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Faceless Sculpture

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What it was like...

I was eager to grow up, because I thought becoming an adult would mean I'd know everything. There were a lot of things I saw at home that I didn't understand, and no one would explain. I wanted to understand.

In elementary school every day that I woke up I was excited to get to school and see my teachers. When the school day was coming to a close, I wished I could stay. I would settle with checking out my teachers' books, taking a piece of school home.

Sometimes, my dad would be waiting for me right outside my elementary school gates. He'd have a smile plastered on his face, asking me if I was hungry as he took my backpack off my back and carried it for me. Other days, I'd have to walk around the block frantically searching for his car; and after I'd climb in, he wouldn't even turn to greet me. He'd immediately start the car and aggressively drive home, drop me off without a word, and then leave again to some unknown place. Sometimes he left to work, sometimes he left to drink.

Other days, my favorite aunt would pick me up. I would know she was waiting outside the gates when I saw a small crowd gathered just outside. This is because she would carry her colorful parrot on her shoulder and I would part through the crowd around her and she would transfer the giant bird to my excited shoulder so we could walk home.

Sometimes, my mom would be waiting at the corner. She always had a tired smile on her face, but she would ask me what I learned at school that day. Or, one of my 6 uncles would be awkwardly standing among all the mothers, never quite looking at me, but always exchanging small talk until they got me home.

The one thing that promised consistency was school. I clung to it as though it were my source of oxygen. After I learned how to read, I always had my nose inside a book. The words took me to magical places, and brought unimaginable characters into my life. On the days my mom was home in the evening, I'd beg her to walk me to the library. And she would, with a soft sigh, but a smile nevertheless. I knew she would because even before I started going to pre-school, she would tell me how important school was. She would sadly say, "I know you know life is hard for us. But life will not be hard for you, if you pay attention in school. You will have a better life one day. And so will we. *Hecha le ganas.*"

And I internalized these words early in life. As a child, every time I witnessed suffering in my house that my mind could not process; I would imagine my future self, the one attending college, stepping in and having the power to make it all go away. So, you can imagine my surprise when this future self didn't magically appear.

I thought I had to find her, but I've discovered that instead, it took me four years to realize I have been sculpting her.

* * *

What happened...

The Week Before Year One

I'm excited because I feel special. I'm going to a pre-orientation, with a group of students who are apparently just like me- the first to go to college! *So, there's a name for that? There will be people to guide me? Maybe everything will be okay after all.*

My legs are trembling a little as I walk up the stairs to "STR 233." I can't believe I'm about to step into a college classroom, and that in less than a week, I will officially be a college student walking to my first college class in this same building. I can take the steps two at a time now, but as soon as I reach the door to room 233, I start moving slowly again. *I think I'm a little late...*

"Hello! What's your name?" a professor greets me with legitimate enthusiasm. *I'm not in trouble?* I see that many of the other students are already here.

"I'm Carla," I shake her hand with a grimaced smile. *Yep, I'm scared.*

"Sit wherever you'd like! Relax," she laughs. I want to mirror back her enthusiasm, but I can't.

After a small grace period, the orientation begins. First, a student who's already been at LMU talks to us about what being "First To Go" means. For some reason, when I hear her honest advice on needing to balance the good with the bad, I feel a wave of calmness. *It means this is... do-able? It's not a fairytale?*

And nothing goes wrong that day. At around 8pm, we're still there, all of us first-generation students. They tell us that we will be watching a film about the individual experiences of a few first-generation college students. We file into a room, "Ahmanson Auditorium." The red seats are soft and comfortable. I tell myself this will be a sneak-peek into the next four years of my life, and I'm suddenly keen to learn and pay attention.

Not everyone in the film gets a happy ending. My stomach churns a mixture of fear and motivation. First, I realize for the hundredth time that this is really happening- *I am starting college.* Second, it hits me that it's up to me to come out in 4 years- *I could fail. I know which of the film characters I'd like to be, but deep down, I know which one I most resemble.* Third, I remind myself that I've made it this far, and I'm going to make the best of it. *I have resources, duh! Unlike the students in the film, I have First To Go.* I let my eyes absorb the faces

of the peers around me, try to see myself in them, and I breathe. It's time to go home, and start college next week.

