

"Brilliant . . . Melissa Mogollon did not come to play."
—KILEY REID, *NEW YORK TIMES* bestselling author of *SUCH A FUN AGE*

OYE

HOGARTH



a Novel

MELISSA MOGOLLON



HOGARTH

London · New York

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To my grandmother, and all grandmothers, for teaching me how to laugh

Is this more than you bargained for yet?

—FALL OUT BOY

Entre broma y broma, la verdad se asoma.

—EVERYONE'S MOTHER

Part I



Pásame el teléfono

“I can’t believe you called me six times for this today, Mari.

Abue is going to be fine.

Whether she evacuates or she stays.

She’s like an immortal Pokémon.

Oh my god. And you left me a voicemail?

I just saw the notification...

You are such a closeted boomer...

Well now that I know you’re alive, I’m gonna need a second to breathe.

I thought you had been kidnapped. And the police were calling me to demand some answers, since you have me saved as ‘ICE Psychopath’ in your phone.

Yes. Mom told me you still haven’t changed that.

Which is not only rude, by the way, but also impractical. Have you thought about that?

What’s gonna happen when you have an actual emergency one day?

You’re gonna be like on your last breath, begging for help. And the cops won’t be able to reach me because my phone’s gonna be locked away in Mrs. Nelson’s desk again for ringing during class.

Luciana Domínguez. Is that your phone?

Yes?

Give it. You can get it from me at the end of class.

Wait, it's Mari? This fucking bitch.

Luciana!

Sorry. It's just...my sister.

It was on loud because NO ONE EVER CALLS ME, DUDE.

So imagine my surprise when I get my phone back and see six missed calls, thinking that you're either dead or I'm being framed—just to call back and get your unbearable high-pitched voice on the line screaming about our grandmother!

Mm-hmm.

And it's really all or nothing with you, huh?

Because I hadn't heard a peep out of you since you went back to school.

Nope. Not a single word when I texted you being vulnerable, asking if it was weird that I was starting my senior year but was still scared of Mom.

I shouldn't be this afraid, but her eyes are so scary. Is that normal? Should I feel more confident?

Or during the important and personal milestone of Rihanna launching her Fenty Beauty line last week.

Ignore my texts about Mom, I'm over it. But can you send me \$30 though? It's urgent.

And now here you are.

Blowing up my phone while I'm trying to prepare for a hurricane.

Along with the underwhelming beginning of my impending adulthood.

Thank you.

No! Don't start asking 'how are you' now, bitch.

I needed you a month ago!

Whatever. You're lucky there's a storm coming. I don't have time to get into this.

So tell me, is your plan to cyberbully and harass Abue into evacuating with us, too? Cuz you're pretty good at that.

Oh, she's not listening or picking up your phone calls? Weird. You have the voice of an angel.

Okay, relax, lol.

Just text her that Jesus came to you in a dream and said there's a one-hundred-pound weight minimum for adults to get into heaven. So if she really wants to meet Princess Diana, she's gonna have to wait. Because it's not in her best interest to die right now at ninety-five pounds in a hurricane.

I am being serious, Mari? You know how Abue feels about Lady D.

Fine. But could you at least remind her that all the stores close up during hurricanes too? As the allegedly 'wiser,' more 'trustworthy' one of us? I tried telling her myself, but she didn't believe me.

If you stay, you won't be able to buy anything, Abue. Not even at Marshalls.

Everything you say is a lie, Luciana.

You can't just decide that because I'm saying it in English.

Why not? It's the language of liars.

I promise you that the mall will be closed, dude. You won't be able to get in. No one is going to be here—just you and Hurricane Irma. So c'mon! They're saying she's going to be the worst storm of 2017. Go pack up your stuff and let's go.

No! I'm not a sheep.

Ew, Mari...Why are you crying?

Abue's going to be fine! She's not an idiot. She knows where all the shelters are, and Dad will be at the farm, only a few hours away.

Plus—she's still got like twelve hours left to change her mind. Mom said we're not leaving until tomorrow morning.

And you can even tell Abue that if she comes, I'll let her ride shotgun.

That way she can lean into the driver's seat and say, 'This isn't the way' to Mom like five hundred times.

She really loves doing that, Mari! It could help.

FINE. Then just call and confess that she needs to evacuate so you don't feel guilty over not being home! THERE. I SAID IT.

Oh, please. You're a horrible liar.

And for starters, it's obvious. We were invisible to you until Irma found us.

But now you desperately need Abue to stay safe, so you don't have to come back or feel guilty if something happens.

Since this is really all just about you and your need to control everything! Voilà!

I'm not as stupid as everyone thinks!

Why is Mari freaking out? Abue can make her own decisions. She's an adult?

She just cares, mi amor. She feels helpless from so far away.

Well she should 'care' more often then. Not just when the news says there's an emergency.

Sure, yeah, I'm joking, lol.

Just can't believe that I'll never make it to college myself.

Since I'm going to die driving the back roads of Florida, racing a tsunami to save our grandmother.

Next to our mother and our dog.

Mari—relax! I'm kidding and you know it. So stop pretend-crying and spare me the act.

You will get to escape the consequences of your actions once again, and we will all be okay. Including Rosy. And she's the only dog I know who's scared of clouds.

Yes, Mom and I tried convincing Abue to come with us all week! I promise.

We bombarded her from every angle possible: Facebook, WhatsApp, texts, and emails. Nightly FaceTimes on the iPad. Even some fake eHarmony promos. But she just wouldn't listen. To Mom, Dad, or me—her most perfect and precious grandchild.

I'm not leaving, Luciana.

Fine. Your choice. I'm tired of begging.

Though, of course, Mom then acted like Abue's refusal was somehow my fault. Since she's so used to you doing everything so perfectly and flawlessly for her.

No! Luciana! Get back on the phone.

Why? She's just being stubborn.

Because she's your grandmother. Try again.

UGH. Hello? Abue—it's me again. Your daughter is driving me crazy. Please don't leave me alone with her. They're saying this storm is going to get bad! That we really need to evacuate.

They always say that! Tell your mother that I'm too old and the drive is too long. And I read somewhere on the internet that senior citizens who evacuate are much more likely to get injured than those who stay. Can you imagine that?! Suffering in a hospital that's already falling apart? My girl, I'd rather be dead.

But you'll be with us!

Everything I need is here. Goodbye. They say this every year.

What about the six-foot storm surge? And the power outage?

Tell it to come.

*Do you think that Abue won't evacuate because she wants to be on *Primer Impacto*, lol? The world's most depressing news show?*

She's been watching it a lot lately while we're on the phone before she goes to bed.

Yes...and all they do is, like, show pictures of dead bodies on streets... Or run stories about dads trying to sell their daughters.

Or flash 'Breaking News' alerts about the kid in the neighborhood who's been chopping the heads off his pets.

Last time we were at her place, she even got in my head by saying, Luciana—look. Isn't that boy in your class?

No. Stop. You're gonna give me nightmares before I go to sleep.

I think you better call home and check on Rosy. It's not looking good.

*I had to be like, Abue, c'mon man, doesn't this show make you sad? Why don't you watch something easier on the stomach all day? *It doesn't help that you like to watch it in the dark.**

No. Yo soy dura.

Omg. Do you not know how to change the channel?

But then she threw her spoon at me for speaking English again.

And even though she never aims, she still somehow always hits my face.
It's like some supernatural form of grandma physics...

Can you please look into that?

Smart enough to learn English but not smart enough to duck. Look at that.

Ow! Why did you throw that?

Because you think you're better than me.

I was asking a question?

You don't have to say it with so much pride!

And the torture didn't end there for me, Mari, oh no. So excuse me for not wanting to play your little 'Let's Tell Abue What To Do' game.

Because after Abue's mentally ill news show was over, she tried teaching me how to use her hair curlers again.

Please, no. I'm so sore from last time.

Yup. And I still couldn't get the twist right.

What the hell, Luciana? Even your wrists don't have rhythm?

And I wasn't allowed to leave, eat, or use the bathroom until I got it right.

It's almost midnight, dude. I have to go home.

No, you're sleeping here. Try again. Put my news show back on and let's go.

At least get me some water!

So in conclusion, you all need to leave her alone. Because you and Mom are forgetting who we're dealing with here. If Abue's mind is made up about something—she's holding on tight.

Remember when she had a broken toilet for a month? Because she wouldn't let anyone inside to fix it? Because she had dyed her hair the wrong color and was waiting for it to grow out?

Exactly. The bitch is crazy.

Leave her be.

And besides...Mom said that Abue's been bringing up the butt job?

Yes. As in, she thinks that people with butt jobs can't run from hurricanes, lol.

Which would be wild. Because then all of Miami would really go underwater.

But didn't she get it done like two years ago?

Oh no, you're right. That was her waist.

Well then—there you have it. Your grandmother can't evacuate because she said that she needs to be sleeping in a specific position, in her specific bed, or her ass will pop.

Is that true, Abue?

Yes. It happened on Paraíso Infierno, season one.

Really? I thought the redhead's butt just gets infected?

No. Pay attention. That was season two.

So, AssGate is probably gonna be our final answer. And unfortunately, Abue is a grown woman who can do whatever she wants. So if she wants to buoy above water with her fake titties and ass when the hurricane hits, then that's fine. I'm sure she has her reasons.

You and Mom just need to stop trying to micromanage everything. You're like the type A twins from hell.

No wonder Abue doesn't want to come!

Look, I promise to check on her the entire drive tomorrow, okay? I love her too...I've just had a lot going on.

Mom asked me to sit in the garage and separate cans by expiration date when I got home from school.

I'm gonna cry.

Luciana, please. We're all tired. Just sort through the old food supplies. I don't want to buy new cans, they're horrible for us and the environment. But make sure to grab only the ones that haven't expired yet. And take your time. You don't want diarrhea on the side of the road from food we bought in 2005 for Hurricane Wilma. Read the dates carefully. Don't rush things like you do on your math tests.

Omg. Will I need a calculator? Pressure flares up my dyslexia.

And then after that, I had to drive to like four different supermarkets for a gallon of water.

Yes.

ONE GALLON OF WATER, Mari. Can you believe that?

Because everyone is fighting and hoarding supplies!

It's like survival of the freaking fittest at the grocery stores.

And you really have to send in your best fighter...But because you ditched us, I'm all this family has.

Why can't you or Dad come? I'm scared of old people.

Your father and I need to work as much as possible before the storm hits. Just go, Nana. We need your help.

I'm not built for Black Friday Hurricane Edition, Mom! I'm anemic!

Even though I badly wanted to be like, But can you explain to me again why you're so busy working, Mom? Because who the hell needs swimming lessons the days before a storm?! *Isn't it too late by then?*

No. I offer a hurricane discount. People love it.

However, speaking of things that don't make sense...has Mom told you about the new neighborhood parents WhatsApp thread?

Yes. The Miami Princess Homeowners Association is already starting with their theatrics. They made a group chat to talk about all the precautions we need to be taking or we're going to hell.

Get your canned goods, donate to those in need, and sit down with your families to pray. That's all there is to it. Sin is especially tempting during difficult times. We must hold our loved ones close in God's light—it's the only way.

Mom. Are they talking about...the hurricane?

I'm not sure. Just ignore them.

Shouldn't they be making sure everyone has shutters?

Yes. But listen, you should really think about joining their youth group when we get back. They go on some incredible service trips! And it would look good on your college applications. Plus, it could be a great place for you to make new friends. A sort of... 'fresh start' for your senior year.

Why did you just use air quotes? And why would I join a youth group? I'm already eighteen.

Age is just a number, honey.

You're so lucky you're in D.C., dude.

I'd take ten winters to the face if it meant I never had to 'shelter-in-place' again with these fake evangelist intellectuals.

They're all about loving thy neighbor, yet the bigotry oozes from their pores!

Yes, Mari...They were literally DISTRAUGHT that gay people can adopt in Colombia now. I saw them arguing about it in that demonic chat.

Some poor earnest soul asked the group if gay men should be allowed to donate blood too now and, obviously, all hell broke loose.

I'm serious! Their responses were so absurd that I almost even said, Oh my god! I don't fucking get it! What's the actual problem here? Would you all rather those kids NOT have homes? Cuz it's not like your selfish asses are gonna do it—donate blood or adopt kids. You probably can't even afford it! And if God really hates gay people, why is his son bare-chested in a miniskirt getting pinned down to a cross? *These people are so confused.*

But when Mom saw me reading those messages, and she saw my face begin to contort, she snatched her phone back so fast and said, Never mind—that's enough. No more scrolling for you.

Lol. I know.

I was like, Copy that, Mother. I'll just stay in the closet forever. Just like you and your sicko friends want.

And what's worse is that those idiots have probably never even read the Bible! Because God is not the problem here...*It's their tiny little brains.*

Mom even tried telling me that YOU loved your 'church friends.'

I was like, Who? Mari Magdalene? Hoe of the East? No, thanks. I don't think so.

Mari only joined youth group because it was the one place she could sneak off and let that weirdo Alonso feel her boobs.

I said, that's enough! Go pack up Rosy's stuff. I can't find her harness.

That's because she doesn't have one! What reality are you living in?!

Unbelievable.

It's like she had blinders on your entire teenagehood. And instead, I get fucking binoculars.

But anyways, on top of bestowing her religious trauma on me, Mom's also been making us do these stupid YouTube video workouts every night before bed.

That's another luxury that you're missing out on.

Yes. She said that she read online somewhere that if we don't start 'stretching now' and 'preparing for our drive,' all our blood will stop flowing and our metabolisms will slow.

I don't think mine can get any slower.

Luciana, don't say things like that. This isn't a joke. Your health needs to be your top priority. When are you going to learn to take it seriously? It's extremely important that you get exercise!

Omg. You're obsessed with my body.

And did you know that her YouTube account name is ElenaLifts600?

Cuz that shit gave me chills...

Yeah, so, we'll probably be on the side of the road, doing squats and downward dogs with Rosy, when we get a frantic call from Abue screaming that there's actually rain this time, and the U.S. Army is at her door.

They're the ones who got her to evacuate last time.

Elena? Hello? You need to get here. There are a bunch of men in the same outfit in my lobby. Tell them I don't want whatever they're selling.

That's the National Guard, Mom. Open up.

Ew, Mari. Yes? Abue's apartment obviously has shutters? We're not actually just leaving her here to die. Stop believing her dramatic-ass texts.

I swear! Dad installed those special rolling ones on her balcony when we dropped off supplies.

If Jaime gets to stay back with no problem, then why can't I?

Because unlike you, Abue, we don't live near the water. And he's not seventy-five! He's staying because he has to take care of the farm. Not because he wants to die playing with his makeup.

