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La gente no nace, se hace

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I sat there in my living room as I heard her utter the words, “Quiero un divorcio.” Translation: let’s just go ahead and throw away nearly thirty-two years of marriage and ruin our children’s lives, just for the hell of it.

I’m sitting on the cold, black, leather recliner, and my mom is standing in front of my dad, my brother, and I, asking my dad for a divorce. In the midst of studying for midterms and struggling to hold together what seems like the last few bits of my sanity, I am in a nightmare. My brother, taken aback by this, begins to yell and plead with my mom. I’ve never seen my brother cry like this. Not even when my grandma died or when my uncle died, never had this tough, strong, quiet man shown any excess of emotion. All I remember was begging him not to leave, not to leave me alone to settle the fight. He left.

At the same time, I could not believe that the mother and father whom I had put on a pedestal all of my life could hurt me so deeply. That the mother and father, whom I did everything for, would break my heart. 32 years. 3 children, 2 grandchildren, and 1 dysfunctional marriage. How could SHE do this to us, what was her problem, why was this all happening? Since when did my mother become the monster that wanted to ruin my family? What could I do?

When I think of my mom, I think of being outside my home on a warm summer day, with the wind blowing just right. In the distance there is laughter and the loud chatter of family enjoying a delicious, home-cooked dinner. When I think of my mom I think of home, this place where everything is better and easier. On that night, I lay in bed, and thought of that woman who reminds me of home, and wondered how it was that she got to a point in her life where she simply could not take her pain and anger any longer.

Flashback

I always considered my mom my best friend. When I was in kindergarten she began to work—*two jobs*—in order to help support my family. I remember how every night my dad and I would go pick her up. I would climb into the family car in my pajamas, tired as can be, but eager to see my mom after her shift at Cosco had ended. My dad would wait, sometimes stubbornly, sometimes angrily, and sometimes he would even get off the car just to see what was taking her so long. He was not a patient man, and he did not like the idea of my mom working at such late hours of the night. I never saw it then, but the problems between my mother and father started even before I was born.

When she would drop me off at school my mom always had to wait awhile for me to get adjusted before she could leave to go to work. She would help out in the classroom as a teacher’s assistant until she knew it was okay to leave. Although she worked two jobs, and that meant less time with her, I loved her

unconditionally. I knew that she would always take care of me; I was her baby girl, and the bond between us was unbreakable.

As I grew older I realized that my mother was truly my only best friend. I struggled a lot growing up, and I never really fit in at school. All the girls at school would call me fat, but my best friend, my mom, protected me. On the days that I would come home crying, with my heart broken and spirits crushed, she strengthened me with her words of encouragement and comfort; she inspired me to work hard, to be resilient, and to keep pushing toward my dream of attending Loyola Marymount University. Most importantly, she never let those girls in second grade get the best of me.

Flash-forward to the night she decided to ask my dad for a divorce

So why was my mother ruining my life? Why was she asking my dad for a divorce after an already horrible year? What could I do? I could not fathom the idea of this happening. Why wouldn't this nightmare of a year end already?!

Flashback

Just three months before my mother broke the awful news to our family, my uncle had died at the age of 51. After two years of struggling from Mesothelioma he passed away. I couldn't understand how someone so young could just be taken from his family, his family who so greatly needed him. I remember the anxiety that came when I realized that we are all eventually going to die. I know, big shocker there, but although I had always thought about it and although it had always scared me, I had placed death far into the depths of my mind, and I didn't think I would feel the fear so intensely. But I did. And it was awful. I remember my dad telling me to breathe, more importantly, telling me to cry. I hate, absolutely hate, crying. Crying is for those two a.m. type of nights when the music is just right and the emotion is just not right. Crying in front of everyone, yeah, that wasn't going to happen. I needed to be strong; I needed to prove to everyone that the youngest in the family could be the strongest. I broke. I remember the release of emotions, that breath of fresh air, when my dad just held me in his arms outside on the street and let me cry. I remember driving home the day my uncle died, listening to music as I crawled into bed, just crying.