Year One, Semester One

I drive to campus, and I can't find parking. Late on the first day? Of course. *Should've paid attention to that video, this isn't a fairytale, or a movie, or a book. Newsflash: You can fail.*

During my 3-hour gap between classes, I decide to "people watch." When I registered over the summer, I thought I would use this time to study- nope. I see friends interacting, and my heart begins to swell up in my chest. *Me, Alex, and Alan were supposed to go to college together. I was going to be the small one, walking around campus with two lanky, tall guys, and we were going to walk to class together. I would feel safe. I wouldn't be alone. They'd understand how I felt. We were going to motivate each other by competing against each other's grades. But this is real life, and in real life, the people you love, die.*

A tornado of emotions is aggressively circulating, but I won't let the rain come. I turn off my thoughts to turn off the water works. *I am not me. I am not here.*

I decide that I should be early to my first day of biology lab, since I was late to pre-calculus and that didn't go well. I don't feel good, but I'm going. *I can do this.*

The lab technician introduces herself. "Hi guys!" She seems enthusiastic. "I know this class seems really long- that's how I felt when I was in your position. But it's really not that bad." She says, smiling.

She continues. "We'll take it easy today, so you guys just get a taste for what this will be like for the rest of the semester."

She places a microscope on each student's desk. "Okay, just switch through each slide with the appropriate zoom and focus. I want you to label each sample as either prokaryote or eukaryote."

Everyone leans over and starts putting their slide under the lens. I stare at mine, my eyes widening in disbelief as I watch everyone begin to tackle the task without skipping a beat. I raise my hand tentatively, feeling embarrassed, but without other options.

"Excuse me," I say to get her attention, because she has her back to me.

"Yes?" She turns around, a friendly smile on her face.

My legs beg to run for the door as everyone's eyes dart toward me. *I don't want attention.*

"I...I don't know—How do you use this? I—I've never used a microscope before." I keep my eyes focused on a particular brown tile. It has cracks on it. I feel everyone's stares piercing me, and I imagine them laughing at my ignorance.

This is why students like you don't go to college. It's only the first day, and already you're WAY behind.

She looks confused, but she almost immediately recomposes her smile. "Oh! Don't worry! I can show you," she walks toward me.

I end up needing her help multiple times. Everyone else works independently.

Maybe Alex and Alan could've taught me, or at least would've helped me feel less like an idiot.

Another student leans over and kindly offers me her help. *I don't want to make friends. Why bother investing in friendships anymore?* I tell her, "No, I'm fine."

At the end of the 4 hour lab, the lab instructor tells me I did great. I leave disappointed in myself, and I can't believe her words. *Well, obviously she's never met people like me.*

When I get home, my mom asks me to take her to the grocery store. I'm about to tell her I have homework, but I stop myself. She's more important, and besides, I probably wouldn't even do the homework right.

I want to crawl in a hole when I open the e-mail. *Midterm deficiencies? Me? I've never received even a C, all my life! I'm suddenly in danger of failing? No. I can't do this, this college thing.* I feel the heat rising on my cheeks, and immediately freeze. *No more thoughts. No more emotions.*

I realize I'm not going to make it to class on time. *Who cares about class? Everyone is just gonna stare at you for being late.*

I look up from my computer screen, and the "Salutatorian" medal on my mirror catches my eye. I vividly recall my graduation ceremony, the moment my principal placed it over my neck. I come back to the present, remembering the email I just received. *My principal should walk in here right now, and strip away my medals.*

Last week, my parents informed they're incredibly proud of me and how well I'm doing. They want to take me to eat at Red Lobster because there's a lunch special, and apparently I deserve it. The guilt is infiltrating my face, so I tell it to hush.

"Que vas a ordenar?" my mom asks me.

How do I tell her I'm not hungry? That I'm physically incapable of eating? That I would actually prefer not to exist?

My eyes glance down as I fight the urge to puke. *No more thoughts.* But it's not working.

I hear the concern in my mom's voice. "Carla, que te pasa?"

I try to lie, but unlike the past couple years, it doesn't come out naturally. The tears start flowing, powered by the thoughts I can't find the "emergency stop" button for.

"I'm not doing good. I don't deserve this food." I mumble.

She laughs, "Calmate, hija. Ya se que tienes hambre."

That makes me feel worse. "Mom, I'm thinking about dropping out. I'm wasting your money. Don't invest in me. I don't know what I'm doing and I don't know if I can graduate. I hate going to that school. It makes me sad."