Oh—but I think you should know that when we were about to leave Abue's apartment, she made me grab the Publix groceries from her car and do the whole rebagging thing again.

Yup.

She had me put them all into individual Whole Foods bags before bringing them up.

Where do you even keep getting these bags from, dude? Are you ordering them online?

No questions. Just hurry up and stuff before anybody sees.

Sees what? That you're a normal person who shops at Publix? I'm not gonna do this for you every time!

So as you can tell, she's still very committed to her fabricated identity of old-money Russian heiress. I hope that brings you some peace...

Because she really wouldn't go through the trouble if she thought that she was dying anytime soon.

But while we're here—when is she going to learn that you can't just leave groceries in your car for hours?

Is that why she doesn't eat?

And they CLOSED the Whole Foods near her place, Mari.

So does she honestly think that the neighbors believe she's driving more than twenty minutes now for organic lemons?

That bitch won't even walk outside to get the mail!

Abue. I don't think you can keep this façade up for much longer. Just logistically.

Listen to me. You have to keep people on their toes in this world, Nana. The second they think they know you, you die.

No, Mari, lol. Take a deep breath.

Abue has no 'secret plan' with not evacuating. Stop conspiring with your sorority sisters and think clearly for a second.

And even if she did—it would be for the same reason that she has me stuffing bootleg Whole Foods bags!

Yes! She just needs to be seen as glamorous and beautiful at all times. It's that simple.

She's probably only worried that running from a hurricane won't give her that.

Let her live.

Oh, please. You of all people should understand.

You're the same way.

Abue just wants people to say...Let me tell you about this crumbling building...and the DAZZLING old woman that wouldn't leave from the fourteenth floor. Ouuuuuu you should have seen her hair! Long, black, and brittle, like it was running away from itself. And high, skinny cheekbones that didn't let her talk to anybody. With one lonely brown eye—clouded with cataracts but still winking at you—on the left.

The way she slammed doors in your face was sexy!

But it wouldn't even matter to her, you know.

Whether she lived or died.

Because even if Irma ravished the whole state—at least Abue would still be beautiful.

And that was the point.

I know.

Incredible AND depressing, right?

Does it sound like you yet?

And then at her funeral, she'd want us all talking about how she wouldn't leave...How she knew this storm would kill her.

How she called it her welcome party to the neighborhood!

The quince she never got!

Cuz how much you wanna bet she'd even be knocking on Home Depot's door when the storm hits?

Trying to get in?

To find a new faucet head or doorknob.

Because the one she has now 'makes her look cheap' and she knows it.

She's been saying it for years.

What will they say! *No no no, dios mío*. The rescue teams!

When they find her!

When they call all the sisters she hates and the kids she's ignored, she needs them to say, HO-LA, we found your mother's body, ma'am. But don't worry. She is so beautiful, so striking, and my god, her home—she must have been an empress.”



Peínate el pelo

“Hi, girly...

Yes, it's me. Your sister.

I'm calling you back.

You can breathe now.

It's still September 2017. That's right.

You have worked yourself into a stress coma, but yesterday did actually happen.

In fact, I'm calling you now—live from inside the car—in the middle of my own existential crisis.

Yes, Mari. Of course I got all sixteen of your text messages.

How could I not? I've been sitting in a car for over ten hours!

But did you get mine? Where I said that I'd call you as soon as we got to our first stop?

Because if you did, you wouldn't be hyperventilating right now.

I'm sorry that I couldn't call all day! Okay? I'm sorry.

But it's not my fault that the drive took so long. Go yell at Mom. I had to preserve my phone battery because her car only has one charger.

And like I just said, I've been a little BUSY today.

Trying to understand if this hurricane is a punishment from the universe or not.

Since it's just given me even MORE time to think about the potentially worst year of my life...

So, that's what's up.

That's the 'latest update from the road' you asked for.

No, Mari. Shut up. You only loved your senior year because you got into college early decision.

It's different for me.

Yes! Some of us have to actually WORRY about being the first disappointments in our family to have access to college and STILL fuck it up.

Do you know how annoying that burden is?!

No—I said that I don't want to talk about Abue right now.

I want to talk about ME.

Because, maybe, I'm realizing that...college just isn't for me? You know?

Maybe my 'journey' to 'higher education' would have been more natural if it were?

Omg.

Fine! You're so annoying. If you must know—once again—Abue and everyone else is okay. We're all good.

Yes. We have courageously survived to see another day.

Oh, don't act so surprised.

I told you that exact thing was going to happen yesterday.

Though, I guess, the confirmation of it should be thrilling for you. Since it means there's no bad karma for you so far.

Despite only remembering you had a family like yesterday.

But back to me, lol.

Do you think it's a good sign or a bad sign that the start of my senior year got hijacked by a hurricane?

Like...do you think it's an omen?

Or an opportunity?

Because I was planning on just throwing myself in cold turkey...but now that I suddenly have this time on my hands...I'm wondering if it means that I should actually use it to think about what the hell I'm gonna do with the rest of my life.

Yes. Like to come up with a plan or something.

No? I haven't 'set goals' for the year?

Do you know who you're talking to?

In between you going back to school and us evacuating, all I did was sit in my room and stress about having to face the fact that I've ruined my future with terrible grades for the past three years.

Oh. And I did get a fake ID.

But that one was easy.

Nico's cousin has a friend who makes them online.

What? Why are you mad?!

You're supposed to be glad that I won't be whoring out my tits to random dudes at the gas station until they buy me alcohol!

Kidding, lol. Don't cry. I'm not you.

And I still don't drink.

Plus, I would never use something Nico's cousin's friend made at a reputable establishment anyway.

I just need it to get into Ladies' Night.

It's no longer eighteen and up.

Oh, NOW you wanna talk about my plans for next year. NOW you're concerned about my future.

Nice. You're a hypocrite.

Because, Mari! You got a fake ID before you even had a real driver's license! Give me a break here.

I'm at least just using it to meet other gay people!

While sober!

Not to parade around in bandage dresses across downtown...

Okay, well, now you're just being annoying. We can go back to talking about Irma.

I give up.

No—don't act all shy now! We both know you left me voicemails again all day, blowing me up with your sick, twisted priorities. Trying to assuage your distant-daughter guilt by obsessing over Abue. Without ever stopping for a single second to ask if I was okay.

Or if I was feeling all right...

But that's okay, my sweet self-centered sister...I know you well. And I love you despite your flaws.

And you can breathe now. By the way.

Because we've officially made it.

Oh, yes. We're here. In paradise. At our weird second cousin Susana's house in the Redneck Riviera—Panama City.

The only place more terrifying than our neighborhood's group chat...

Um, what do you mean, 'Susana is not our second cousin'?

She's 'technically' our 'first cousin once removed'? What the fuck is that?

Omg. I forget you wanna be a redneck so bad.

Anyways, moving on, before you ask me for the seventeenth time—no. Abue is not with us.

She is still at her apartment.

And she didn't teleport here since the last time I texted you that exact same thing. So enough with that!

I'm getting dizzy from hearing you all talk about her.

We should be talking about me for a change!

I'm the one facing serious damage here!

If I don't start this year off right, my performance anxiety will take over and flush it down the drain. You've seen the way I react to pressure, Mari...

Which, clearly, nobody seems to be thinking about.

Because besides telling me to join a fanatical youth group to bolster my extracurriculars, Mom has not brought it up once.

And it's not fair!

This trip could have a major impact on me.

Everyone else just gets to chill, pausing their regularly scheduled lives, while I have to sit here in Mom's Toyota minivan for ten hours, and think

about the next three hundred and sixty-five days that everyone claims will define the rest of my life.

Ugh. Can we lower the windows please? I'm getting nauseous.

Did you do your stretches, Luciana?

No. Hurry up. I can't breathe.

And instead of comforting me, or just considering me, Mom has been yelling into her phone all day. Having a back-and-forth with Abue about how 'selfish and irresponsible' it was that she didn't evacuate.

You shouldn't be staying in that run-down apartment all by yourself, Ma. It's not right!

It's not going to fall over, Elena. It's not like the movies.

But what if you need help?

Then I know who to call! Jaime will be right here. Now will you focus on the road? Tell me about the drive.

It's great...We're learning so much about ourselves already.

Oh. That sounds horrible.

What do you want to hear, Ma?! That it's terrible? That the roads are all bad and we're going hungry?

Don't make me disconnect the house phone, Elena. You know I don't like when you get hysterical.

And on top of that, Mom was also shoving her phone in my face the entire drive, kindly interrupting my mental spiral, and whisper-screaming at me to 'do something.' *Do you hear this? Why is she so difficult? Can you please talk to her, Luciana?*

But I was like, Nope. I can't hear you. My murder podcast is on and your little mother-daughter-guilt-trip push-and-pull is giving me a headache.

Why don't you care! Why doesn't anybody!

I do care, Mom. But she's not gonna listen to me. No one does! And no matter what, it's her decision. Why can't you accept that? You've been stressing me out this entire drive!

Omg. Of course I worry, Mari. But this isn't Abue's first hurricane?

And not everyone evacuates!

Mom will just use any excuse to get us out of town...I think you're only forgetting that because you're a northerner now.

Seriously. I don't even think we're following the weather map anymore.

Mom's just got me looking up informational welcome centers for the bigger cities nearby.

Why?

Oh, just do it. Don't be so boring. We could stop along the way.

Along the way to what? We just drove ten hours to Panama City.

I don't know. Somewhere more west! We could keep going. We might as well see something interesting while we're here.

How? You were crying about Abue like five seconds ago. And now you want to turn this into a family vacation?

Yes. I think it's horrible she won't come out and see the world.

So, no. I'm not getting involved with the whole Abue thing, Mari. It's over. We left. Accept it.

I'm already barely hanging on by a thread here anyway...

Our dear 'first removed' whatever cousin still lives with her freak husband, Ernesto.

Yes! It's a miracle that I didn't catapult myself out of the car, onto I-95, when Mom said their house was the first stop on our evacuation road trip.

Seriously?!

They live by the beach! It will be beautiful! We never get to see the Gulf Coast of Florida.

Now I get why Abue stayed. Pull over. Drop me off here.

Luciana, stop. This is an emergency. And we need somewhere safe to stay.

Safe?! Can't we get a hotel? I'm not staying with a wifebeater!

Watch your tone with me...But no. The hotels are all booked up. And don't use that word! It's disgusting. It only happened once. Susana reassured me that he's been going to counseling and feeling better.

Omg. That's EXACTLY what the girl on my podcast said before she was murdered.

And I'm a saint, truly.

Because since the drive to Panama City today took so long, between the traffic and all of Mom's YouTube stretching, I had a lot of time to think about jumping out.

Yes. I even Facebook-chatted Abue saying, You bitch—did you know?

No. But I don't blame you for being upset. Susana is just like her mother.

Not the point! We're not here to talk about your estranged sister. I could be in danger!

Hmm. Is Susana gonna be wearing those maternity pants again? It's been a few years now.

I don't know? Mom said she just had a baby.

Another one? With that ogre?

Yes. But apparently it looks like her ex.

That's wonderful. Good for her.

Lucky for everyone involved though...things have been 'fine' at Susana's house so far.

But I'm not letting my guard down.

I'm watching Ernesto now through the window as we speak.

Yes—I told you. I'm sitting outside in the car.

Well, you're gonna regret asking, but it's because I can't stop farting.

I know. I'm sorry.

Susana made us dinner when we got here, which was really nice, but then no one warned me about the whole milk in the mashed potatoes.

'Why,' Mari? Because no one takes me seriously. Easy. Next question.

Since when are you lactose intolerant?

Since I could talk, Mom. I feel sick. Does Susana have Tums?

No. Go away. Those have too much sugar.

So after I downed multiple servings of those lethal, mouthwatering potatoes, I had to run outside before I poisoned everybody with my flatulence.

But don't worry. I brought Rosy with me.

I would never leave her in there unprotected.

However, though, despite this all being very painful, I'm not officially complaining.

Because Irma canceled school for ten days.

So if this is what it takes to get a break from Mrs. Nelson again, then so be it.

Yes, Mari. She's gotten so much worse since you left!

I even got a notification earlier saying that she's still expecting the freaking homework. Can you believe that?

I don't get why she became a teacher when she just wants to be a cop!

So, whatever. Even if Irma delays the agonizing realization that I have close to zero college options, this is fine. This is beautiful. I'll suffocate on my farts in this evacuation and car forever if it means I never have to see that lady's face.

EVEN if it comes with having to listen to Mom sing 'Despacito' all day...which is very hard.

Again, dude? It just played.

Yes. Turn it up.

I'm serious, Mari. She did it today for the entire drive.

It's like a sickness.

And when she gets to the chorus, she grips the steering wheel like... really hard.

What are you doing, Mom? You're swerving in between the lanes!

Nothing. Nothing.

It doesn't look like nothing!

And she only ever stopped when the phone rang, hoping it was Abue begging us to turn around and go pick her up. *Hello? Ma? Are you okay? Did you change your mind?*

No. It's me.

Jaime. Oh. We're fine. But I can't talk now. My favorite song is playing.

Can you have Luciana text me your locations? I want to know how far you're going. The service is already getting spotty here at the farm.

Hold on, Mari. I have to roll the car windows up. The mosquitoes here fly like they're chugging Four Lokos.

Ow! I can't tell if they're trying to kill or hook up with me...Jesus.

And it's so fucking hot in here too.

In this whole fucking state.

No wonder the crime rate is so high!

I should probably just say my goodbyes now. Before Rosy and I die from an ax murderer or a lack of oxygen in this car.

Tell Mom where to find our bodies, okay?

Right next to my future and the 'fresh start' to my senior year.

But make sure to text her a photo. Because she won't be able to hear me gasping for air. She's too busy talking shit inside with Susana.

Yes! It's all they've done since we got here!

They have like an Olympian-level stamina for talking about other people...

Earlier, the second we got in, Mom started just randomly telling Susana about how she doesn't agree with the IUD treatment that the doctor suggested for my endometriosis.

Um, why are we talking about this?

It's important that you see I'm not the only one who disagrees, Luciana. And maybe if somebody else says it, maybe you'll start to believe me!

But she kept calling the IUD a DUI. So Susana's face was getting more and more worried, as Mom started walking around saying: Luciana's DUI this! And Luciana's DUI that! That I'm too young, too underdeveloped, and I just need to start working out and losing more weight.

Elena, that is heartbreaking. She's so young.

I know. That's what I said!

Poor Susana was then looking over at me like, either (1) Help me or (2) You're a fucking monster. So after a couple more minutes, I had to be like, Ma—it's an IUD, not a DUI.

And Mom was like, Sí sí! She knows!

But Susana so didn't.

