 I earned on the writing portion of the SAT apparently wasn't evidence enough. One school I really liked told me I had falsified my citizenship on my application, and they nulled it. The CAL states would not accept my fee waiver, so they cancelled those applications too. The humiliation was unbearable.

Galina in particular had her heart set on Stanford from the beginning, and didn't even consider any other schools. She got in early decision, as we all knew she would. Meanwhile, I had frantically launched twenty-four applications in every direction, hoping some fish would grab my financial aid bait.

My parents would not accept this. My mom told me she and my dad were planning on getting a divorce so she could marry a Puerto Rican man for papers so my college process would be easier. But that man took our ten thousand dollars and fled. Ten thousand dollars... that could have been used to pay for my education. So, we were left no choice. Our time was running out. We were going to find another man to purchase for marriage, only this time, it looked like I would have to be the bride.

My mother all but forbade me from telling anyone about our situation: "I wouldn't trust them. They might call you a criminal, they might ask you really personal

questions. They... might feel *sorry* for you. Pity is the absolute worst thing. It distances people from each other. Why would you involve your privileged friends in a situation they can never understand?"

"Because I can't do this alone?" I whispered.

"You're not alone. You have your family... isn't that enough?"

This was the loneliest time of my life since I was six, when it had been linguistic isolation and not a terrible secret had kept me from communicating with my friends. But eventually, one almost-summer afternoon when it grew to be too much to bear, I sat my friends down and broke my promise to my mother.

They sat in shocked silence, then:

"I'll marry you." Galina said. It was little more than a whisper, maybe a contorted sob that I'd misheard.

"No, I'm serious. I'm not kidding. I will marry you. We'll make it work." Her lip trembled.

"Galina, it doesn't work like that. Gay marriage isn't even legal in California, let alone federally for immigrant legalization..."

"It doesn't matter, I'll do it, I'll do it..."

I'd never seen my friend cry before. I hadn't known she *could*.

I was sitting in my living room planning my wedding when my mom came into the room holding the phone from LMU.

"They say you have a full-ride to their school," she said weakly.

I listened with a deadpan expression, nodded, and then went to take a nap. It was only when I woke up that I realized it wasn't a dream.

Several weeks later, Obama passed an executive order called Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or DACA, which allowed undocumented people who were brought to the US as children to get work permits, and would pardon me from deportation risk for at least two years.

My life was *saved*. I wouldn't have to marry anybody. I wasn't going to get deported. My family celebrated and cried. My friends and I celebrated and laughed. And the next day, I went out to celebrate with Galina at a friend's graduation party.

I guess, in the dark, and the alcohol, and the euphoria, we were filled with bravado enough to talk about how we felt about each other. And... we kissed. There we were, kissing in the middle of the living room of our classmate's house party.

We kind of thought we would blend in among all the straight girls that were making out to impress straight guys. But straight girls break apart after a few seconds. And they keep their eyes open to egg the spectators on. We... we stuck out.

I floated happily through the house for the next few days. I was too elated to notice that my mother had more or less stopped talking to me, and had trouble looking me in the eye. Until one day, I mentioned Galina in passing, and she whirled around with a terrible look on her face.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Tell you what?”

“What that girl did to you. Why did you not trust me enough to tell me.”

I noticed she refused to say her name. “Tell you what?”

“Don’t play dumb!” She began to cry. “You are smarter than that, I know you.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about...”

“Don’t lie!” she snarled, hurling a sofa cushion at me. I dodged it, but she advanced.

I backed up into a chair and stumbled. “I didn’t do anything wrong...”

“I know... I know... my poor baby. How could I have let this happen to you.”

“She didn’t do anything wrong, either.”

My mother’s face hardened. “Don’t defend that scheming little lesbian. No, don’t you dare.”

“I started it. I wanted it, Mami, I instigated.”

“No, she forced you into it. She took advantage of you, forced her body upon you and now you’re all confused and I’m so sorry this has happened... If I had known...”

“*What?* Who has been telling you these things?!”

“One of the mothers called me over the phone anonymously. She says her daughter witnessed Galina force you to drink, and then take advantage of your body.”