Her eyebrows furrow and her smile transforms into a slight frown. "Pero, Carla, saliste con puras A's de la high school. Como que no entiendes? Tú eres inteligente." She flashes me a little smile. *How do I begin to explain everything I haven't talked to her about?*

I laugh. "Not like the kids at this school. Mom, I'm really sad. I think I need mental help." I can't look at her as I speak, so I just bury my hands in my lap and stare at them. I feel ashamed. *This is what I get for lying to her about Alex's suicide after my quinceañera. This is what I get for using drugs for two years and lying to her about that too. This is what I get for thinking I was so smart in high school, using drugs but still getting good grades. Not so smart now, are you?*

My dad interrupts my thoughts. He speaks more firmly, with a hint of irritation, "Y si fallas esta clase, que pasa? Si paras de ir a la escuela hoy, que pasa con el dinero que ya pagamos? Lo van a regresar?"

My emotions are suddenly all nonexistent. "I get no credit for the class, I graduate later, and you have to re-pay that class until I pass it. If I stop going now, you still don't get that money back. But at least you won't have to keep paying if you let me stop now." I look into his eyes. *But I'm not sorry*, I think to myself as I look at the frustration shining on his face. *All you've ever cared about is money, and alcohol anyway. I don't owe you anything.*

My mom slaps his arm softly, telling him that the money isn't important. *But I do owe her. She's always supported me.* My emotions are back, gnawing at the corners of my heart.

She looks at me carefully, concerned. "Hija, habla con migo. Por favor, olvidate de el dinero. Que te pasa? Are you ok?"

My dad interrupts her, "Como que no importa el dinero? Ella tiene que terminar. Ya pagamos miles de dolares."

I look into my mom's eyes. I've seen this facial expression before. *Remember when you were 16, and she would say, "hija, te ves demacrada. Nunca comes nada. No duermes. Por que?" You would laugh and say nothing was wrong. Well, go ahead. Look her in the eyes, and do it again.* I do.

I'm sitting in the waiting room at Student Psychological Services. I was going to drown myself to escape what I can't handle. But someone convinced me

to seek help before I made a decision, and now I'm here, waiting to see a therapist for the first time. *Only chickens commit suicide.* I walk into the "crisis" therapist's office because I don't have an appointment. After I upchuck a string of unorganized thoughts to the therapist for a half-hour, he kindly tells me, "It seems you are very depressed. You should schedule with one of our staff therapists, someone you can see regularly." *Depression? That's not real.* But I follow his advice because it's clear that I don't know what I'm doing and I can at least admit that.

I'm in front of my computer again. *Why do they send our final grades right after Christmas?* I remind myself Christmas sucks anyways. *The right people aren't here to celebrate it with me. They never will be.* I'm scared to open the file, but curiosity wins. I see no D's or F's, but I see only one A.

Year One, Semester Two

I have some faith that things will change. As uncomfortable as I was with the idea, I'm giving these anti-depressants a chance. That meant telling my parents about the fact I'm seeing a therapist. That meant trying to explain to them why I need anti-depressants.

Tonight, I'm playing my first show with the LMU PepBand. I feel so professional wearing my white collared shirt, black slacks, and crimson tie. I look down from the stage, at the players darting around the glossy basketball court. I see cameras labeled with the letters "NCAA." *This is like a movie. I'm really doing this! Who would've thought?* I imagine that Alex and Alan are in the stands. *I'm gonna make you guys proud.* I feel a leap of adrenaline when the band director references my name to the audience. There are only a few people in the crowd because the game doesn't start for another 30 minutes, but I feel special anyway. I'm aware that I'm a girl, and girls don't usually drum, but I'm all about breaking stereotypes. *Thank you Alex, for inspiring me and believing in me. Accepting me as the "tomboy" I was, instead of making fun of me for it. Thank you for introducing me to the drums. This performance is for you.* I guess I do have something to offer this institution, after all. I'm even getting paid to do this! *With my first check, I will buy you a hat, Alex. I'll send it to your mom on your birthday. She can place it on your grave for me.* Before the tears start coming, I turn off the fuel. *Goodbye thoughts.* Hello, drums.

Year Two, Semester One

I failed a class last semester, but I won't let that happen this time. I'm on merit probation now, and I can't afford to lose my scholarships. I'll do whatever it takes to pass these classes. *Plus, one of these classes is a repeat, since I'm re-*

doing the statistics class I failed. I never was good at math, but let's try again. No excuses!