Flash-forward

So my uncle had died, and my mother had asked my dad for a divorce. Pretty rough first three months of the year, do I dare continue?

Ecuador. Move the rocks. Keep passing down the shitty bucket. “Ten un Corazon Abierto.” Three days after my mom announced her plan to separate from my dad, one day after my brother’s birthday, I was boarding a plane to Quito, Ecuador, where I would be spending my spring break on an Ignacio Companions Service Immersion Trip. At first, I debated not going. The thought of staying home to deal with the mess that was my life felt a whole lot better than going to middle earth to worry about all that was going on back home. But my parents had vowed to talk things through, and I could not cancel my plans.

If I had to pick two words to describe this experience I would choose “life altering.” After seven days in Quito I began to dread coming home because I knew the reality waiting for me would be even more difficult to bear after the magic of this trip. By bonding with an amazing group of students and leaders and meeting inspiring, strong, and loving new people, for the first time in my life I felt of sense of belonging somewhere other than home. One night, as we sat around in small group, the leaders played a song for us called “Home”:

*Settle down, it will all be clear.
Don't pay no mind to the demons,
They fill you with fear,
The trouble— it might drag you down.
If you get lost, you can always be found.
Just know you're not alone,
Cause I'm gonna make this place your home.*

After hearing this song, I realized that my life was, and would probably always be, filled with struggle and hardship, but regardless of whether times were joyful or painful, I had to find my home within LMU, within my family, and within myself.

I arrived back to L.A. to find that not much had changed. My father had left the house and then come back, and my parents had started couple’s therapy (oh the joy!). I buried myself in my studies. I went to school, worked, came home, did homework, slept, and then did it all again. I decided that the only way to salvage my parents crippling marriage was to become the best daughter ever. And I did (for the most part). The thing about living life for others, however, is that it can be emotionally and physically draining. I struggled to find a sense of home and comfort, as I was constantly trying to please others and not really focusing on what made me happy. My lack of drive and motivation to reach my goals was disheartening and made me dread waking up every day.

Approximately one month after my return from Quito, a time when I should have been enjoying life, I found myself questioning everything. My world was crumbling. Every time my parents so much as bickered, the nightmare of an

impending divorce seemed real. Meanwhile, my eldest brother was struggling with marital problems of his own, which would come to affect me in immeasurable ways.

I began to go to therapy. As a Psychology major I had self-diagnosed myself with some early stages of depression, and I was right. I had hit a breaking point, and my therapist encouraged me to seek out friends and reminded me that I could not be in control of my parents or anyone else's life but my own. I realized that I was scared, scared to step outside of my comfort zone and to show the world the real me, all the mixed emotions, the sad memories, the troubles I was facing. I had managed to hide my true thoughts and feelings behind an "I'm fine" or a fake smile. I had managed it so well that I didn't know how to feel anything else.

Flash-forward

"Makayla, please hold still, I need to fix your hair!"

Ugh. This little brat never holds still. Okay Angie, you got it this time, this ponytail will not win. As I give myself a pep talk I'm thinking about what the women at the pre-school will think when they see Makayla show up at school with messy hair. Does she look different when I take her to school than when her mom takes her? (At least she looks more stylish.) And then it hits me. If I don't get this damn ponytail to look pretty enough, the moms will think I don't love her!

As I drive to Makayla's pre-school, I wonder what she's thinking. Does she hate me? Was I too harsh with her today? Will she grow up to not like me? She sure is singing the hell out of that Taylor Swift song. Will I ever fill the void of her mother? I mean it's not like her mother's gone, but, it must be horrible to not see your mom half the time. Divorce is hard.

As I arrive to her school, I park and take her out of the car seat; we wait for her teacher to come outside, and then I leave her there. "Goodbye Makayla," I say as I walk out of the bungalow and to my car. Makayla? She's too preoccupied to notice.