My blood ran absolutely cold. For a moment I felt faint, a searing head rush, and then a wave of pure rage. “That is a complete and total lie!”

“Is it? I’ve seen the way she looks at you!”

“Have you seen the way I’ve looked back at her?? No, Mami. I wanted her to kiss me. I liked her. I am bi.”

And I saw it. The revulsion in her face, the way she swallowed back bile. That hurt more than anything.

“She has confused you.”

“Why are you doing this?” I blinked back tears.

“You’ve been sucked into American culture, and look what it’s done to you!” she screamed at me.

“No...!”

“She has manipulated you into being her sex slave. That’s all she wants, to prey on you. That’s what she’s been planning this entire time.”

“Planning since the 7th grade?!”

“Planning since she figured out she was a lesbian! Planning since she knew you would be kind and pliant and too naïve to see through her schemes!”

I straightened my back until it hurt. “I’m not a child, Mami. I’m seventeen years old.”

“That means nothing. You are my daughter till you die. Till I die.”

“I am your bisexual daughter.”

“No.” I saw the revulsion again. It was so terrible I began to cry. “You are my victim daughter. I will not be made the enemy, she is the enemy. She wants to turn you against me, to ruin our mother-daughter relationship.”

“Oh yes, Mami. I’m sure Galina spends all her time plotting in her room about how to ruin our mother-daughter relationship.”

“She lied to me. She betrayed me. I let her into my house; I let you sleep under her roof, always under the presumption that everything was innocent. Never knowing she was secretly a pervert.”

“But that’s your fault. You assumed she was straight. She never had any responsibility to tell you anything, it’s her personal business!”

“Not when it involves my daughter! Then it becomes my personal business!” She panted, catching her breath. “I would not have let you sleep over with a boy. I shouldn’t have let you sleep over anywhere, it’s such an imbecilic American custom.”

“That happens to be one of my favorite imbecilic American customs.”

“You cannot be bisexual. You have never shown any inclinations of it before... it came out of nowhere, it had to have been manipulation.”

I had no leg to stand on. It was true, I hadn’t ever felt that way for a girl before, not in childhood and not until well after puberty. “Well... I’m showing inclinations now.”

“And what’s next? Inclinations for dead people? Children? Animals?”

Those were the words that broke me, the words I would hear bouncing in my ears for the next two years. “H-How could you say that to me...”

“It’s the gateway!”

I gripped the back of the chair, doubling over. I felt my tears fall in the wrong direction. *Everything* was wrong. And suddenly, astonishingly, all decency seemed to leave my body, dripping slowly from me like the tears slipping off my forehead. I raised my head with a vengeance. “I feel so sorry for you.”

Her breath caught. “What?”

My words came out quietly, viciously. “Poor ignorant little immigrant housewife with no concept of tolerance. I was stupid to expect that much from you.” My voice broke. “No one taught you better, so how would you know?”

I relished the pain I glimpsed in my mother’s face before she buried it in her hands. “You... you...”

“Me what?”

“You are... a little hypocrite. You call yourself open-minded, ohh, how open-minded these Americans think they are. But you can’t even be patient with your own mother.”

“Patience?? You don’t *deserve* my patience. If you wanted me to end up like you, why did you bother bringing me over to this damn country?”

“I... wanted what was best for you. I’ll always want what’s best for you. This girl... is not what’s best for you.”

“Ever think that maybe I could maybe, for once in my life, figure out what’s best for myself?”

Pained, she reached out to stroke my cheek. “You’re still so young...”

“Don’t... touch me.” I shoved her hand away.

Real tears were now forming in her eyes. “Look... at what she’s done. To us... To you. I’ve never in my life done anything to wrong you... never. I gave up my life, my family, for you. And... you’re going to toss that away like it’s nothing... for this girl.”

I was filled with such cruelty. I didn’t think about what I was saying. “Yes.”

“You’re making... a huge mistake...”

“You made the mistake, when you made that ultimatum. Now you have an answer you didn’t want to hear.”

“Stop... please stop this.”

“Stop what?” And I lost my composure. My face became slick with sorrow once more. “Growing?”