I'm early to class today, it turns out I enjoy learning from a Women's Studies perspective. I find a seat in the back though, because the professor warned us about triggering material. Not that I'm *weak*, but better safe than sorry. The professor plays a video about some riots. On the screen, there's a black-and-white photo of a young man whose body is sprawled on a curb, on the cover of a newspaper. *Alex's suicide got a tiny publication in the newspaper.* His mom is crying, and something inside me starts to snap. His mom tearfully explains that his shirt was white when he left, but it is black on the newspaper because he bled through the shirt. *Sounds too familiar.* A surge of emotions electrifies my body, and I immediately jump out of my seat. *This is why I shouldn't be early to class.* I don't want anyone to ask about the emotions on my face, so I walk with my hood on, my face directed at the ground. *Hey, Alex. Remember when you said you would make the right choice? Well, you didn't. At least the young man in the film died protecting his family's business, at the hands of someone else. You died, for nothing, at the hands of yourself. I wish I never met you.* I walk out of U-hall and start running toward the bluff as soon as I'm outside. I know I'll have privacy there. The water works can finally run, unperturbed by the cold part of me that turns emotions off. I stare out at the city, take a deep breath, and let my heart start tearing open its stitches. *I can't believe I'm falling apart. I wish the bluff was more like a cliff, so I could throw myself off it.* But it isn't. This is reality. My hands start trembling, and I feel the urge to be violent. *Should I be hospitalized?* I turn everything off again.

I realize I left my backpack and other belongings in the classroom, and that class has ended. Shame lunges at me as I realize that my professor might be waiting there, and ask me to explain myself. But she isn't there, no one's there. I feel both relieved and stressed. *I really want to die. Going to school is war, and I give up. I can't live in the past, but I can't live in the present either. I know drugs are bad, but suicide is bad too. Drugs helped me get through the second half of high school after the suicide. I was even Salutatorian. I bet they can help me get through college, too.*

When I get home, I tell my mom I don't need anti-depressants anymore. "You are healed? Te curaron?" She asks.

"I will be," I tell her, as I walk past her into my room. Part of me hopes that she will follow me and interrogate me until I have to admit I lied, but she doesn't. *Good. This is a sign.*

I sit in front of my e-mail after Christmas again. I'm not scared to open it this time, because I'm no longer the pilot of my life. *Whatever I see, it wasn't cause of me.* I see that I've gotten all A's, but I don't feel good about it. Turns out I *am* good at this. But only when I'm using drugs. *That explains everything.* I laugh at myself for thinking I could just start a new life overnight. I don't care. I'll do whatever it takes to bring that degree home. *I've found a way to merge my past into my present, and make the present work for me.* "Sober me" failed a class. "User me" just came back, and she is already doing better than Sober me. Go me.

Year Two, Semester Two

I'm missing classes again. This time, it's not because I don't want to break down in class. *Emotions are for the weak.* I'm sitting in theology, talking about God. *I hate this class. It makes me feel guilty. Mom always said that God knows everything. Does she know everything?* This morning, she commented that I'm starting to look "demacrada," again. *God is watching you. Mom is watching you. Alex is watching you. Alan is watching you. The walls are going to swallow you.* I gather my belongings and leave class before it starts. *Fuck this class.*

It turns out I am bad at math. This upper-division stats course is starting to lose me.

"And you just convert the raw score to a z-score. You can use it to determine the percentile your score lies on," the professor says.

What? I don't believe this. I don't understand what she's saying, but I've been coming to class every day and monitoring my daily drug intake. *What's the use of going to class?*

I have nothing better to do, so I decide to walk into theology, *at least to check that the professor hasn't dropped me from the class.* If I'm going to stop attending stats, I guess I should at least go to theology. *Maybe God will tell me something nice this time. If I'm willing to listen.* I'm early, and all the seats are open, but I decide to sit in the back. The professor looks up from his computer, and we make eye contact. *Crap.* He starts walking toward me. *I knew I shouldn't have come.*

"Can we talk outside?" He's standing in front of my desk.

I try to read his facial expression. *Am I in trouble? I should be, but I don't want to be.* I nod without looking at him and get up from my seat. We walk outside the classroom.

"I'm a little concerned," he tells me, no trace of anger on his face.