Approximately two hours later I walk over to pick up Matthew. Matthew is different. He's more of a suffer-in-silence type of kid; he reminds me of myself. He doesn't yell at me or throw tantrums like Makayla does. He hugs me, and gives me sweet kisses on the cheek, and asks me how my day was. He asks about his sister's day, and we walk home as I ask about his day. Things are a lot simpler with Matthew, but also a lot more troublesome.

With Makayla, I know how she feels all the time, because she yells at me, she throws things at me, she verbalizes her feelings pretty damn clearly. But with Matthew, I'm always left guessing. I don't know how his parents' divorce is

affecting him, and I probably will never know the extent to which he worries or knows what is going on. Matthew is smart; at eight years old he has seen and knows more than I ever did at his age. Yet, he worries me. The teachers at his school think he has problems. They say he plays alone and doesn't really socialize with his classmates. This reminds me so much of myself, and it breaks my heart. They say he has Autism; Asperger's to be exact. I don't believe it. As a Psychology major I find myself overanalyzing him consistently. Wondering if it's true, hoping it's not. Not because I would love him less, God no! But because I know that this society is not accepting, and that labels mean everything.

I dream of the day that he can move to Alhambra. Having him live close by, attending my old elementary school, things would be a lot simpler for my family, and for the kids. I wonder if Matthew is bullied. He wears glasses, and he is the tallest kid in his class. Does that make him an easy target?

I'm filled with all these unanswered questions; I just don't know how to wrap my head around it. I wish things were simpler; I am too young to be worrying about all of this. I'm too young to be worrying about being a mom. I'm just too young. I don't know many nineteen year olds who work three jobs, go to school nearly 20 hours a week and drive around with car seats in their back seat. It's rare for me to have a weekend out with friends, or to imagine going out to parties every weekend. I sometimes envy the people who are out partying and drinking and having the time of their lives. I wonder if they secretly struggle as well, or if they truly do live without a care in the world.

Present Day

"Do what young people do." This is the idiot counsel my best friend gives me. He may not give the best advice, but he's been my best friend for almost ten years. You would think that after so long he would realize that I simply cannot and will not *relax*. My life is far too complicated for that. What do young people even do? Party, have sex, do drugs? I don't think young people go to church as much as I do. Do young people pray? Because for the last two months that seems to be all I do. Someone once told me that God spends your entire life preparing you for an eternity in heaven. If that's the case, then why worry about the small troubles in life. Why not just live our lives dedicated to saying, *yes* to God. Through all the hard times, and the good times, it strengthens me to know that these troubles will pass. But when?

Every day that my brother doesn't sell his home, I'm left with more disappointment. I absolutely hate having to come back and forth from school to his house every week. Not because I hate the kids—no, they're my world—but because taking care of them is an added stress that I was never ready for. I find myself dreading the thought of waking up early, and doing things I never thought

I would be doing at the age of 19. I thought I had defeated the “teenage mother” stereotype, but I guess it was in my blood. I have my moments of despair and I worry and stress more than usual, but then I stop and look around me. I think of my brother, and of how he never wished or imagined it would be this hard. I think about telling him how I really feel, but then I stop at the thought of all the stress, pain, and disappointment he is facing.

Then I think of my mom.

At the age of 18, my mom was married and had her first child. She did not have the privilege of going to a prestigious university; she stayed home and took care of her child. As an immigrant to this country she struggled, yet she gave it her all. I’d like to believe that she did it out of love, because although I can’t read her mind, I have come to realize that a mother (or aunt, in my case) doesn’t care for her kids in hope of recognition. A mother cares for her kids out of love, and with the hope that they will have a better life. I look at my kids, and that’s all I could ever ask for. I work hard and strive to be a good role model for them. They are my world, my strength, and my drive.

Flashback to the dreaded night that my mom asked my dad for a divorce

I lay in my mother’s room on my dad’s side of the bed crying, broken. I am mad at my mom, but she is the only one who can comfort me right now. My dad had left to stay at my older brother’s home for the night. I need my mom. I think back to everything she had told me throughout the years—how she was so unhappy, how she couldn’t stand my dad, how he was such a tough, impatient, and stubborn man. I wondered if my dad had really been that horrible. To me, he was simply my daddy, my protector, my friend, my example of a wonderful, loving, and funny family-man. How could this be the same man that she wanted to divorce?