My mother forbade me from ever seeing Galina again. But of course, the first thing I did after the battle was leave Galina a novel in her Facebook inbox, explaining what had happened.

And our relationship then took a hairpin pivot into one of support and friendship. She was always there to listen to how my situation with my mother steadily worsened, how, as the time passed, the environment became outright toxic. It could not have been easy for her. This was a woman who had been a constant positive presence in her life since she was twelve years old.

Eventually silence fell on our household, and our living situation became... strangely unbearable. I locked myself in my room, self-inflicted exile, and only burst out when that one August morning arrived, with my suitcases all ready to move into my dorm at college, eager for my freedom from Mami. Mandatory distance from her was probably what saved our relationship.

My first semester of college, instead of feeling like a new chapter of my life, it felt like an insidious pause, a short intermission before what was waiting for me at home. My mother’s name would pop up on my vibrating phone screen and I would let it ring and ring. Galina, too, was fading away, consumed by her own new problems she’d stumbled into in her first semester at Stanford. I tried to make friends.

That winter, Obama was reelected, ensuring that my DACA would continue to exist for at least four more years. That spring, DOMA was repealed, making federal same-sex marriages legal.

Galina, distant as she was, made sure I knew that her previous proposal of marriage had not expired. I often pretended not to hear her, or said I would consider it in the future.

On that 21st of December, the incredibly-anticipated day of the End of the World, Galina invited all our friends to a sleepover to watch apocalyptic movies.

Our home exploded. “Don’t you even *think* about going, how does she ever *dare* to ask that after all of this, she’s deliberately using this as a way to force us to fight, she wants to drive a wedge between us, to make you choose between me and her, why don’t you see it, why don’t you see it. . .”

“I don’t have to ask your permission anymore,” I said superciliously, well aware that I was not making my situation better. “I went to college for four months and I did anything I wanted all those nights.”

“*You’re not going!*”

“But you can’t stop me anymore.”

“If you do, I will follow you. I will bang my fists against the door until you come out. Don’t think I won’t!”

“It’s a gated community, you’d really risk security coming to take you away?”

“Security!” she screeched. “What a joke! Security should be keeping people safe, like keeping you safe from Galina.”

“I can take care of myself.” And with shaking knees I walked out, astonished at myself. Wondering how autonomy could have turned me into such a malicious person.

At Galina’s house, we watched zombie movie after zombie movie until I couldn’t take it anymore, and I pulled Galina into the kitchen to tell her what happened.

“Wow. I didn’t even realize she would take it that way. Am I *that* tactless?” she grimaced. When she caught sight of my face, she said quickly, “Let’s talk to my mom, okay? Let’s tell her what happened. She’ll help us. She’ll talk to your mom.”

And that was how Galina came out to her mom for the first time. It did not go well. She leaned back into her chair with her champagne glass in hand and narrowed her eyes.

“I cannot believe that after six years of friendship, that your mother would think that you would be unsafe in my house. That I would raise someone who would hurt you like that.”

Galina and I glanced at each other uneasily.

“This is incredibly offensive to me.”

“I think she’s just scared,” Galina said. “Diana told me what she said. I think it might just be homophobia.”

“Well, there’s no point in talking to people like that, people who have made up their minds about their opinions,” Galina’s mom said haughtily.

“But if you could just talk to her. Please won’t you talk to her. . .” I let my voice peter out before it could break. She was shaking her head before my sentence was done.

“No. There would not be a point. Galina, she is no longer allowed in this house, do you understand? If she comes, you call the police.”

“Mom—”

“No.” She got up and headed to her bed. It was our cue to leave.

“I don’t think she meant it,” Galina babbled as we stumbled out of her mom’s room. “She probably reacted that way because I surprised her with the gay stuff. Yeah, that was bad. Shouldn’t have done that. Russian mothers,” she laughed weakly.

I went out to sit on the step, fumbling with my phone. “I have to warn my mom not to come, I have to warn her or the police will come get her!” My words started to become incoherent. “The *police!* And she doesn’t have *papers!*”

Galina put her hand on my phone. “My mom is out cold, she won’t wake up until late tomorrow. And *I* won’t call the police on your mom.”