"Look, I'm sorry I don't come to class. I know I failed the first two tests, but I'll do better," I lie, my eyes focused on the doorknob behind him.

He flashes me a small smile. "I'm not here to bash you for not doing well in my class," he says. "I know that you know how you're doing in my class. I'm wondering," he pauses. "I'm wondering why you don't come to class. You students pay a lot of money to take these classes. It baffles me that you don't care about that. Is everything okay at home? I do care about my students, not just the work they turn in. Are you okay?" It feels like his eyes are penetrating me now, and I'm uncomfortable.

You probably get paid to pretend to care. You don't really care. It's not like you can help me. "I just really don't like theology," I mumble, my eyes still on the door behind him.

I peer at him, peering at me. He thinks for a moment, and slowly says, "Well. Most students don't." He smiles. "And that's okay. But to fail on purpose... I just want you to know that you can talk to me. There is help on this campus, and there are many resources available to you. I hate to watch students' potential go to waste. You are a bright student, and I know that because you were accepted into this institution. They don't let in just anybody, you know," he laughs and winks at me. "I just want you to know that my door is open to you." He smiles at me again, slightly nods his head, and walks back into class.

I don't follow him back in. *He's right, what am I doing?* Back to the bluff, I go. But I'm not going to cry this time. I'm going to provide my brain its medicine, so it can think straight again. Then, I'm going to make a plan. *At least, that's my excuse for doing this.*

The band director is yelling at me. I missed another basketball game, without notifying anyone. I know I'm fucking up, I don't need the whole world to tell me that. *But I deserve to be yelled at.* I hear his voice, but I don't hear his words. *In one ear and out the other.* After he finishes lecturing, I decide that I'm quitting the band. I'm looking forward to leaving this room and getting to the baggie of happiness in my car.

Before I open the final report for my spring semester grades, I know I won't like what I see. I don't want to open it. *But you have to.* I open it, allowing my eyes to absorb the digital delivery of fate. The visual information is coming in, but my brain is not registering what it means. Two D's and one F. *I can't believe this. My drugs let me down. What am I going to do?*

My mom pulls off my blankets. "Ya despierta! Puchica, ya es la tarde." My eyes snap open. *What's she going on about now?* I turn over to my alarm clock. It's 3:22 pm. Suddenly, the panic from last night returns, and I realize why I'm waking up so late. I realize why all my pores are sweating, why all the layers

of my bed sheets look like hell, why I didn't expect to wake up today. *But you did wake up. Here you are, alive.*

My mom interrupts my thoughts. "Niña! Que te pasa? Quitate de esa cama!"

I don't want to lie anymore. I allow the force of my thoughts to break the mental fences I've built. I start trembling when I hear myself begin to talk. *Why are you talking?*

I try to control my breathing as I speak. "Mom, I want to die. I need help. I need to go somewhere, where they won't let me do that to myself." I can't look at her.

Her eyes widen, and concern permeates her face. "Pero...y la escuela? Y tu trabajo? Que les vas a decir? Y-" She stops talking as she looks at me, and thinks for a moment. "Cambiate de ropa, pues. Y no te me mueves de este cuarto!"

I hear her getting my dad. *I forget she can't drive. I can drive myself! Into the ocean.*

My dad comes into my room, an annoyed expression on his face, and his eyes on my mom. Before he looks at me, he starts talking. "Carla, dile a tu mamá que se calme. Que les pasa—" He stops talking when he looks at me. *I guess I look like shit.* I laugh a little at the irony, but I know it isn't funny. He tells me not to move, shuts my door, and walks to the living room with my mom. When they open my door again, my dad speaks to me without looking at me. "Get a hold of that mental doctor you've been seeing. She can cure this. She knows what to do. Verdad?" *I'm sorry I bring you so much shame that you'd rather not deal with me.*

The Week Before Year Three

I will not fail any more classes. I will stop avoiding class. I will stop avoiding people. *What happened to committing to First To Go? What have I been doing these past two years? It's been 2 years! This time, if I mess up my merit probation, I really am out of here.* I have enough units now to be beyond the point of no return. Dropping out is not a game, nor an option. I'm determined to stay on my road to recovery. *At least you managed four weeks of sobriety toward the end of summer,* I remind myself.