So then thanks to Mom, I had to clear up to Susana and Wifebeater during dinner that I hadn't turned into an alcoholic between my junior and senior years. *My mother is just confused. Thanks for understanding. And the potatoes are delicious.*

Even though it's starting to sound like a really good idea!

Since Mom is still hiding the Advil from me!

Yes, dude. She still won't even let me take ONE.

Why not?! I'm in pain!

Because Advil destroys our organs. Don't you read the news? You're being ridiculous.

And you know that whole aspirin-allergy story?

The one where Mom said that my face blew up when I was five years old? Because Abue had given me an aspirin to stop me from crying over a headache?

Yes, well, it was fake. Mom made the whole thing up. Psychotically. To stop me from ever taking a painkiller.

And you wanna know how I found out?

A few weeks ago, when the birth control stopped helping and my cramps got really bad, I was in so much pain that I downed four whole Advils. In the blink of an eye. Because I told myself that whatever anaphylactic shock I entered, was probably going to be way less painful than my fucking period. *It's fine. Just do it. Your entire lower half is already on fire.*

But then I panicked.

And ran into Mom's room sobbing. Telling her that I was sorry and that I didn't want to die...expecting a full-blown beatdown and lecture. But instead, she just waved me away saying, Ay, Luciana—I told you that years ago so you wouldn't depend on a pill every time you got sick. *How can you still believe that story? What fool would give aspirin to a five-year-old? And Advil is a completely different drug. It's MUCH worse.*

So now, ever since Mom discovered that I am fearless and generous with my NSAIDs, she hides them from me all over the house.

Give them back! Those were expensive!

Last week, I even found a new pack I bought in the freezer.

Yeah, lol. She thinks they're like equivalent to meth or something.

But why would I even do drugs at Susana's house?!

Her machista-ass husband would just try to hit me too!

What? It's true?

He already looks at me weird for not being girly...

And Mom said that he got mad at Susana recently for having ‘sexually suggestive songs’ on her phone. How do you think he’s going to react to a drug-dealing LESBIAN, Mari?

Wow.

It’s sooo cool that our family wanted to save money so bad that they evacuated us to an abuser’s house. So cool.

And Mom is fake as hell too! Because just last year, she was sending messages to half of Colombia, calling Ernesto a good-for-nothing hijo de puta and malparido. Talking all crazy about how he finally hit Susana this time—how he hit her good—and how now he’s taking everything. *Even the kids.* And moving into his sister’s house down by the beach. *Just like we all said he would.*

But now what?

At the dinner table she’s just like, Ernesto, hey sweetie! Could you pass me the ketchup? And how’s the new job?!

Susana told me that you’re liking it...That’s so great. Oh no, no, sit down. Don’t get up. We’re not done catching up yet! Should we take a group pic?

Oh he’ll be right back, Mom. He’s just checking on his guns.

Shh! Will you cut it out? This is hard enough for me as it is. I’m just trying to keep things light and keep you safe. Why don’t you go outside and call your sister?

So now I guess I have to add fucking AMNESIA to the list of things these bitches have.

Cuz they love to traumatize you and then be like, Oh my god? What? Relax...

The only reassuring thing that’s happened, that tells me I didn’t make this all up, is that Ernesto has looked very stressed whenever one of us walks by.

Yes. Kind of like a strung-out opossum.

On the side of the road playing dead.

Kind of like he’s just waiting for one of us to snap out of whatever sedated state we’re in and jam two forks into his ugly head.

I'm sorry! But that's how dramatic he's being!

Every time I got up from the dinner table, he flinched and grabbed onto the side!

I literally wanted to scream, Can you CHILL, Wifebeater? I'm too busy trying to find the fucking Advil!

Luciana, wow. You've gotten so much bigger since I saw you last.

Ugh. Thanks.

Oh yeah. And then he called me fat and ugly like three separate times.

While still also somehow sounding like a predator.

And you look...different too. Your style has changed.

Well, I was like fourteen. So that's good.

Sure, sure. You're certainly not daddy's little girl anymore!

Hmm. Could you pass me that fork?

Mom was obviously then pinching me under the table the whole time, whispering desperately at me to 'Please. Do not. Engage. Luciana.'

But you wanna know what pissed me off?

What I realized—instantly—in that moment?

It's that Ernesto sucks because he reminds me of ANOTHER creep I also had to see.

Live and in the flesh this week...

And I'll give you a hint: It involved an oil change.

Yes! Good job! Marco from Toyota.

That fucker STILL works there.

Yup. And he had me fighting for my life again this week at like two in the afternoon.

I also even tried telling Mom no this time—that I didn't want to take the van in for an oil change. Because she always takes forever to pick me up, and then I always end up getting cornered and harassed.

But when I told her that it was Marco, specifically, who acts like a creep, she was just like, Oh, that guy? He's so tiny. Why don't you kick him the balls?

Are you serious? So you don't care? And you want me to respond with violence?

No, Luciana. I'm saying I'm shocked that you'd stoop this low when you're lazy and you don't want to do something.

Wow...Can you just say that one more time for me? Please? Into the phone.

No. Stop recording.

And I was so fucking mad at her, that I just jumped in the van and told myself I'd go Live on Instagram if one of those fuckers locked me in their office.

That way I could look into the phone camera and say, See, Mom! I was right!

And guess what, Mari? I'm sure glad I had my phone ready!

Because the second I got to Toyota, Marco came slithering on out...

Mm-hmm.

All schmoozy and smiley. Running his hand down my back saying, Don't worry, mama, I got you. Winky face. *Just leave me the keys.*

The whole thing pissed me off so much that I couldn't even say anything back.

I just stomped over to the waiting area and started texting Mom.

Okay, I'm ready. Come.

Hello? Where are you?

You better be driving, Mom. It's been twenty minutes.

OMG. YOU SEE? I TOLD YOU THIS WOULD HAPPEN.

ELENA. ANSWER ME. I AM NOT WALKING.

And after about a million texts, she finally called me back and said, 'Ya deja el show, Luciana. I'm on my way.'

But what happened, you ask? While I sat there and waited?

Bingo. Exactly what I said was gonna.

Marco walked right on up.

Hey, you. Your ride got lost?

No. My mom is coming.

And he told me that he could give me a ride—but we wouldn't be going home.

YES.

‘WE WOULDN’T BE GOING HOME,’ MARI.

Out loud. In front of everybody.

I don’t know, I must have crossed my legs tighter. I don’t remember what I did.

All I could think about was just SCREAMING at Mom in her face, because I knew she was taking forever just to see if I got annoyed and walked home and got exercise.

Mom. I’m not playing your little games. Get here. RIGHT NOW.

But joke’s on her.

Because she was like five seconds away from being one of those moms on TV, begging whoever took their child to please let them come home. *AY, SEÑORES, POR FAVOR. ELLA ES DEBIL. NO HACE EJERCICIO. DEJENLA EN PAZ! DEVUELVANME LA NIÑA.*

And she’d probably say something super fucked up too...Like, She’s just not in the best shape, you guys! Bring her back! She can’t handle the abduction!

What’s more infuriating though is that I know she thought it was ‘great’ that a guy was ‘giving me attention.’

What’s wrong with Marco? He could be cute? He has a job and is only a few years older than Mari.

Um, he’s inappropriate and makes me uncomfortable?

She LOVES when guys say shit to me, dude. Don’t lie.

Some weirdo could catcall me in the parking lot, and she’d still be like, Well that was sweet! He probably likes your smile! *He just asked to fuck my asshole, Mom.*

So she totally knew what she was doing—leaving me there to wait.

In her eyes, Toyota doubles up as a potential workout and her own DIY conversion therapy.

She was probably just sitting at home thinking, This is great! If Luciana can just feel wanted by ‘the right guy,’ then maybe...just maybe...she won’t mean what she said when she came out.

Pathetic, lol.

Actually—it’s fucking depressing, is what it is.

And a very long, hard road ahead for me.

So let's stop talking about this before I get mad again. I suddenly feel like I could run inside and take Ernesto.

It's true, Mari! Why are you defending her?

It's the same reason she lets Nico sleep over whenever Dad's at the farm. She hopes one night we'll just fuck!

Yes. There's been so many times when I've come downstairs and she's been like, Welllll youuu'reeee in a goooood moooood.

What? No, I'm not.

Okay. Nico is just a friend—sorry.

He really is, Mom. Can you stop? It's so weird when you do that.

And it's even more ridiculous she won't acknowledge the boy is gay!

Nico has a purple satin pajama set...

He waxes his eyebrows more than me...

He screams at the sight of a soccer ball, and we are each other's only friend!

No, Mari. I'm not saying 'YoU'rE gAy' if you do those things. I'm just saying it's remarkable that these people unsubscribe from stereotypes the second they're no longer convenient for them.

Like, Mom has asked me multiple times why Nico's voice sounds 'like that,' and I don't have the heart to tell her. All I can do is just stare and beg her three homophobic brain cells to wake up and enter.

No, absolutely not. There's no point in telling her.

Do you not remember how coming out to her went? The Great Fall of Her Empire of 2015?

Yes. Sophomore year. When I told her that I liked girls and she didn't go to work for like two weeks. Exactly.

You were there, dude!

She literally threw herself on the floor, grabbed my foot, and started stomping on her own neck with it saying, WHO. YOU. ARE. IS. KILLING. ME.

Mom! Let me go! Everything is going to be okay!

What part of that gives you 'some hope'?

She wouldn't even talk about it! She just woke up one day and then pretended like it never happened.

Mari, what is she doing?

I don't know. I think she's finally showering?

I'm scared.

Me too. Stay in the room.

Terrifying...Just terrifying.

I'm getting hives now just thinking about it.

She literally made it painfully clear that I wasn't allowed to tell anyone I was gay, and then weeks later, she was just like, What do you mean? Tell them what? *No, nothing.*

And no one has said a word since.

Incredible.

If nothing else, the woman has range.

Because she's truly an amazing architect of her own reality.

I just wish she'd use her powers for good.

Instead of all that...And now pretending like Hurricane Irma is a great opportunity to sightsee.

What if we drove all the way west? To New Orleans? That could be fun! How far is that?

Um. I don't think you'd like the crowd there, Mom.

Oh yeah. Her denial is flaring.

Big-time, baby.

She wants to keep driving to Mississippi and beyond now, like some half-assed teen tour, even though Panama City is already out of Irma's 'Cone of Destruction.' All because she wants to go to some Civil War museum she found online.

During the hurricane, Mom?!

Why not? There's nothing else to do.

That's what people do during hurricanes. Nothing! To stay safe.

And normally, this would be a huge fight between me and her, about her delusions, but since I don't want to be near Ernesto any longer, I told her that I'd consider the Civil War museum.

Fine. I'll go. But as long as you promise to only speak English to me in there. I'm not surviving Florida just to die in the Deep South. I should at least TRY to get into college first.

Good point. Let's visit Elvis Presley's birthplace instead.

But I'm telling you, dude. She's treating this whole thing like a vacation now.

Whenever she's not worrying about Abue, she's just looking up national parks online.

And she hasn't stopped yelling about how we never go anywhere, because Pa is always at the farm, and how now she's going to make this trip QUOTE worth it END QUOTE. If it's the 'last thing' she does. Wait.

I was like, Okay...interesting take on a natural disaster...

Wait. Is this why you wanted Abue to come so bad? You're gonna turn this into a cross-country road trip?

You don't know how lucky we are, Luciana. To have this safety—and this car. With just enough money, and our health. Not everybody has that! We need to embrace and explore this world with every chance we get! It's what people fought for.

Oh my god. Please get off the Civil War museum website.

This is coming from my heart! Life is short.

I agree! And you have me wasting it by doing YouTube workouts!

I still can't believe you only missed this drama by just a few weeks...

Evacuating with most of the Florida Peninsula would have been such a beautiful way to end your summer vacation.

No? Why not?

Think of all the fun stories you'd have for your freaky little sorority retreats!

Oh, c'mon. I know they LOVE hearing about how Abue thinks that you're away at college converting to a new religion.

Luciana. Come here. Look—why do they pose like that? In Mari's photos?

I don't know. She said they have to try out different formations. Apparently they meet on Sundays to practice.

*And she pays for that? I thought your generation didn't like the church.
I know. It's absurd. She already has a sister!*

In a way, you'd think that joining a sorority to be around hot girls would be more of a ME thing to do. But if there's anything that I've learned about you recently, it's that you're full of surprises.

Yes. Just like how you're gonna ditch us next summer for an unpaid internship at the White House.

No, don't lie to me! Mom already spilled the beans! She said you were considering it!

She is?

I think so. But she's scared to tell you, Nana. That's not right. You have to be more supportive of your sister. Be proud! She said those internships are very difficult to come by.

Omg. You guys should be more supportive of ME. I'm constantly kept in the dark here!

It's fine...I just wish you would have told me first yourself.

Finding out through Mom sucks.

It just strengthens her idea that I'm 'difficult to talk to.'

When really—you all just say difficult things to hear!

And September is already so violent!

I don't need additional stress here.

Um, because it's the beginning of school? Have you not heard anything I've said? I'm preparing to white-knuckle through every class until I pass out!

Plus, it's peak Virgo season. But we can't get into that.

You don't respect my religion.

Hold on...

How do you know that I'm taking Environmental Science this semester?

Omg.

Because Mom TOLD YOU?

To talk to my TEACHERS?

So they 'PUSH ME HARDER' this year?

Jesus.

It's like the woman doesn't even know me.

First of all, if Mom really cared, she wouldn't have me organizing rendezvous across all fifty states.

But second of all, and more importantly, my learning disabilities are not taken seriously. And THAT'S the reason behind my GPA. Not 'distractions,' or a 'lack of motivation,' like you all seem to believe.

I have test-taking anxiety, Mari! I've told you this!

I need accommodations but no one believes me!

And you know what? Thank you. Because this just helped me decide that there's no hope. No one listens.

I'm just gonna go to community college, like every other happily underachieving second child, and then I'm gonna launch myself into a missile, into outer space, and forget that school ever even happened. Okay?

Whatever.

Just don't bring up my grades ever again. That'll ruin my senior year.

I'm serious, Mari. I already have to worry about things like 'homecoming,' and 'buying a dress for prom.' All so Mom thinks that I'm getting finger-blasted at the school gym instead of taking edibles at the park with Nico.

So no more little side huddles with her about my classes and teachers! I've got bigger fish on my plate.

Look...I promise that once this fake road trip is over, I will sit down and 'map out my goals for the year.'

Yes. Because this may come as a surprise to you all—but I actually WANT to graduate.

I might have very little college options, but I fucking refuse to spend another minute in that cesspool of Pornhub and Chick-fil-A.

Sometimes I wonder if they make high school so bad so you do anything BUT stay.

Yes, Mari. I still even hate English class.

That one is never going to change.