I swallowed, and buried my face in my knees.

Galina helplessly put her hand on my shaking shoulder, then hugged me. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry about all of this.”

I looked up. “You know what really gets me, though?”

“What?”

“That if I had been the stronger, more confident woman Mami had always wanted me to be, I . . . I would have been the more dominant one. I would have made the first move, the one to lean into kiss you. And then, it might have been *your* mom who would have been slandering my name till kingdom come, it would have been *her* making me out to be some terrible lesbian slug who preys on innocent virginal straight girls.”

She chewed on her lip. “So you’re basically saying this is your fault.”

I inhaled sharply. “Well—”

“Because it’s not, you know. If anything, it’s mine.”

“What?”

“All this time it could have been ICE that tore your family apart. Instead, it was me.” She blinked rapidly. “Do I just . . . do I just have some inner evil power that hurts everyone I touch?”

My heart hurt. “Hey. Hey. No you don’t. What happened was between my mom and me. You got caught in the middle. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

We huddled together on her staircase, hiccupping ourselves into silence, listening to the sounds of laughter and groaning zombies downstairs.

It was not until my sophomore year of college that Galina and I decided that there was something a little too powerful to ignore between us. That if the combined forces of my mother, the 300+ mile gap between us, and the radically different paths our lives were sure to take were not enough to keep us apart, then this was likely something that, as my mother would put it, *valía la pena*.

It was a cloudy, comfortable morning when Galina pressed her bare toes against my shin at the breakfast table and proposed to me one more time. My mind scrolled through my mental rolodex for my usual list of excuses, when I suddenly realized that the only obstacle that was left before me, between me and my citizenship, everything we had ever dreamed for fifteen years, was my Mami—the person who had

fought hardest for it from the very beginning. I knew it would break her heart, to see herself that way. I did not want to see her that way. *I will not be made the enemy, she is the enemy*, I heard her echo again in my head. I smiled at Galina and said, “Yes.”

“I want to be there when you tell her,” Galina’s voice crackled over Skype a few days later.

“Galina, that is the worst idea ever. She’ll murder you alive!”

“Ohhh, as opposed to murdering me dead?” she smirked.

“I’m serious, dude.”

Her pixilated face slowly sobered. “Does she really hate me that much now?”

I looked away from the screen and stared out the window, fixing my eyes on a spider patiently turning a golden orb between its front legs. My leg started to jiggle.

“That bad?” she asked quietly.

“She thinks you’re my rapist. She’s known you for six years, she watched you grow up, and she thinks you’re my rapist.”

I heard her sigh. “Well, she’s not being entirely irrational. Most rapes are done by someone close to the victim. I just guess I... I guess I never thought I’d be boxed into that role. Still,” she cleared her throat, “You shouldn’t have to talk to your parents alone. I’ll be there with you. Wait for me.”

“No.” I was surprised at the sudden firmness to my voice. “This is my fight. If you come, it’ll look like I’m standing up for you. She has to know that I’m standing up for myself.”

Our pixilated eyes met for a moment. “You’re kind of beautiful, you know that?” she said. The pixels on my cheeks slowly checkered into red. I glanced at the floor and felt the corners of my mouth rise.

“Hey, does anyone at your school know anything about this?”

“Nope,” I smiled sadly. “I’m as deep in the closet as it gets here. I’m in Narnia.”

“Living in the shadows, too, you Undocuqueer, you,” she added.

“Yep. In fact, I’m so deep in the shadows that the Vashta Narada is eating me alive.”

“Vashta Narada? Is this *another* Doctor Who thing?”

“Mhmm! It’s that carnivorous shadow, the darkest shadow in any dimension of the universe.”

We laughed.

The next time I visited home, I stood at the threshold and glanced at the tiny ring shining delicately on my left hand. Hesitating, I slid it off, and pushed it into my back pocket just as my mother opened the door and squealed with delight.

“Hijiiiiita,” she cooed, taking me into her arms. “I missed you so much.”

“I missed you too, Mami.” I buried my face in her hair, in her scent, eyes squinting shut with too much love, embracing her with one arm, shoving my ring deeper into my back pocket with the other.