I've started talking to someone I haven't seen since we were in elementary school. He doesn't know about the wrong paths I've taken since then. Talking about the past history that he and I share, reminds me that I wasn't always this way. I notice the difference between the people he's still in contact with, and the ones I'm still in contact with. *I can tell him an awful lot about people who are currently going down the wrong path. What does that say about me? I know my*

inner-child would cry if she were to meet me and be told this is her future. That colorful parrot would vacate her shoulder, and never return. She would ask me, "what about all the library books we used to check out?" I would tearfully tell her we don't read anymore. She would ask why I couldn't make everything go away. I wouldn't have an answer.

Before he or I resume school, we decide to re-meet by watching a movie. I realize I haven't been to a movie theatre in a little over a year and I want to shut down. But I'm determined to reconnect with who I used to be, so I hush that fear and agree. *When was the last time I saw a superhero movie? When was the last time I really sat and shared a moment with another human being?*¹

Year Three, Semester One

Halfway through the semester, one of my professors actually addresses me while handing back papers. She leans in to quietly tell me, "Carla, if you aren't doing so already, you should minor or major in Women's Studies. Great paper." *Huh? Me?* I look at my paper, and absorb the good news. *I've missed seeing these scores with my name on them.*

When she addresses the class, she reminds us, "We are halfway done with this class. This means you should have a decent understanding of where you stand in the class. Midterm deficiencies will be sent out by next week. I know this class isn't all that fun, guys, but you gotta read." She smirks.

I smile in my seat, because this sounds familiar. But, I know I have a 98% in the class. *I guess I am capable of producing my best work without drugs. I've never done this well before in college.*

During the last couple weeks of classes, the pressure starts setting in. I know my lowest grade is a high B, but the deadlines are boxing me into my mental prison. *How could I get this far without using drugs? It doesn't make sense. Ah-ha! The only way to make it make sense is to hand the credit over to drugs.*

I find out the hard way that you can't trust drug dealers. *Duh. But you can trust drugs, right?* At 7:30 am, when I hear my dad taking my younger brother to school, I finally admit to myself that I'm not going to get a wink of sleep, and it's because of my own choices. I also recognize that I need to be in my seat for class, at 10am. *I fucked up. SO FIX IT, GENIUS!*

I'm dazed, and jittery, but I start getting ready for school, as if I did nothing wrong the previous night.

¹ *Guardians of the Galaxy* became my favorite movie.

When I'm sitting in my seat, 2 minutes before class starts, my body starts screaming at me. *Why are you in here?* I look around at the students I've been attending this class with all semester. *I wonder if anyone notices I'm not normal?*

I start realizing that this is nothing new. That I've been doing this for years, just not around these specific peers. The only thing that's finally changed is my awareness. That I've noticed how bad this is. I hear the professor's voice, but my processor is broken. I stop trying to follow the lecture. *Remember Alan's overdose? Watching him jump between kicking the habit and basking in the addiction as if it were glorious? That's what you're doing. Stop playing with fire. Or you'll end up just like him. And you'll leave someone in the position he left you. Is that what you want?* I start taking notes on what I need to change, so this doesn't happen again. *I was doing so well before I made this choice. What do I really want? Do I want to go back to this lifestyle?*

This time, around Christmas, I'm not my usual Grinch-y self. For Christmas, I received the gift of a new relationship. I received the inner peace that my family *is* capable of sharing a nice holiday together. My dad gifted me what I've been asking for since I first learned to talk: a holiday without the overwhelming presence of alcohol. *If he can face his alcoholism after 22 years, I can face my addiction (did I just acknowledge that?) after only 5 years.* And when I open my final grades for the fall semester, I see that I made Dean's list. *Maybe, things are turning around.*

Year Three, Semester Two

As I pull into campus for my first day of the spring semester, I feel a sense of coming home instead of dread. My boyfriend comes with me for the first day of school. I pretend it's no big deal, but in my heart, I'm so grateful. *I feel like a real college student. I'm early, I'm prepared, and I'm actually living in the present. I know what I'm capable of. Both good and bad.* I see an airplane, pulling in to land at the airport. I was up there, a week ago, returning from El Salvador. Our first family vacation since I turned 8. I re-discovered my mom's side of the family, since I was a child the last time we went. I couldn't believe how different they were from the family I've known all my life, my dad's side of the family. They were so nice, so motivated, and so hard working; despite the circumstances life has dealt them. *There is good in my DNA. I just need to get in touch with it.* My boyfriend squeezes my hand, and I come back to the present.