Because, dude! They have us reading things like *The Handmaid's Tale*! And for what? I'm from FLORIDA. I live that shit every day.

Oh my god...

Of course. You loved that book?

Cool. You don't have enough pain in your life.

You and every other bottle-blond girlboss.

Okay, well, I think you've officially overheated me now by thinking about school.

I need to get out of this car before I actually suffocate.

Rosy—let's go. Mari's ruined our safe space.

But wish me luck with Ernesto, though. Okay? I'm sure he's also a fan of *The Handmaid's Tale*.

I'm sure he's off in his room writing a spin-off right now.

Oh. And call the governor of Mississippi.

They don't know Elena Domínguez is coming."



Bájame el tono

“Hi.

We’re so tired, dude.

Has Mom explained the drama to you?

Yes. We’re at a rest stop now somewhere in Georgia.

Heading AWAY from Panama City and Mississippi.

In the complete opposite direction.

No, lol.

I’m not kidding.

Irma somehow changed course overnight and is suddenly right behind

us.

Excuse me? What do you mean?

I didn’t even know hurricanes could move that fast!

That’s because you don’t pay attention in school, Luciana.

ThAt’S bEcAuSe YoU dOn’T pAy AtTeNtIoN iN sChOoL.

*Do. Not. Mimic. Me. I’m functioning on no sleep and need to keep us
alive.*

Well, it all happened very suddenly this morning.

After we woke up at Susana’s house.

I had literally just opened my eyes—thrilled to see that we had survived the night—when the next thing I know, Ernesto is turning on the TV and the news is blasting: IRMA MOVING WEST NOW. BREAKING NEWS.

What?! Is this live? Ernesto, turn that up!

And off scrambling like little chickens we went...

Wait, are you serious, Mom? We actually have to leave now?

Yes! Did you not hear the news?! Get all of Rosy's stuff. We need to head north and east immediately.

But, why can't we just go home? We live on the east side?

We don't have time! We're too far north now. We won't be able to make it back before the storm hits. And if she changes paths again, we could get stuck in the middle. It's safest now to just keep going up.

Um, okay...But where are Susana and Ernesto going?

It doesn't matter! We'll find somewhere else to stay on the road. Go and pack up your things. But whatever you do—don't tell your grandmother. I'm not in a place to handle her gloating about being right.

And I didn't even realize it until Mom said it, but Irma not hitting South Florida directly now means that everything they said on the news was wrong.

I'm serious, Nana. Look at me—if your grandmother calls, do not pick up. She's going to be unbearable. She doesn't understand that this is about being safe instead of sorry. You don't take chances when it comes to your children's lives!

I'm still so confused...How could the meteorologists not see this coming?

Nature is beautiful! She can't be contained!

Omg. I need to get out of here.

That's exactly my plan.

Everyone was so caught off guard that even Ernesto fake-offered to make room for us at his aunt's house.

Elena, are you two going to be okay? They're saying it could look pretty bad most places now...We could always head over west to my aunt's place together.

Though, you could tell he was instantly relieved when Mom said that we didn't want to come.

No, that's okay. Thank you. We're gonna drive to the Carolinas. Luciana's never been to Charleston.

Charleston? Hmm. Okay then! I guess this is goodbye.

Once the shock wore off though, he just went back to his regular, paranoid self.

No, I'm serious, lol.

He kept dramatically holding the butter knife really close to his chest when we were all eating in the kitchen this morning before saying goodbye.

Ew. Why does he look like he's praying?

I don't know. Just hurry. We need to get on the road.

I can't, he's ruining my appetite.

Also, did you know that Mom has been putting chia and hemp seeds in her arepas, Mari?

What the fuck is that?

Yes, it's disgusting. And sacrilegious.

And they're the only food that she ever lets me eat. So can you do something about that? I'm going to starve here!

Wait, Ma, these taste different. What's in them?

Good things. Eat up.

They look weird...

Why do you care? You'll put anything in your mouth.

Aw. Did it make you feel so good to say that?

Just eat it. We need the fuel for our drive.

I gave mine to Rosy and she wouldn't even lick it, Mari. That's how bad they are.

Will you please just talk to her?! I will lose my mind if she has any 'weight-loss plans' for me on this trip. That'll really push me over the edge.

Thank you. It's important that you do your part from afar.

And to answer your question, no. Nothing else happened with Ernesto, lol.

We eventually just got our things and said goodbye.

Mom was like, Just smile and wave as I back up the car, Luciana. But don't break eye contact—he needs to know that we're not a threat, but still strong.

He's so creepy, dude. I feel like he gets off on scaring people.

Of course! It's how you get control. Why do you think I've been doing my squats and lunges?

And now I'm standing here, looking around at this rest stop, staring at all these people and wondering: Which one of you is the Ernesto of your family?

Which one of you should I avoid at the checkout line?

But more importantly, which one of you is the me? And should we all ride together?

Oh, shit. Hold on.

Rosy finally pooped.

I need to go find a bag somewhere to pick it up.

Ew. Of course I'm gonna, Mari!

I'm not a barbarian.

Even though I'm probably gonna get lightheaded and pass out from bending down and standing up...Since this heat is fucking unbearable...

And don't even get me started on the traffic!

Because all it takes is just one idiot texting on their phone to rear-end an elderly couple—and the whole day is shot.

You get stuck with like two extra hours of traffic right there.

And I'm seriously on the brink of insanity here.

Because every time we drive by an accident, Mom feels the inexplicable need to say, You see that? That's exactly why you should be careful on the road, Luciana.

None of that speeding you do in the minivan!

Like, suddenly it's MY fault these random people got in an accident.

The whole car is totaled. Do you see that? And he's so young...Dios mío. You're gonna kill me with your driving one day! As parents we suffer!

You're more dangerous than me! You're FaceTiming Dad.

No. I'm showing him the trees.

Yes, Mari. I am doing my breathing exercises.

But it's hard! Go tell her.

And she didn't even want to stop anywhere!

I had to beg her like five times just to pull over and get some food.

Can we PLEASE eat something before I faint? I couldn't eat any breakfast this morning thanks to your disturbing arepas.

And she still hasn't eaten anything yet. By the way.

She's too busy doing her planks over by the picnic tables...

You're scaring all the kids, Mom. Including me.

No, I don't know where we are. And I don't think I can handle the answer to that question.

I've had to just cede control of our trajectory over to Mom because it's the path of least resistance.

Yes. Dad is also worried that we're gonna get lost and end up in Canada.

But don't worry. Mom has reassured him and us multiple times that she's much smarter than him.

Jaime, please. Just because your English is better doesn't mean that I can't read. I know what the signs say! And I have Luciana.

Have you talked to him today though?

Yeah. Poor guy. He's still preparing for the worst.

He said he's less worried now that Irma isn't gonna hit the farm directly, but he's still sleeping there just in case.

You never know what could happen. They get angry when they hit the ground.

Well, I hope she comes quickly. Because I can't handle another day alone with Mom.

No, Abue is still not concerned, lol.

About anything.

I just got off the phone with her and she was reading me the lotto numbers.

I bought double the tickets since everybody left! My chances have never been higher.

Great. Then will you Uber me home with the prize money? It's the least you could do for leaving me here.

No, stay with your mother. She needs a leash.

But why do I have to do it!

And even though she didn't say it, like Mom was worried she would—I know that Abue feels validated that Irma is heading west now.

I'm sure she's gonna be bragging about it soon for weeks.

Which is fine, I don't care. I just wish she was here.

Or you! You're both Mom's perfect little handlers.

It's true, Mari. Mom and I are the two most passive-aggressive bitches in the family! Why would anyone let us do this alone?!

I piss her off just by sitting here...

If someone heard the way you talk to me, they'd be shocked to hear you're a mother.

Why would anyone be listening to our conversations, Luciana?

I don't know. You always listen to mine.

Please. I have better things to do.

Like? Evacuate for a storm that was never gonna happen?

Listen, we're all on edge today. Let's just try to keep our cool. Try some of your stretches.

Earlier, she even told me that it was rude to listen to my music with headphones in while she drives.

So I was like, Okay? Would you rather I blast 'I PICK THE WORLD UP AND IMA DROP IT ON YOUR FUCKING HEAD' out loud? In the car?

And she said yes.

So I did.

And then we both silently sat in the car for two hours listening to Lil Wayne.

Oh—and you wanna know how she broke the silence?

By telling me that she had recently read on Facebook that Starbucks boils cow blood and puts it in their coffee now. *That's awesome, Mom. Thank you for that.* But that I wasn't allowed to tell anyone. Because they

had recently committed to recyclable cups, and that was a step in the right direction.

Ugh, and I'm drinking Starbucks right now. Why would you say that?

Exactly! Does it taste like metal?

Hmm. It kind of does...

I knew it! I'm telling you, Luciana, eyes peeled. But shh.

Cow blood or not though, it wouldn't have mattered.

Because I was already choking on my own blood from grinding my jaw. Since we were later sitting in standstill traffic again, next to the one millionth anti-abortion billboard we saw.

What is wrong with those people? These are so graphic!

I know. I wish they had that much passion for recycling.

The traffic is so bad because no one knows where to go, Mari! Are you not paying attention?

The west coast of Florida wasn't prepared, and most of the east coast had already traveled over there, but then Irma U-turned—so now everyone's all jammed up and trying to get out!

We're even at this massive rest stop now, with like four hundred gas pumps, and the attendant said that it's still gonna take ONE HOUR to wait in line and fill up the car.

Which is horrible news.

Because I've already seen way too many Tallanasty rednecks on their motorcycles for comfort.

Omg. Is that one eating gator jerky? I'm so hungry that I could try some.

I heard they put cow blood in those too.

Whoa. I think he just strapped a six-pack of Natty Light to his back...Is this Mari's future husband?

Yes, I know you're thirsty for rednecks, Mari. Please don't remind me.

Just try to keep it in your pants.

I'm also curious though—where do all the old people go? Like the West Palmers and the Boca brats? They can't handle this Ironman journey. I barely can. I almost passed out carrying two bottles of water outside in this heat!

And all the animals! What happens to them?

Poor Rosy starts shaking at the sight or sound of any F-150 truck. And now she's refusing to walk anywhere because there's a mob of children outside Cracker Barrel.

How fun! I love their gift shop. We should eat there.

Hell no. I'm not going inside...

You know, for someone so concerned about others being respectful and accepting—you're very judgmental. You should open your mind! Try something new.

You didn't even want to stop here!

I WISH Advil was meth so I could handle this situation.

And from what I've learned...this was probably Rick Scott's plan all along!

To injure Floridians!

Just so he could buy another hospital and charge a left eye for each bed!

Yes, cuz let me tell you something about your dear Voldemort Scott... since you were obviously TOO BUSY to learn anything before you worked for him.

No. I don't care that he was 'just the governor' and you needed the internship.

Do you wanna know what Rick Scott was doing before he ran for office?

He was the CEO of the largest 'for-profit' healthcare company in the country, Mari.

As in...he literally BOUGHT hospitals so he could profit off sick people as his business.

Like...that's just so weird! Who chooses that?

As a career?!

Oh, and he didn't just stop there—hold on.

He went even further and then DEFRAUDED Medicare and Medicaid—the actual programs that were trying to HELP the sick people.

Bad boy, right?

The federal government thought so too.

The Department of Justice fined his ass about two billion fucking dollars. And it went on to be the largest Medicare fraud settlement in U.S. history.

But it STILL wasn't enough to stop him from running for office... Despite exaggerating patients' illnesses for money.

All so you could one day grow up and serve as his intern.

So cool, right? History rocks!

Like—did you even BOTHER to look him up before you worked for him?! Because I learned all that from a quick skim on Wikipedia.

Ew? Obviously?

I'm not just walking around with the personal histories of Florida Republicans in my head.

I had to look him up for ammo earlier when Mom started giving me another one of her lectures.

You know, Nana, I was thinking. Maybe you should follow in Mari's footsteps and do something political...Like activism, or public service. That could be fun? Right? Maybe Mari still knows someone working in the governor's office. And they could help get you a summer job. Wouldn't that be cool?!

Elena. Do I even LOOK like I'm fit for government work? You're throwing spaghetti at the wall here...We need to start heading home. This evacuation sounds like it's getting to you too.

What's worse is that when I told Mom about Voldemort's fraud schemes, though—she didn't even care.

She was just like, So what? Do you know what the government does to people back where we're from, Luciana? *They just shoot you! They don't bother with hospitals!*

Yeah, lol. You could say we're losing it.

Cuz if Mom thinks that I should go into politics, then this is officially a code red now.

So Irma needs to hurry up before Mom signs me up to work with the Proud Boys at the next rest stop.

I even tried making a joke earlier, about how an alligator was probably causing traffic and blocking the street, but Mom took it seriously and was like: You see? You're great at lying! That's perfect for government! I'm sure it's the same alligator that was looking for you the other night.

Oh my god. You're still not over that?

Why do you get so irritated if you insist that you're telling the truth?

Because I AM telling the truth, Mom. You just don't believe me!

Only liars get worked up...

Yes, Mari. She was referring to the night that Nico and I successfully snuck out and used our fake IDs at Ladies' Night for the first time. But then—surprise!

I got in trouble on the drive home because there was a giant alligator blocking the road.

Wait. Is this for real?

As if the cops pulling me over wasn't trauma enough!

Omg. Am I hallucinating?

No. Everything with the cops turned out fine, Mari. Relax.

I wouldn't be breathing here right now if it hadn't.

The real problem was that I had hidden Nico's open bottle of RUM in the car's backseat pocket, so I was freaking out around the officers the whole time.

And because I knew that if I didn't get home before Mom or Dad woke up, I'd be in serious trouble.

Luciana Domínguez. Where were you? The sun is coming up.

Mom...I swear...and please don't scream...but there was an alligator in the middle of the street. I couldn't drive around it. I promise I'm not making this up! I was just hanging out at Nico's...and then I couldn't come home.

My god. Have you been drinking?

So now she loves being petty, and pretending like I was out partying all night and made the whole thing up.

And while technically, yes, I was, if it wasn't for that alligator—I wouldn't have gotten caught!

So it pisses me off!

The rum bottle wasn't even mine, Mari. Stop crying.

I told you it was Nico's!

That night I was literally just driving home, being a responsible sober angel, thinking about the hot bartender named Yessi with the shaved head and the piercings, doing my gay shit in secret like our freaking mother wants. When all of a sudden I hear, 'Ma'am, please pull over and turn off your vehicle' shattering through the sad, scared little neurons in my brain and ears.

Remain seated inside. There is a dangerous animal up the road.

Fuck.