I realize now that my dad was a tough man to be married to. In recent years, things have been different. As my mom says, “la gente no nace, se hace.” My mom built herself. She went from being a perfect housewife who never spoke up to being the perfect housewife who just simply didn’t give a damn anymore. She says what’s on her mind, she’s tough, she’s a force to be reckoned with, but she’s also caring, nurturing, and loving. As my mom has made herself, my dad has too. I never knew the man my mom had tried to describe to me throughout the years. I guess I missed out on that part of the marriage. But I know the man my dad is now. He is still strong and stubborn, but he’s silly and loving too, and he takes my mom out on dates now. I guess you can say that they both have evolved for the better. It only took thirty-three years and lots of empty, selfish arguments, but they got there, and they’re working every day to stay there. I still worry every

time they argue. I worry that I might hear those awful, heart wrenching words again. But I do not let that worry and fear control me.

My dad says I'm just like my mom—outspoken and not afraid to speak up to anyone, even my father and mother. You see there's a fine line between respect and fear. I respect my parents, their love, their support, all they have given for me to be here today, but I don't fear them, for they too, are human. They are flawed, and vulnerable, and I try to be as open and honest with them as possible. It's how they raised me to be.

My brothers, on the other hand, let's just say they grew up under a different regime. They grew up with that other father, and that other mother. But slowly, they will develop too. Ellos mismos se tendran que hacer.

Flash-forward

Makayla begins to cry when we arrive at her school. It seems that every day I babysit her she has a new issue to deal with. On this particular day, she reveals that her friend had called her fat and the other girls laughed. I notice the tears as we are waiting for her teacher to open up the door to the small bungalow. I bring Makayla off to the side to avoid being watched by all the other moms and their kids. I get down eye-to-eye level and see the sadness and the tears rushing down her face. She explains to me how her friends made fun of her and cries out in anger at those “mean, dumb girls.” I stand there thinking about how I'm going to handle this situation. I remember all the times I was made fun of—*oh if those girls could see me now*—and part of me wants to hate those little girls that made fun of my baby. But I also remember the song in the car as we drove to school that morning.

Immediately, I bring my baby girl into my arms, look her in the eyes as I wipe away those tears of sadness, and tell her to think about what Taylor Swift would say. “Haters gonna hate, hate, hate, hate, baby, I'm just gonna shake shake shake....Shake it off!” In a combination of every inspirational pep talk I've ever heard from my own mother, I remind Makayla that she is strong, beautiful, and that in typical “TSwift” fashion, she has to just “shake it off.” “Girls will be mean sometimes,” I tell her “but that doesn't mean we should hate them. You just have to shake it off and know your own worth.” She laughs that cute little laugh of hers, smiles, and gives me those beautiful Eskimo kisses I love.

Two weeks later, as she's getting ready for school, Makayla asks if she can take a backpack. I tell her that no one else has a backpack and that they might tell her something. She replies, “It's okay, I'll just do what Taylor Swift does and shake it off.” It's the small victories that count, right?

Flash-forward to the now

I sit here writing this as my niece jumps around on the couch in her yellow polka-dot onesie, watching Elmo. Oh God how I dread Elmo. Seriously PBS? I would rather sleep all day long. But as much as I complain and hate waking up early, I love my life.

I have been beset by challenges I couldn't have possibly imagined just a few years ago, but I live every day in gratitude. I am thankful for all the hardships that have strengthened me and all the blessings that have come into my world. My faith in God keeps me strong. It reminds me that this is my cross to carry—my cross constructed out of Matthew's Legos and covered in Makayla's drawings and stickers. You can see the tears I have shed and all the marks on my cross at the places I have had to strengthen and patch up my life. But my cross is beautiful and strong. It reflects a lifetime of joy and sincere love. It's worth carrying.

I thank you for reading this narrative about my life. I hate to end in the midst of all this uncertainty, but I really have to cook breakfast for my impatient niece.