Since this spring semester is all about change, I decide to attend an information session for a program called McNair. It's meant to prepare students for graduate school. I recall that before college began, I wanted to do more than

just get my bachelor's. When I opened the e-mail invitation, I thought it was a mistake, but then I remembered that I *do* have a GPA greater than 3.0.

After I leave the info session, a concoction of hope, faith, and fear begins to brew in my stomach. I want this. This is what I want. *But my grades suck. I'll apply for nothing. SHUSH. They wouldn't have invited you to attend, otherwise. Start defining what you want.*

I almost don't bother turning in the application, even though I finish it early. But other people's words of encouragement drown out the bullies in my head, and I listen.

When I see the McNair director's name in my inbox, I freeze. *This is it. Their decision.* I experience a powerful flashback, to all the times I remember sitting like this, afraid to open my e-mail to bad news. *That's a sign. It's bad news. SHH.* My hand reflexively clicks on the e-mail to quiet the voice in my head.

I've been *accepted!* *I can't believe I almost didn't turn my application in. This is fate!* I look around my room, expecting a clown or some sort of prankster, to come out and say, "April fools!" But nothing does. *This is reality.* I run to my mom, who's washing pans in the kitchen.

"Que te pasa ahora?" She asks me. "Que estas haciendo aquí en mi cocina, corriendo como loca?" She teases.

I laugh and remind her about the program I talked to her about. "Te acuerdas de ese programa? El que yo tenía miedo aplicar?"

She nods. "Sí, que con él? No me digas. Te aceptaron" She smiles as she looks down at me, not waiting for me to answer. I bet my face says it all. "Que te dije, mija? Tú sí eres inteligente. No mas que se te olvida." She lightly taps my forehead. "Pues, ahora, ya no se te va olvidar. Esos profesores te van a enseñar bien. Necesitas creer, mija."

My feet bring me to the bluff, and I absorb the beautiful scene. *I can't believe I once wanted to jump off of this.*

Year Four, Semester One

As I'm walking to grab lunch, flyers for a Latino Retreat catch my eye. It will be in November, which gives me plenty of time to make sure I can accommodate it into my schedule. *But I hate November. It reminds me of loss.* The retreat theme beckons to me. Culture, faith, family. The things I often avoid. *The last time I went to a retreat, Alex had just died. It was in November too, 5 years ago. I'm in a better place now than I was then. And this time, I will go with an open heart and mind. I'm old enough to take control of my life now. I'm not a*

teenager anymore. This November will be different. I put it into the calendar on my phone. I will deepen my commitment to recovery.

During class, the McNair director tells us that we will be inviting our families to the McNair Symposium. I shift in my seat. *Will mom and dad even come? They've never even set foot on this campus. They never even ask about school. Why would they start now?* I'm about to raise my hand and ask if it's mandatory, but someone else beats me to it. *Thank you.* I try to compose my face and posture so it doesn't look like I care about the answer. I hear the words "we encourage," "should be involved," and "will be mailing invitations to your addresses." *Shit. I don't want to get my hopes up.*

My professor walks up to me before class starts. I start panicking inside, thinking I did something wrong.

"Carla," she says, "I saw your name in the McNair Symposium program." Her eyebrows lift in surprise. "I didn't know you were a McNair Scholar!" She beams.

I shift uncomfortably in my seat and avoid looking at her, feeling like I don't deserve the recognition. "Yeah," I mumble, "But I just started, so I'm not really one yet."

She chuckles. "Oh, Carla. So modest. You are a McNair Scholar!" She lightly points a finger at me. "That is amazing. I have a McNair scholar in my class! If there's anything I can do to support your goals, you know where my office is. Just wanted to congratulate you. That's amazing!" She walks away.

I stare at my desk, feeling both proud and ashamed. *I can't believe she came up to me to acknowledge that. I also can't believe I ruined the moment by letting my lack of confidence win.* I toe the carpet anxiously until her lecture breaks my thought process.