I had to tell myself: Luciana, calm down. You are sober. *You are eighteen, and you shouldn't have that open container in your backseat, but you shoved it really far down, they probably can't see it, and you weren't even fucking speeding. So you're going to be fine! This isn't your fault! Just don't show them your fake. And remember—you are sober.*

Even though I hadn't had a drop of anything all night!

So I don't know why I was gaslighting myself.

Because Nico and I had spent that entire time at Ladies' Night trying to be vigilantes...scrolling through these bizarre-ass websites that we had found on our phones. All because we had heard this one guy tell bartender Yessi that he had 'recently joined a new community of men looking for Latin American women.'

Nice, that sounds illegal. Let's ask him for the link and look it up.

Omg. We could be FBI heroes...

I know. And then I wouldn't have to go to college! But what do they want with those crazies anyway? I'm around TOO many Latin American women...

You know what! Your mom, sister, and grandmother are extremely hot.

Okay? But have you talked to them?

It was absurd, Mari, lol.

The websites we found had these articles titled like 'Secret Hacks to Understanding Colombians.'

Poor things. They're gonna need a lot more than just that.

Yes. And one of my favorites was like, ‘You should know that Colombians are very lively and spirited creatures. But because they are very excitable, their dissatisfaction and irritation can sometimes feel disproportionate to the issue at hand. And this is especially true during physically painful situations. As a small cut can often appear excessively agonizing.’ *So if the world feels like it’s crumbling to your Colombian partner, have some patience. To them—it absolutely is.*

I know...lol.

Then this other one emphasized how Colombians will ‘prioritize their parents and family over everything.’

They were practically like, Sorry, my dude—but it’s family or death now. You can forget date nights, alone time, or any other fantasy you had about having a healthy relationship with your in-laws. They are now your main priority. And especially over your own spouse, but DEFINITELY over yourself.

I kinda wanna send this to my teachers...Do you think it’ll help them understand why I’m failing?

My other favorite one said: ‘When you marry, you have to remember that Colombian women can become very resentful and difficult.’ They’ll want massive wealth, constant attention, and an enormous family. And they will speak way too much Spanish around you while on the phone. But do not ever say this is a problem for you—or they will destroy you and your home. And then no one will find your body, because they will have stuffed and preserved it in their closet. Where they will still occasionally walk in to yell at you.

Okay...c’mon. These guys deserve a Pulitzer.

And all the websites also somehow had a really good rating on Trustpilot?

Which is weird.

I know.

And way more surprising than the whole-ass alligator.

But the point is—Nico and I were in that internet hole for hours. And by the time we were done, it was last call and the lights were coming on.

Damn it! We didn't get to talk to anybody.

It's for the best. I have stress sweat all over from reading those articles.

And because Nico didn't want to just dump the rum bottle he had snuck in, we stuck it in the car's backseat pocket and hoped for the best.

Make sure it doesn't spill though. My mom has the nose of a great white.

But then, of course, stupid Nico forgot to grab it when I dropped him off. And then I ran into ten fucking cop cars on the way home.

Since, duh Luciana, they were all out trying to corral a giant alligator.

On the one night I get to sneak out and be around other gay people. Fantastic. This is exactly what I get for 'trying to be out' and go to Ladies' Night. Fuck your advice, Nico!

Thankfully, the cops didn't search the car or ask me to step out.

They just told me to wait on the side of the road until they figured out what to do with the gator.

Which, I quickly found out, can take a really long time.

Um, how much longer, Officer?

Almost done. Hang in there.

You're not going to shoot it, right?

No, ma'am.

Okay, thanks. Sorry if I'm acting weird. It's just...my mom.

But when I finally got a good look at the poor animal, it looked so sad and pissed off.

Me too, big guy. I'm sorry.

Like so completely and utterly over it.

Because the cops had like six stadium lights on him to make sure they tracked his every move.

Me fucking too.

Y colorín, colorado, by the time I got home, Dad was already getting up for work.

Ugh. This is exactly what I was trying to avoid!

No, he wasn't mad. Miraculously.

He was just confused.

Luciana? What are you doing?

Uh, I fell asleep hanging out at Nico's...And when I woke up, things didn't go as planned.

He asked if I was okay, and then I just caved and told him everything. Including the whole alligator story.

Whoa—really? Was it big? We've had a few snapping at the dogs on the farm. You didn't go near it, did you?

No, I didn't get near it!

Sorry. You hung lizards on your ears as a kid.

That's because Mari thought it was funny!

He believed me. Which was nice.

And he didn't care about the Ladies' Night thing.

But then he told me to come up with something more convincing. Or Mom would just assume that I was out sneaking around up to some gay shit in the middle of the night.

Which obviously—I was. But still! Seriously?!

I can't believe that woman is so paranoid, that she'd think I'd lie about facing an apex predator.

Doesn't mean you have to like it. But she's your mother.

Maybe Mom is right though...

And it's the same gator out here now.

Looking for me in the Georgia marshes.

Trying to warn me about something sinister...Or tell me some scandalous secret that's unfolding nearby.

Like, Hey! Your mom knows you've thought about downloading Tinder!

Or: Turn around! Irma told me she's heading this way!

Or maybe the gator's just evacuating because he's being fucking reasonable.

Maybe he's seen enough of the people down here.

Maybe he's running because he married a Colombian!"



Ponte un suéter

“Oh my god.

Mari? Hello? Are you there?

Finally! Where have you been?

I don't care that it's 'rush week,' Marisabel. Don't be pathetic.

And didn't you already do that last year?

I thought you had panic attacks for like seven whole days?

Wow...

Now it's YOUR turn to recruit/torture other people?

That's dark, dude.

But, hello! Do you even care?

If we're in danger here?!

I haven't heard from you or Abue in like two whole days.

Which is SHOCKING.

Since you bitches are normally driving me up the wall.

And now I only have like twenty minutes to talk while Mom's inside the grocery store, since you refused to call me any earlier. And maybe even LESS if they don't have organics.

So you need to zip it. Cuz I have a lot to say.

YES, Mari. We're in a crisis.

No, not with Irma.

Mom is having a MIDLIFE CRISIS. Courtesy of this evacuation. And she's attempting to live out her dreams as the host of the Discovery Channel.

Yes. Listen to this.

You know how Irma already made landfall?

And we can all finally go back home?

Well...Mom wants to KEEP ON DRIVING EVEN FARTHER. To 'extend the trip' and 'see the world.'

What? Why would we do that? It's safe to go back now. And we're already so far! Poor Rosy has lost like five pounds since we left from the anxiety.

Because there's always more to see, Luciana! Don't you want to take advantage of this time while school is out? You have the opportunity to explore the world here! Without any repercussions! You could even maybe finally find something to write about for your college applications.

The world?! We're in NORTH CAROLINA, MOM. I miss my room!

Yes. We're still in Wilmington, North Carolina, thank god.

But that's only because I got on my knees and begged her to not go anywhere else. Since she woke up this morning on an existential warpath.

Why are you so lazy, Luciana?! All you ever want to do is complain and be on your phone! I didn't raise you this way. That's horrible. You don't even want to stop somewhere on the way home?

No, Mom. Everything is boarded up! There's nothing else to see. Charleston, Savannah, Jacksonville—they all got hit. You were just telling me how Irma ran up Florida and spread! It feels WRONG to go and visit now.

But why do we have to keep living our lives defined by the rules of other people? Go when they say go. Stop when they say stop. Work work work. Pay pay pay. I'm sick of it! We need to do something for ourselves for once!

What the hell has gotten into you? What are you talking about?

And since you didn't pick up the phone, or assist me with backup, I had to sit through a whole-ass speech about how I'm so sloth-like and uncultured. And how I need to 'grow up' and 'appreciate my life more,' because other kids would have KILLED to spontaneously stop their responsibilities and do this.

You sound insane, dude. And I have gone along with your antics all week, but I'm done now. We shouldn't even be leaving Abue alone by herself for this long! And what about Dad? Isn't he worried? Doesn't he want us to come home?

They're fine! The outskirts of Irma barely caused flooding. And your father said he's okay, and that he's going to check on your grandmother later. We never get this kind of freedom, Nana! So what do you say? One more city to check off our list?

What list?!

Real life is coming, honey. And it only gets harder from here.

I honestly couldn't even tell if she was projecting, or trying to teach me a lesson.

Or if she had maybe just started drinking for the first time in her life...

But things became a little more clear when she started aggressively telling me to be grateful for the ability to move around and learn new things. 'Because not many people have the privilege!'

Luciana, you have to take every opportunity this planet gives you, okay? Do you hear me? Before the rest of life sets in. Trust me. I wish I would have traveled more and done more things. Before getting married and having kids. And your grandmother? Please. Look at her! That woman barely leaves the house! Only to the pharmacy for medication and beauty supplies. And now she can't even be bothered to return my phone calls. It's not normal to be that indifferent to the world! Do you want to end up like her?! With no sense of wonder? She was just never taught it, you know. Sadly. Because her mother? Fernanda? Forget it. That poor woman never even had parents. She got stuck raising kids her whole life! Tragedy after tragedy. You know what happened to her husband, right?

Yes.

First, she was an orphan—

I said I know, Mom! I've heard this lecture before. I want to go HOME.

No, listen. It's important that you know the details. You're getting older now and it's your senior year. You need to start understanding how lucky you are...Because you were only ever expected to be a kid! And now you get to grow up and do something beautiful with your life! You should take that more seriously, Luciana. You have no idea about the sacrifices the women in our family have had to make.

Omg. Isn't that a good thing?!

No. I think it's time that you do. Especially with how close you are to your grandmother...there's a few things that I want you to know. Mari didn't need me to push her like this, but you do.

And then Mom just started going off about Abue's mother, Fernanda, because you know she loves that whole fucking orphanage story. She swings it around like a bloody steak knife!

Except this time—it went a little different.

And I think that you're gonna wanna know, because it explains the current mental state of your mother. Who I'm gonna need you to call and calm down immediately.

And also, yes.

Some depressing shit about Abue.

That Mom rudely baited me with to listen.

Okay. You win. I'm listening. What do I need to know about Abue?

Your grandmother used to be soft...and artistic. Not like she is now. She was animated and energetic, and had many many goals and dreams. But unfortunately, life had other plans for her. And to fully understand what happened, you need to understand her mother—Fernanda. Because there's a small detail that you guys have never known. I didn't want you or Mari to judge, Lord knows you're both good at that. But times were different back then. And your great-grandmother just did what she had to do. Though it does explain some of your grandmother's resentment...But I think that Fernanda just had a hard life, so she had a hard exterior. And your

grandma was never able to accept that. Even though she turned out the same.

Look—I promise to tell you everything, as long as you also promise to call and tell Mom that we need to head back home TOMORROW.

Because I'm done with her shit, Mari. And I'm serious.

You need to tell her that this is over, and that I need time to settle back in before school.

Especially if she wants me to 'do something beautiful' with my life ever again!

DO IT, MARI. She listens to you!

And you fucking owe me. For leaving. And forgetting that I exist.

Thank you...I expect a call to Mom the second we hang up.

But now buckle up. Cuz this ride's about to get bumpy.

So—as we know, Fernanda was abandoned at birth, and she grew up an orphan in Colombia.

And while her years at the orphanage weren't remarkable per se—nothing too bad, nothing too good, just your average, run-of-the-mill, regular Catholic Colombian orphan days—Mom said they marked and defined her.

That was Fernanda. That's how she started her life: unexceptional and average. And that's probably why she never got adopted.

MOM! That's horrible. You can't say that.

People are horrible! It's the truth. They crave excitement. Pay attention.

The orphanage itself also had an average, under-the-radar existence. No scandals or secret famous children. Just nuns, long skirts, typical friendship drama, and ample, ample time to pray.

Until one day... 'Something extraordinary happened.'

I'm so scared for what you're about to say.

And on one hot Friday afternoon, while the sun shone through the church's stained-glass windows, someone delivered an anonymous donation of basketballs. Right to their door. *Completely by mistake!*

Which, according to Mom, was strange, yes.

But it was also fucking disastrous.

Because they were an all-girls orphanage, for Christ's sake!

They weren't allowed to get dirty or play outside with silly balls.

They had to spend their time inside. Doing housework and learning scripture. Not running around competing in useless games...

The delivery was not only an accident—it was tragic. Why tempt the girls with something so cruel? Something they were already forbidden to do?

So at first, the nuns didn't know what to make of their surprise delivery. Playing sports was against the rules, and the girls also only owned dresses! How were they supposed to run without a pair of shorts in sight?

Some of the nuns thought the balls could even be a message from God. A way for them to practice living with ungodly things from the outside world. And they themselves were curious! What would happen if the girls were exposed to this mystery toy? Would they turn away from their duties? Or toward?

But despite these concerns, they considered it.

And in an unprecedented move for all-girls Catholic orphanages worldwide—they let the girls play with the basketballs.

Oh shit.

And guess what, Mari? They fucking loved it.

The girls started doing their homework faster and eating their food quicker. Waking up each day more motivated and excited to play. Even finishing their prayers properly on the first try. Anything that could give them more time outside with the basketballs—they did it.

I told you, Luciana. Exercise stimulates endorphins.

Omg. Just continue with the story.

And while the nuns didn't understand, they were certainly impressed.

They thought, All this? Really? Over a bin of balls?

But what they didn't realize is that the basketballs meant more to the girls. They began to symbolize the larger world beyond the orphanage's walls. And the new possibility of things outside what they had been promised.

How do you know what the nuns said?! Or the girls?

Your grandmother's sister Luisa told me. After Fernanda told her. And she said that at one point, the girls even started playing in their underwear! To get rid of any extra cloth from their skirts. Isn't that brilliant?

No. That's really sad...

Exactly. Do you understand what I'm saying now? We have to chase every dream we can on this earth. Even if you don't have one—go find it! So many wanted more and lived with so little. But you get the chance to be something! So we should at least explore one more town...out of respect to them.

No. You're not gonna manipulate me with your sad orphanage story. What happened next? Get to the part about Abue.

And so because of all this sports drama, Mari, believe it or not, when Fernanda left the orphanage, she became a professional basketball player.

I'm kidding, lol. It was worse.

She met a man named Eduardo, our great-grandfather.

But what happened with the basketballs?

Nothing. Some big-shot priest came to visit and said they had to throw them all away.

And that's it?! After making the girls so happy? And everything they had done for them?

Yes. And that's another lesson for you: Never let another person dictate your life. It'll be the beginning of the end! Learn from my own mistakes! Your father wanted a family young, so I said yes. And now look at me! Only free to travel when the world pauses for a hurricane.

Well, that's not fair. You dictate mine.

That's different. I'm your mother.

And did you know that Fernanda met Eduardo while working as a seamstress?

Yes.

Mom said that once she was of age to leave the orphanage, Fernanda started taking on new sewing jobs at different stores all over town.

Fernanda's work was exceptional. It was one of the many skills she had learned from the nuns. And since she had liked to practice by fixing the

girls' dresses, by the time she left the orphanage, she had more experience as a tailor than any machine or man.

However, it was at one of these sewing jobs that the universe sealed her fate.

Which is nuts.

Because if she had just skipped work that day, I wouldn't be at a Motel 6 right now in North Carolina begging my mother not to kidnap me.

But as the story goes, Fernanda was apparently cleaning up her station at work one day...when an unexpected visitor walked through the door.

Let me guess? It was Eduardo. And Luisa told you that too.

Yes.

And when Eduardo walked in—Fernanda was startled at first.

She was taken by his deep eyes, yes, but she was mostly enthralled by his impeccably tailored suit!

She loved the way the seams extended perfectly across his shoulders. And how the buttonholes were handmade.

And once Eduardo caught her admiring gaze, he introduced himself. Telling Fernanda that he was there because he was told she did great work. And he needed nothing but the best hands on his newly imported dress shirts. *He proudly told her they had just been shipped there from India.*

But as the two began to chat, and Fernanda examined his shirts, Eduardo's focus switched almost immediately toward her.

He couldn't believe his friends had never mentioned how beautiful she was!

And Mom said something must have come over him, because he then asked Fernanda out right there. On the spot. Before she could even finish her sentence. *After laying eyes on the seamstress his friends had been talking about for months.*

Yes, Mari. I know this is your dream, lol.

But wait for it. Cuz the good fortune didn't last long.

Allegedly—Fernanda was in shock.

About the date, yes. But she also couldn't believe that Eduardo would lie to her, a seamstress, about the quality of his textiles!

She knew right away that his dress shirts hadn't been imported from India, like he had said. And that instead—they had been made with the fake materials that came from downtown. *She said she could tell by the way the collars felt.*

But unfortunately, for whatever reason, she decided not to correct him.

And despite this knowledge, and against her better judgment, she absurdly accepted Eduardo's invite.

Omg. She's worse than Mari. Those were obvious red flags!

Fernanda was lonely! And amused...She figured she'd need a lot more experience with men before finding a husband. So she told herself that it was okay, and that it would be practice. Just like the basketballs. For many more first dates in her big new world.

But did she regret it?

Yes. His lying didn't stop.

Before she knew it, Fernanda was enamored. Her naïve intentions fell by the wayside, and once they got to know each other, they both fell deeply in love.

Eduardo found Fernanda's independence mature and refreshing. Most girls at her age still lived with their parents. And Fernanda liked how Eduardo didn't care that she had no friends or family...The very thing she had been insecure about her whole life. She couldn't believe that he didn't think any less of her for being alone.

So shortly after, the two married and moved in together quickly. And 'We could assume the rest,' Mom said.

Not really?

He knocked her up!

But we'll get to Abue's birth in a second.

Because first—here's some background that you probably didn't know. Since you're clearly too obsessed with yourself to ask questions. *And because no one likes to talk about Eduardo. It's too painful for those of us still alive.*

You mean Abue and her sisters?

And the rest of us! It affects the whole family, you know...Why are you laughing?!

Nothing. You and Mari just love to make everything about yourselves.

So, Mom explained to me that Eduardo ran a small coffee farm in the countryside.

That he handled the business side of things, like production costs and land contracts, while also making sure that the farm met its monthly output goals.

And while the money wasn't always there, when it was, it would suffice.

But apparently, this wasn't enough for Fernanda. Who lived haunted by the fear of being 'poor again.' Every day.

Lol.

Stop laughing, Luciana! None of this is funny. She was traumatized.

I know. She just sounds like you. You act like we have to see the entire Bible Belt before the government takes our house.

Or before another hurricane comes and destroys everything! That's what I want you to learn out here. That we could lose everything—at any moment. And if you don't get that by now, I hope you're about to.

Mom then tried explaining that Fernanda lived with this fear because she thought that having no money was the reason her parents had left her at an orphanage.

She grew up thinking that money was the only thing that people needed to have a family. And she wasn't entirely wrong. But she mistook it for being the most important.

And Eduardo allegedly also carried his own grudge around wealth too.

His childhood sweetheart, the woman he loved before Fernanda, had been forbidden to marry him because of their class differences. *She was eventually shipped off by her family to marry another man in a better town. And Eduardo never looked at himself in the mirror the same way again.*

So together, with their shared pain and upbringings, once Fernanda and Eduardo got married, they became the bitter by-products of social class mobility.

And they had four children.

Hello, no contraception!

Which led to their family expenses really piling up. And created long periods of financial stress and instability.

Which ultimately gave birth to their real problem: Eduardo lying about their money issues and keeping it all to himself.

Fernanda was unaware of how bad things were getting financially. She was disappearing under the pressures of motherhood already, so Eduardo didn't want to worry her. But when his parents confessed that they were too broke and far away to help, destroying his only hope, Eduardo's secrets began to really add up. And slowly, over time, as Fernanda drowned in baby bottles and dirty diapers, their family accumulated the largest amount of money they had ever owed.

Which was apparently really bad?

Because Mom said that most men would rather be dead than in debt in their town.

One of them usually leads to the other.

And that this all became a serious problem when Eduardo started to skip payments to the landlord of his farm.

It was then that he realized that if he didn't fix things, he was going to lose it all. The landlord controlled their family's only source of income.

But Eduardo had his demons.

Because even though he knew how much trouble he was in—his fear and hopelessness just kept getting in the way.

Whenever he'd have a decent amount saved, ready to pay a part of his debt, he'd spiral to rock bottom thinking about how deep he was in. Or for exactly how long he would owe. And he'd say, Fuck it. There's no point. I'm gonna drink until I can't breathe.

I think he wanted to die. Or was hoping he would. Especially in their town back then. He had lost the only thing that people cared about.

I know he gets shot, Ma. I've heard this story. Can you get to what I need to know about Abue?!

No. I'm giving you the details so you understand why it happened! What is it with your generation and patience?!

And so this is all why, Mari, Eduardo ended up on that fateful day, going to meet his landlord to confess that he didn't have any of the money.

But first, plot twist! Cuz guess what?

Eduardo had actually TRIED to bring security with him that day...

He just never got it.

Yes. And that's another moment where things could have gone differently for us!

If this world wasn't run by the dark forces of gossip!

The police had heard about Eduardo's debt...It was a small town and people talked. So when he showed up at the station that day, looking concerned and asking for help, they thought he was just simply drunk and depressed over money again. They didn't care to take his fears about meeting with his landlord seriously...And what a shame.

So THAT is exactly why—Eduardo was sitting in his car outside the police station, vulnerable and afraid, when a man walked up and shot him five times through the passenger-side window.

Jesus!

One for every ten thousand he owed.

But—did you know that Eduardo actually survived the shooting at first?

Yes. Mom said that all five bullets went through minus one.

It was small, but it was lodged in his lung.

The cops then came out and transported Eduardo to the hospital quickly. Where Fernanda was able to join him.

He was still somehow conscious and coherent then, assuring her that it would all be okay. *'Tu vas a poder con todo, chiquita,' he told her.*

But sadly, he was wrong.

Because Eduardo died that day on the operating table. There was too much blood loss when the doctors tried removing the bullet from his lung.

None of the kids got to say goodbye. Not even your grandmother. And she was his oldest, and favorite. There's a rumor he even tried hanging on long enough to hug her goodbye...But Fernanda couldn't go get her. Or leave his side. It's all very heartbreaking, Nana...He died that day asking for protection. Trying to be honest for the first time in his life.

Yeah. It all sounded really fucking sad...

And unfortunately, after the murder, Fernanda found herself abandoned once again.

Except this time, she had four young children who were calling her name. And though they weren't orphans, for them she felt just as terrified.

They had no money. Or any other family nearby. Fernanda didn't know who she was going to turn to if she needed the help.

And on top of that, there were a lot of rumors flying around!

People from all over were saying that Eduardo's murder had maybe been a setup. By some narcos or mafia. And that they had done it because he was probably high up!

Others were even claiming that the murder had been passion-fueled! Eduardo sleeping with the sister or wife of the wrong guy.

But Fernanda didn't believe any of it.

She knew that the landlord had sent someone over to kill him. Because she had found papers in Eduardo's office detailing exactly how much he had owed. *And the number was so high, she knew they'd want Eduardo to pay the debt with his life.*

That's so scary!

It was. For everyone! Until things got handled.

Turns out, though, Fernanda didn't have to worry about the landlord or the rumors for too long.

Because months later, as if fucking telenovela writers had written this scene themselves, somebody bombed the landlord's car. *In the dead of night.*

Oh my god, this story is amazing.

Luciana—no. Shut your mouth. Your grandmother would die if she heard you! This story ruined her life...

Unsurprisingly, the landlord's sudden death made the papers, lol.

Well, who was it?

You'll see.

And they mentioned that the landlord had been under investigation for the murder of a coffee exporter in the area. *Eduardo Molina*. Done sloppily

outside a police station.

And because of this, they wondered if the landlord had even faked his own death!

Omg.

To flee the police or some greater allegation!

Since, given his exporting empire, they had reason to believe that the landlord had been smuggling all kinds of things through his farms! *Guns, drugs, and animals. Maybe even people.* And that poor Eduardo had probably just caught wind of it, so they had him murdered to shut him up! Because rather than just being depressed, Eduardo was likely going on his benders from all of the horrible things his farm had done!

The rumors then started swinging Fernanda's way. Around town, you could hear everyone whispering, Did you hear about that coffee farmer? Poor family. I saw his picture. He was so handsome...And that wife, my goodness. So young! Left with all those children. God can be so cruel.

And this is where shit gets bleak for Abue, okay?

So you better be paying attention.

There you are. Great.

So—even though the town's pesky eyes were off their backs, Fernanda still needed a way to make money. But she couldn't really do that if she was stuck at home all day taking care of her children.

Besides desperately needing the money, Fernanda also wanted to keep up the façade that everything was normal. She didn't want others to think poorly of them, because she had dealt with those stares her entire life. And she knew in her heart that they were the reason her husband was gone. So this time, she was going to do whatever it took to stop herself and her children from becoming pariahs.

That is so dramatic...They had just lost their husband and father. People aren't completely heartless!

Tell that to Eduardo, who was six feet underground.

So in an attempt to 'not lose everything,' Fernanda decided to turn to her oldest child for help. Abue.

In what way?

And she told Abue that she was going to be taken out of school, permanently. And put to work.

It ended her life as a kid. Because Fernanda needed her to be their family's second parent.

Omg. So Abue stopped school in ninth grade? I'm so jealous.

It was terrible, Luciana...She had just started her first year of high school...It's heart-wrenching to think of it now. After having you guys, I can't imagine asking my kids for that kind of sacrifice. It must have killed Fernanda!

Oh, of course. That's who you're worried about.

She was left with no options! The other girls were much younger, and she was terrified that she'd lose all her kids if she couldn't provide. She knew that her old sewing job wasn't going to be enough. And that she'd need someone to take care of the girls now while she worked day and night. And after all the rumors, it had to be someone she could trust.

So she chose ABUE?

Yes! Lower your voice. Fernanda told everyone that your grandmother was too sad and scared to continue school. That she wanted to be at home safe, with the rest of her sisters and helping her family. And though it wasn't true—it wasn't a complete lie. Your grandmother had been very close with her father, so his loss was extremely hard. But Fernanda stretched the truth about her wanting to be at home to help. In reality, Fernanda had given your grandmother no choice. She told her that if she continued in school, they wouldn't survive.

That is so depressing. From all sides.

You see? Your grandmother had to stop being a child for the sake of her family! Because that's what happens in adulthood! You sacrifice your happiness for the people you love. And that's exactly why I want you to cherish your freedom right now, Nana. Do something with what you've been given! Go read books. Travel. Try new things. Come up with exciting new ideas for your future. And take your education seriously! You can find something that you really like, I promise. Look at Mari! She's doing it. She's

studying in D.C. and following her dreams. But now, what are you going to do?

Okay...one...that's not true because following my 'dreams' is only okay if you agree with them. And two, I don't have time to think about my future right now! I'm too busy trying to get through each day here! I'm literally begging you to take me home! And three—I agree with you, what happened to Abue is really sad, but you're acting like she got murdered too. She turned out fine? She lives by the beach and we hang out every weekend! She has a blast.

No—it took the life from her.

How?!

She won't even talk to her sisters!

SO THERE YOU HAVE IT, MARI.

Fernanda forcibly used Abue, her fifteen-year-old daughter, as an interim mother when her husband was shot, and then she never let her go back to school.

And now as a result, I'm being harassed for not wanting to stop at the freaking Civil War museum—or lose weight, be straight, and work for Rick Scott.

And the ONLY thing I can do is just sit here! And bite my fucking tongue!

As I go blue in the face listening to Mom beg me to 'MAKE SOMETHING OF MYSELF,' while she violently ignores the fact that it means solely on her own terms.

Because if I said, Sure! Let's go to the nearest gay bar!, she would fucking set fire to North Carolina.

I think I'm done talking to you about this.

Like, how hypocritical can you be?!

Telling me to take advantage of opportunities when you won't even let me be myself!

And are you seriously telling me all of this? While you reveal that my poor grandmother never got to know herself? Because she got stuck

babysitting full-time while the rest of her classmates got to party and graduate?!

Fernanda tried to find a more permanent solution, but that day never came. Your grandmother missed out on everything—her schooling, her friends, and her future. Everything that a kid does after the age of fifteen. She'll never tell you—but she lost more than just her father when Eduardo was shot.

I know!

I was like, So that's it? The family was just magically okay after that? With Abue just giving up her life?

I'm not sure. I don't know the details. All I know is that your grandmother helped raise her sisters. And the second she could, she left.

Omg, you're not sure? What the fuck?!

What the fuck, NADA. You're going to infect your brain with all your what-the-fucks. Go read a book so you can learn more words. Your grandmother wishes she had!

Yes! Mom didn't even know if Fernanda's plan at least worked!

She said that Abue only ever says that her mother was the devil, and that she treated her like shit.

So she doesn't have any details. And that whenever Mom tries to ask Luisa, she says that it's not her place.

Luisa never explains much, but she says that it wasn't that bad. That Fernanda was tough, and they struggled, but that there was always food on the table. So I imagine it was a little bit of both...You know how extreme your grandmother can be. But don't ever ask her...She's incapable of going back there. And you also didn't hear it from me! Or I'll never hear the end of it. She wouldn't want you looking down on her life.

What? You guys are all so weird. Why would I look down on her? She was a child in a terrible situation.

And because I still didn't get the point of Mom telling me all this, I was like, Wait...was this just your way of saying you wish you never had kids?