I hug Astro when I get the UROP acceptance letter. "I'm going to do research!" I yell at his brown, furry face. His tail starts wagging. *If I had a tail, mine would be wagging too.* I laugh because I know he doesn't know why we're happy, but I do. Piggles, my sun conure, chirps from the living room. I look at Astro, and decide he'll survive without my attention for a little while. I shoo him out of the house, to the backyard, and take Piggles out of his cage. His bright yellow/red/green/orange tinted wings flutter a bit as he composes his balance on my finger. From the cage in the corner, P-Nut gives me the evil eye. He's jealous. I shift Piggles to my left shoulder, and let P-nut out of his cage. I blow kisses at him to calm him down. It works; he starts making his own kissy sounds. I place him on my right shoulder. *I feel like a pirate, with two parrots instead of one!* I look in the mirror and remember how I felt walking home, as a child, with my

aunt's huge parrot on my small shoulder. *I have two, now! Except this time, the birds are not bigger than my head.* I reach out to my past self. *Look. I got you another parrot. You can only walk with them indoors because they fly when they get startled (they're the biggest chickens on Earth), but they're great birds. We're going to do research this semester. We're learning to stand up again. We're living up to that dream we used to have! It will be real.*

I feel a little awkward, sitting in the backseat of my dad's car as we drive to LMU. *I can't believe this is happening. I feel like their child. YOU ARE!* I can't help but laugh at what I'm thinking. My mom turns around to look at me. "Que? What's so funny?"

I hesitate for a moment, but then decide to let her in on my thoughts. I take a deep breath and tell her, "This is weird. You've never been to LMU. I didn't think you would come, but here we are." She looks a little hurt.

"Why wouldn't we come?" She asks.

I laugh at her, and pull on my dad's sleeve to include him in the conversation. "Do you remember the last time you attended something related to my education?"

He takes my pull on his sleeve the wrong way. "Are you blaming me?" He says indignantly.

I freeze. "No...I'm just asking both of you a question."

There's an awkward silence. I decide to break it. "You can count high school, too."

My mom starts defending herself, but throws my dad under the bus. She says, "I went to the high school meeting before you graduated! Your dad es el que no va."

I pat her shoulder from the backseat. "It's okay. I don't blame you." I pull on his sleeve too, a little reluctantly. "You too. I'm not trying to attack you." I don't look at them as I say it. I want to believe that I mean it.

My dad changes the subject because we're pulling into campus. "Donde dejo el carro?" I guide him into the U-hall parking lot. *I can't believe this is happening. I'm at LMU with my parents.* A smile sneaks up on my face.

As we're driving home, my parents can't shut up about how amazing everything was. I don't say anything, I just let them ramble on to each other, but I smile in the backseat. My mom turns around, "Mija, I am so proud of you. I didn't know you do all those things as a student! Wow." She smacks my dad's shoulder. "Y tu? Que aprendiste de tu hija?"

He looks uncomfortable, but he flashes me a look. "Good job," he tells me in a genuine tone.

I smile and tell him, "thank you." *I didn't even hear those words at my high school graduation ceremony. This is a big deal. I'll take it.*

I've fulfilled my commitment to myself by going to the Latino Retreat. As the white van pulls back into LMU, I take a deep breath. More than ever, I feel a sense of coming home. I let my eyes soak in the words "Latino Retreat" on my blue shirt one more time, allowing myself to process everything I experienced this weekend—

Have faith. Pray like it depends on God, work like it depends on you. Trust that there is a purpose behind everything that's happened and will happen. There is no such thing as coincidences. God has a plan for you. Open the dialogue with yourself, with God, with your family, with others. Even those who are dead, you can still talk to them. The only thing stopping you is yourself. Carry them in your heart. Have compassion for yourself, for others. Even Alex; even Alan. Even you. Everyone who's hurt you. Above all, love.

I'm back at my computer screen after Christmas. Dean's list! *As hard as recovery is, here's proof that life is do-able.*

What it is now...

Year Four, Semester Two

I'm graduating a semester late, but I see the imaginary finish line that my mom had once created for me. And I'm not going to stop after I cross it. I'm going to keep running past it and go to graduate school. I've grown up and I understand. Not everything, but enough.

The voices in my head step out of my brain to peer at me. They look me up and down, sneering. *What? This once-shapeless block isn't a block anymore. It's actually starting to take shape. But what is it? It's still missing fine details.*

That's right, I tell them.

They jump, startled. You have a voice?

Actually, I do. I forgot about it for a while, but I'm back now. I use my mind to tower over them. I continue.

Unless you keep working on accepting me, this block will never achieve those fine details.

They grumble amongst each other, but nevertheless jump back into my head with a "we'll try."

You'd better.