No! I just wish I would have waited. But I had no examples to follow. Everyone around me was having children so young.

But she was like, Stop making this about me, Luciana! I am trying to teach you a lesson here! Don't give up on your dreams!

I know, lol.

I was like, Um, getting taken out of school IS my dream.

I don't know why. You used to love it.

But of course, I couldn't tell her why. That all my friends had dropped me on the last day of middle school, when they found out I was gay. And that I guess school had been important...because it gave me the space to cry about things that I couldn't cry about at home.

Since I actually COULD relate to being asked to live your life for other people.

It just got really hard. After eighth grade.

But we got you a tutor!

I know, Ma.

Isn't that story ridiculous though? Fernanda never had a family, and then some asshole shot the love of her life?

And then her plan B was to leave Abue with no father, friends, or freedom?

Like, damn...At least I have Nico.

And the car.

It would also probably horrify Abue to learn that we're more similar than everyone thinks.

She'd be like, Who—ME? And YOU? But look at the way you dress!

And I'm sure that if I asked Abue...about her 'perspective' on all of this...it would be a lot more different than just 'Learn to appreciate your life more.'

Like, I think it would literally be: Don't just do whatever your mother says!

NOW do you understand why I need you to call our mother so bad?!

Because it's a little hard to be enthusiastic about going anywhere with her when everything she says is just a fake-ass lecture that mocks me at my very core.

And they're always more about herself than me anyway!

Like...dude. Just go on a CRUISE if you miss traveling so bad!

Or join a book club!

To discuss your intergenerational daddy issues.

Don't pin them all on me while you drag us around the country during hurricane season!

Yes. Explain that to her. Please.

No, Mari—I'm not getting any more details.

I'm not asking Mom about anything else during her midlife crisis. I'm staying far away from that game of telephone trauma...

I'm going to just live in THIS reality. Where we have escaped a HURRICANE.

And I'm going to make us head back home TOMORROW."



Esto no es hotel

“Hi.

Yes.

It’s me.

We have to whisper now because we’re at the hospital.

Did you get my texts? I know Mom already told you.

Yes, they’re running the MRIs now.

I don’t know!

No one has explained anything to me!

I just finally walked away from everyone for the first time to get a second to breathe.

I don’t know how this happened EITHER, Mari. Stop YELLING at me.

Ugh. Hold on...I’m getting looks.

Okay—I can talk better over here.

YES. TRUST ME. I’m just as confused!

I was just getting yelled at about fucking ORPHANAGES, and now I seem to have jinxed us since I couldn’t SHUT UP about coming home!

Cuz, uh, we definitely came home...This is just not what I meant.

Oh god. I’m getting light-headed again.

Every time I think about it I almost pass out.

It just happened out of nowhere, dude...

I had finally convinced Mom to leave North Carolina, by agreeing to stop in Charleston and freaking Savannah, so we were already driving south when Dad called and said that he was at Abue's but she wouldn't open up.

I'm worried, Elena. She hasn't answered my phone calls since yesterday. Should I ask the building manager to let me in?

No, no. She could be sleeping. Or in the shower. She'll kill me if we involve other people. Just try her a few more times. And knock HARD, Jaime!

But Mom didn't even want to take Dad seriously at first, because she wanted to see the fucking trees in Savannah.

Your grandmother just probably has the hair dryer on too loud! She doesn't hear him ringing. Won't you feel ridiculous? If we rush home over something silly like that? I heard Savannah has the most gorgeous oak trees!

I think something is wrong, Mom. She hasn't been answering my phone calls either.

Something's always wrong with that woman!

What if she fell? Or hit her head? Oh my god. What if she had a stroke?!

Okay, okay. Just breathe. If she hasn't answered any of us in the next hour, we can skip Georgia and head straight home. But if she answers you...don't say anything about what I've told you. I'm having second thoughts about sharing so much...

I don't care about that right now! Drive faster!

Thankfully though, after a few more hours of radio silence from Abue, Mom finally agreed that it was weird and that something wasn't right.

So we then raced down from Savannah to Jacksonville to Daytona Beach, and by the time we got to West Palm, Mom had finally caved and told Dad to find the building manager and get him to open up.

Are you sure we don't have a spare key?

Yes, Jaime. She hasn't given us one in years. Tell the manager that it's an emergency. But call me before you go in! I don't know what state you're

gonna find her in.

After that, Mom was already doing like ninety on the highway when Dad called and said that the building manager had evacuated so there was gonna be no key. *See, Luciana? He's probably out having fun, exploring Georgia.* And so Dad was gonna go full Rambo and get the tools necessary to break open Abue's door.

What? No! That sounds excessive, Jaime.

Either I do it, or the police. Take your pick.

Police?! Dios mío. Now she's really going to kill me.

So Mom obviously started doing like one-twenty after that, and when we finally made it to Abue's, Dad had to beg everyone to step aside and let him break down the door.

I can't do it if you're standing right there, Elena. Please move. The faster we get to her the better.

MOM. ARE YOU IN THERE? Jaime is going to tear down this door! And I know you don't want that! Think of the neighbors!

All right, I'm taking over. Emilia? Can you hear me? It's Jaime. If you're near the door, I need you to back up. On the count of three, okay? Are you ready?

And that's when we all finally busted in and found her—alive—but completely fucking yellow.

Abue...What the hell?

Yup!

Just lying on the couch!

Oh. It's you. How was the drive?

Oh my—Mom? Luciana, grab her stuff. We need to get to a hospital.

Elena, is that you? What's going on?

YOU'RE FUCKING YELLOW, DUDE.

What does that mean? Why are you yelling?

Yes, Mari. BRIGHT yellow.

And when I asked why she looked like Tweety Bird, she didn't even have the energy to roll her eyes.

I would have sent you pictures—I swear. But we didn't have time.

Cuz the second we got to the ER, the doctors got one look at Abue and they took her back fast as fuck.

And the minute Mom got me alone—she just started interrogating me. Asking me if I knew ‘what was up with Abue.’

Did you tell her to do this?! What ideas have you put in her head?

Trying to figure out if I was part of some grand scheme to help end her life!

No? What the fuck?

But she tells you everything!

I would have MENTIONED this.

Of course I asked Abue what happened, Mari. Multiple times.

Um, you wanna tell me what’s going on here?

And she said that she could ‘feel’ that something wasn’t right, but that she wanted to ride out the storm first and not say anything that would bring us back.

If something happened to you two, coming back here to help me, I would have never forgiven myself. And I couldn’t say anything before you two left! You would have worried and stayed! I knew that when you got back, we could deal with it. But then that snake Irma changed her plans...And by the time you got to North Carolina, I didn’t know how much time had passed or what day you had left. I sank so deep without realizing...I don’t think that I’ve eaten in days.

Nope. No. Great question.

Somehow, she hadn’t realized she had turned fucking yellow.

I thought it was from being inside all those days! With those horrendous shutters...It’s not healthy to be stuck inside somewhere like that for so long!

And I didn’t want to push more, since she’s still very weak.

But the second she’s out of her MRIs—I’m going in.

Speaking of...Am I supposed to go somewhere? To pick her up?

Or do they also just bring her back when she’s done?

Cuz she’s been in there forever...

I don’t even know where I am right now, actually.

I think I’m on a floor with babies?

I think that I can hear someone crying?

Unless I'm hallucinating. Which is also possible.

Because this all just feels like one big simulation.

And I really want to fucking dissociate right now, but I'm scared that I'll miss out on something important again if I do.

Since I probably could have realized that something was wrong—if I hadn't been too busy fighting ancestral warfare with Mom!

My head was so far up in the clouds—talking about nuns and landlords and rumors and shit—that I thought we'd just come back and I'd call you saying, Hey, ugly! We're back from North Carolina. No damage to our house, can you believe it? We ran up the country for a whole week for no reason!

But nope.

Because instead, we pulled up to Abue's apartment—and found her looking like the sun itself.

Ugh.

And now I think that I'm having like an out-of-body experience or something...

Because I'm so cold. But I also can't stop sweating.

And everyone around me is acting super paranoid too...

Like you did last summer when you took Molly.

Yeah—Mom's been running around telling all the nurses that Abue is a psycho!

Nurse, listen to me. My mother is fragile and she needs to be handled with care. She is not rational! I think she let this happen to herself on purpose! We need to be strategic here.

One of the poor nurses was like, Okay? So this woman needs a psych consult? *No no, I'm just telling you. So you know.*

Know what?

How this happened.

I had to be like, Mom, please, can you chill? You just told me that Abue's practically an eighth grader, and now you're telling everyone that she's suicidal?

*Shhh! I told you that we can't talk about that here. But I don't know!
Why else wouldn't she tell us that she was sick?!*

She was trying to protect us.

No, she's lying! She just hates doctors.

That's not true...She loves plastic surgeons.

Those are different. She needs them.

And fine, whatever, maybe Ma could be on to something—but I would never tell her. Because she'd just go full freak mode. But it has crossed my mind, once or twice, whether or not Abue 'let this all happen.'

I'm serious, dude.

On one of our last phone calls, before she went MIA, I asked Abue if I could stay at her place for a few days after we got back. *Your daughter is driving me crazy. I need some time away from her. You understand.* But she didn't sound excited at all, which was weird, since she usually loves when I visit.

Only if you shower first. And sleep on the couch. Who knows what kind of germs you're bringing in.

And then I couldn't even make her laugh!

Well, I've actually gotten a lot taller since we left...So I'll probably need the bed. And you might not be able to recognize me. I think I'm even tall enough now to clean that creepy Virgin Mary statue over your bed. It's probably all the fresh air away from your farts. Don't you think?

That's disgusting, Luciana...

I know. I agree.

I don't trust tall people.

And then out of nowhere, while we were on the phone, she just started randomly hitting me with: IRMA, IRMA, IRMA. I'M TIRED OF TALKING ABOUT FUCKING IRMA. *Que vieja tan estresante!*

I was like, What the heck? We're not even talking about her? And sorry that we wanted you to live...What's all the anger for?

So if Abue did have a secret plan, in her head she was probably thinking, Luciana, SHUT UP before you ruin my scheme with your adorable brown eyes!

I'm hanging up now. I feel nauseous. Call me when you two are coming back.

I just said that we are!

And then all I heard from her after that were these weird-ass voicemails, where she was sounding like she had just committed a crime or gone up all fourteen flights of stairs.

I swear. They were like, Oye, loca—frantic breath—lla...ma...me. Or Hola, fea—deep sigh—caaauull mí.

But every time I called back, it was over something stupid. Like me needing to reset her Hotmail password for the tenth time.

Okay, thanks. I gotta go.

Wait—why!

So if I knew then what I know now, I would have definitely thought that something was up.

But like an IDIOT I thought that she was just being cranky.

And now every time I think about Abue—alone and in pain, waiting for us to come back—I want to punch a wall and cry!

FUCK. How did we not see it?

See what? She's insane!

Mom hasn't been as understanding though.

She's just making everything about herself.

This is WORSE than not evacuating, Luciana. This is SELFISH. Do you understand that? What if she had DIED? Do you know how HORRIBLE that would have felt? How could she do this to us?!

Yeah, lol. I see where you get it from.

I was like...This is exactly why Abue didn't wanna tell you, dude. You're incapable of not putting yourself at the center.

That's because none of you know how to function without me! You do it to yourselves.

But I'm gonna need Mom to stop screaming and focus on what's going on here.

Because I've Googled the shit that makes you turn yellow, Mari...and things are not looking good.

No. I don't want to say it.

I'm not gonna jinx us again.

I'm going to just wait until we get her results—and you should too.

Mari, please. Don't cry...My brain can't go there.

Let's not do that yet until we know.

Let's talk about how Abue's going to be okay, all right? And how she's going to recover from this?

Because she has this very sexy and well-dressed doctor...

Who is not only brilliant, but a great omen for Abue as well.

Right?!

It probably means that we're in the right hands?!

I'm not exaggerating, Mari. She looks exactly like Sandra Bullock.

Omg.

What?

Nothing. Abue's doctor just looks like this actress...

Will you focus? Call your father and tell him how to get up here. He's waiting like a fool downstairs in the lobby.

When the doctor even first walked in, Abue was like, Who are you? And when am I seeing the chief here? I need someone qualified. Or I'm gonna die alone again in this chicken coop!

Oh my god. Abue!

What? She can't understand me.

It was mortifying. We were like, Dude, go back to turning yellow and shut up. The doctor is standing right here, and she's going to save your life.

What? This girl? But she looks like a supermodel. I've seen her before on my TV.

That's what I said! Mom—see?

Not now, please.

So this is my doctor? Interesting...Probably for the best. Men are degenerates anyway. Luciana, bring her closer. And start translating. Elena, don't even try. I don't want to lose a limb to your broken English.

I was so fucking thankful that we had somehow gotten the only doctor in all of Miami that doesn't speak Spanish.

Cuz if not, I was gonna have to tell her, Sorry, lol. My grandma is just in shock. There are apparently no female doctors in Colombia.

Hi, Emilia. I'm Dr. Parker. We're gonna figure out what's causing your pain and turning you yellow, okay? Once we get more information, we can figure out what to do. But I'm sorry that it's taking this long. We just want to be sure. The nurses will take good care of you in the meantime.

Luciana, tell her thank you, and that I'm the daughter and we have some questions.

Why can't you do it? You speak English.

Not right now. I'm stressed.

Yes, Mari, anyone with EYES has asked why Abue didn't come in sooner.

They're all like: Ma'am, do you live alone? Do you own a mirror? Are you aware that your weight classifies you as anorexic? And have you heard of the term 'depression'?

But they're not ready for the answers...

We even had this young nurse who was trying to be so polite, while she was doing her best but failing at getting any useful information out of Abue.

I'm sorry, but if you don't mind me asking, how long ago did the yellow tone appear on your face before coming in? Was it hours? Or maybe days? And you can take your time and think about it. There's no rush. But please fill out the required personal details on the medical form. It's for our records.

Luciana. What is she saying to me?

She's asking for your birthday and weight again.

Oh, well, she's not getting that.

So I had to tell the poor nurse that her attempts were pointless. Because Abue wasn't going to say anything. And her excuse is still that she didn't think things would happen so quickly.

The pain wasn't that serious when you and your mother left! Tell her that, Luciana. And that I thought maybe my energy was just low from bad sleep. Or because of all the hysteria all over the news! I'm telling you the truth. Do you think this feels good for me? Being badgered by adolescents

about my personal life with no sense of style? I already get that at home from you!

The nurse then asked me one more time if I could help translate, but I was like, You don't want me to. Trust me.

That's okay, I'll come back another time.

Omg. And then Abue kept trying to tip her?

What are you reaching into your purse for, dude?

Don't I need to tip them whenever they come in?

No? We're not at a red light in Colombia? She's not a little boy juggling fruit in between traffic stops for money. Which—YOU DON'T EVEN ROLL DOWN THE WINDOW FOR. So drop the Mother Teresa rich-bitch act. Are you sure that this IV is in your arm okay? You're starting to scare me.

Sorry...No need to get emotional. I thought you gringos liked getting paid to be nice.

We do. But leave her alone. You can hand the bills over to ME.

Only if you use the money to buy yourself new clothes. I'd prefer to not die while you're still wearing shirts with holes in them.

No one is dying! Stop saying that. And you wear mesh all the time.

Mari...and why is this hospital surrounded by endless, massive sea?

I swear they want these people to jump in. I'm looking at it now.

Oh, please. If you were hooked up to one billion machines, and you saw that deep delicious ocean downstairs, ready to put an end to all the: beep beep beep, prick prick prick—wouldn't you?

Whatever.

You just haven't seen some of the sick people in here. They look so out of it.

And I'm gonna be on their level soon—if Mom brings in the machista brigade.

Which she's already threatened to do...

Yes! She said that once we know 'what's going on with Abue,' she's going to call all her brothers and talk about it.

For what? The first time all year? They call and care less than Mari. And if they come, I'll need the ER too.

It'll all depend on what's happening with your grandmother, Luciana. Flights from Colombia right now aren't cheap.

Good. I hope the prices go up.

Be nice. We might need their help.

Why? All they do is comment on my body...And they don't even care about Abue! They didn't check on her ONCE before Irma hit.

I can already fucking SMELL their cologne running up the stairs...

Ready to suffocate me with their etiquette lessons.

Tío Ivan in his knock-off Lacoste polo...looking like some Florida wildlife shit with scales that you see on the news. And Tío Tomás following close behind, with his military cut, scanning the room for a place to do his push-ups later. While Tío Víctor, the youngest of the three, scurries around in his freshly pressed jeans. Carrying the last six months of Abue's favorite newspaper in his right hand. And Google Translate on his phone in the left.

Their collective 'Madre!' ringing down the halls and inside our eardrums forever...

I can't believe those three men came out of Abue. And that they're your 'older' brothers. Related by blood.

I know. Though I fear they only remember once a month when they have to pay her rent.

Or when she uses their money to buy a new body part!

That's okay. It's just how they show their love.

Last time they were here, Ivan couldn't stop talking about how happy he was that my boobs finally grew in.

Why do you care?!

No, it's good! We got worried when they were taking so long. You know, that maybe you didn't have enough of the female levels. We have doctors at home that can help with that.

Oh, if I should be so lucky!

Ay, hear yourself. My niece the comedian.

Like, why does he think that's normal?

Does he have plans to sell me off or something?

And Ma never sticks up for me! Or even responds.

She just sits there and thinks, STOP BRINGING UP BOOBS AROUND LUCIANA. WE'RE TRYING TO CHANGE HER.

Yeah, Tomás is whatever. He's fine.

He just slides me twenties and apologizes for being my godfather.

And I can handle them from afar—but if they step one foot into this country, I am forcing you to get on a plane and come home immediately.

UM. DUH, MARI!

How have you not considered that?

I've been asking Mom why you haven't already tried to come!

I don't get it. Abue's in the ER. Why isn't Mari on a flight yet?

We don't want to panic right now. And we have it covered. There's no need to interrupt anyone's life.

Well yeah...Mom said that you were gonna wait until we 'had some answers.' But I thought that was just her own stupid idea. I didn't think that you'd actually want to risk it!

What if things get BAD, Mari?!

Oh my god.

Oh...my god.

You are NOT bringing up sorority recruitment right now.

Has something INFECTED all of your brains?! Are you also turning yellow now too?!

Mari.

I don't care if Rihanna HERSELF joins your demented little sorority.

If they say that something is even SLIGHTLY wrong with Abue—you better be coming home. Because I am not equipped to carry this family without you. I normally sit in the corner and get IGNORED.

No, no. You need to wake up.

The evacuation was one thing—but this—this is a whole other.

And we're gonna need someone else with common sense around here, or Abue's going downhill FAST.

Dad's way too busy fixing damage at his farm, and Mom's already starting her denial bit. So NEITHER of them can be trusted.

And I can't even trust me right now! Look at us!

We were running around screaming about the wrong hurricane—and now Abue looks like a fucking canary. It happened right under our noses!

I knew it. I knew she wasn't just not evacuating for no reason. She's not a total psycho.

Yes, she is, Luciana. Believe me. I've known her for longer.

Um, why don't you just sit down, Mom? You're looking a little pale.

No—I have to go out and make some calls. I need to be prepared for when the doctors come back. But if they bring her in, don't you dare say anything.

Say anything about what? Did they tell you what's going on?!

Nothing. We can't talk about it yet.

Fuck.

Don't cry, Nana. She will know.

Oh, and speak of the devil, here she is.

Our special ops Mother has found me.

I knew she would look by the freaking vending machines...

Oh, and look. Now she's marching over here with orders to the guillotine because I'm eating chips.

Unbelievable.

Can you believe that I'm being fucking fat-shamed even in a hospital wing, Mari?!

Ugh. I should have just left Mom in North Carolina...

Because maybe then—we wouldn't even be here.

Since without all her screaming, I could have probably figured out that something was WRONG.

Because it's so weird, man...

Looking back, it was obvious Abue was suffering.

But entirely not, at the same time.

Which ultimately, I guess, is the problem with these women."



Con quién vas?

“Hey.

Let me know if the service sucks.

They moved us to another floor of the hospital.

Have you, um, talked to Mom today?

Fuck. Okay.

Well, they ran another MRI, Mari.

Yes. And they found a mass.

Like a tumor.

In Abue’s gallbladder.

Well, technically it’s in her bile ducts, but I don’t fucking know where that is.

I know.

I’m sorry.

I already cried about it three times in the bathroom.

Oh, wow... You’re really going for it.

Okay...

Um, are you at least still breathing?

Can you hear me?

I didn't say she was fucking DEAD, Mari!
And if you were here—I could at least give you a hug!
Instead of leaving you to rely on whatever manic coping mechanism
you're about to use...

Which I should have honestly thought about before making this call.

Because listen—there is hope.

Abue's doctor thinks she can reach it.

Yes, the tumor?

Well, I could have told you that first if you had let me finish!

And it took me like four Wikipedia pages to understand this, so please
take it all with a grain of salt.

But Dr. Sandra Bullock said that since Abue's tumor is in her 'bile
ducts,' right in between her liver and small intestine, it has miraculously
given us just enough space to get it out.

Before anything spreads.

Because apparently...the tumor blocking the flow of fluids between her
organs was a good thing...Since it turned her yellow. And alerted to
everyone that she wasn't okay.

Right in time.

That's correct.

Because the tumor is not actually IN her liver or small intestine, just
somehow directly in the middle, Sandra thinks they have a pretty good
chance of safely removing it.

*Does that make sense? She's very fortunate. Most masses in this area are
caught too late. Or they grow first in inoperable sections. But this one is
right in the center of two major organs. We have the opportunity to try to
get it without causing too much damage.*

Yes—it does seem to be...you know, the bad tumors.

But they said that we can't know for sure until they open her up.

Will the surgery be painful, Doctor? She's already weak.

It will be long. But unfortunately, it is our only option.

Okay. I'll go talk to her and my mom.

No, Mari?

I'm not EXAGGERATING things so you come home?

What the fuck? Did you not just hear what I said?

YOUR GRANDMOTHER IS HAVING SURGERY TO REMOVE A TUMOR.

Why would I make that up?!

Don't you want to be here for that?

'The semester just started.' Wow. Okay.

It's embarrassing how much the alcohol is eating up your brain.

And no it didn't! Isn't it almost October?

Oh, 'That just means I'll be home soon for Thanksgiving,' okay.

Glad you could fit us in!

Only for Abue's sake am I not hanging up on you right now.

Because I actually really need your opinion.

And I'm only going to explain this once, so if you genuinely care about your grandmother, please just focus and listen.

But whatever you do—DO NOT tell Mom that I called you. Because I wasn't supposed to say anything to you at all.

Yes!

It's part of her crazy plan that I'm about to tell you about!

Which is urgent.

Because since Abue's doctor said that these tumors typically only leave patients with like six months to live—they want to operate on Abue immediately. Like tomorrow. So Sandra is outside scheduling Abue for surgery as we speak.

I know! I know. But hold on. Let me finish.

The surgery is going to be high-risk, but without it, her liver will start to fail. I'm sorry. Our images show that the tumor is beginning to obstruct her functions. And that means that she may need additional procedures or treatment if we can't get all of it out. But we'll know more about those next steps once we take a look inside. For now, please be prepared that this mass may be malignant. Given its location and size. And if so, she will likely need chemo for any cells that remain.

Okay...Um...Can we have a second, please? Thank you.

And because we absolutely need this surgery to go well, given the whole ‘six months to live’ thing, Mom doesn’t want to tell Abue anything—at all.

What do you mean?

We can’t say anything about this tumor potentially being ‘malignant’ until she’s safely and successfully out of surgery. Her entire health depends on it.

Excuse me?

Don’t make that face, Luciana. It’s for her own good. Your mental state can determine a lot before you go under. And it can kill! We can’t risk her spiraling and giving up. You know how she is. Look at what happened with Irma! I’m not doing that again. No, señora. This surgery needs to go well—so she can recover fast and do the treatment. Because they said that if it’s bad...this thing could spread quickly. And if she feels that the odds are stacking up against her, she’ll just reject everything up front.

But isn’t that not okay, Mari?

To withhold information from her?

I understand that it’s Florida...but none of that sounds legal.

Like...we can’t just not give Abue all the facts—because we want her to be ‘happy’ during surgery?

Shouldn’t she be able to make her own decisions?

About her own literal health?!

And what if it doesn’t go well, dude? What if it doesn’t even work?

What if Abue comes out with half a liver anyway and she hates us for the rest of her life?!

At least she’d BE alive, Luciana!

But what if she wouldn’t want to live like that, Mom?

Why am I the only one freaking out here?!

Okay, so you agree?

Thank you.

You see? This is exactly why we can’t let Mom take the lead.

Someone else needs to take charge. And I don’t understand half of these medical terms, so I can’t be the first line of defense.

Um, what do you mean, 'How is Mom going to lie to her?' Everything goes through me and her! They don't say anything to Abue directly.

Why did you sign a form that says we don't need a translator?

Because I have you.

But what about Abue? And when I'm not here? Or when they want to tell her something in private?

Why would they do that? She has us.

I thought Mom was just in shock...or that maybe she just needed more time to process...but now it's clear that she's entering full-denial beast mode.

And I can't just stand back this time and let it happen to Abue.

ESPECIALLY if it's going to rob her of the decision again of how to live her life.

Like, even when the doctor said the c-word, or 'Your grandmother might need treatment,' Mom was still just like, That's great! We can breathe now! If we just try and stay positive, everything is going to be fine!

Not really? They just said we don't know that yet.

Exactly. We don't know anything. So don't act like I'm some kind of monster who is hiding something. Your grandmother knows they need to remove a mass, and that's it. That's all we know too.

But Abue's not a child?

She's not actually a ninth grader?

We don't actually have to shield her from the difficult decisions...right? Mom is just having another midlife crisis?

Oh god. Please tell me that Mom is just having another midlife crisis.

Fuck.

You don't know either...

But you know who WOULD know? Abue.

She would be asking all the right questions and sniffing out the bullshit. Pissing everybody off.

But instead, they just have her on like a million sedatives before the surgery, so she's too drugged out to notice or care!

I'm looking at the poor thing now—resting. Sound asleep. Without one clue about what's potentially ahead of her...

What should I do? Do you think I should say something?

Or will it actually mess with her head before the surgery?

I mean...it's absurd that she doesn't already know why we're here.

We rolled her up in her CANCER PATIENT wheelchair, to the CANCER PATIENT TREATMENT CENTER, for her CANCER PATIENT SURGERY.

She couldn't see the labels on her chair—sure—but isn't it the same word in Spanish? How is Mom explaining away all the signs?

Omg...She's probably telling her that it's like a building dedicated to astrology or something.

UGH. I fucking thought this was when we'd finally get real about things!

At the freaking hospital!

When you can no longer ignore what's SCREAMING right in front of you!

It's like a massive five-by-five sign, Mom.

We're fine. That's too high up for your grandmother to see.

Oh god...Maybe Mom thinks that if Abue starts dying, I'll just decide to finally fully come out...

Maybe that's why she can't bring herself to acknowledge it.

And if she won't even tell Abue about the c-word...does she expect me to take the g-word to my grave now too?!

Okay, I'm spiraling, you're right. I need to stop.

No, Mari. You're not off the hook.

Dad is just gonna do whatever Mom says, and our uncles are ex-military sadists. We can't depend on them.

Mom said they're not even thinking of coming anymore because she told them that everything was fine!

And they didn't even question that?

No.

We need a life raft here!

Omg. We need Mari.

No! Do not call her. She needs to be concentrating on her midterms. And she'll be home soon anyway for the upcoming holidays!

Wow...Did you two practice the same script? Everything that comes out of your mouth is terrifying!

If Mari comes home now—then your grandmother will know. And we cannot risk that. Mari would also then throw away her fall semester! You know how she stresses!

But instead of just coordinating your travel or researching treatment options, Mom has been wasting her time here by telling everyone that Abue 'did this on purpose,' because she wanted to die in the most extravagant way possible. And a hurricane was much higher than a tumor on her list.

Yeah.

She was acting like Abue had planned to be released into the ocean when the hurricane hit and flooded everything, so she'd look like a sultry mermaid on the Local 10 news.

It's exactly why she wouldn't evacuate, Doctor. Did my daughter tell you that? That my mother knew something was wrong? She wanted us to be rushing back to save her, but no—it's too late. She's up in the waves! Doing backflips with the fishes! Without a care in the world for her family or illness. How selfish. How can you do that to your own grandchildren?! But this is what I mean—she can't be trusted. So now, everything must go through me. I appreciate your cooperation.

And when Sandra Bullock was even in here earlier, discussing the surgery details with us, she kept referring to what they needed to take out of Abue as an 'unidentified mass.' And that they needed to see how she felt after the operation first, before discussing any 'further possible treatment options.'

Like radiation? Or chemo?

Why don't we talk outside? Your mother said that she prefers that.

She already got to you too?!

Mom was literally looking straight at Sandra the whole time too. Like a fucking stage mom. Mouthing the words back to her, making sure that she

stayed on script.

No, I just told her the truth, Luciana. That your grandmother is delicate. And we need to deliver news with care.

So, I'm officially alone here.

Because Mom has now convinced everyone that if Abue 'finds out the wrong information at the wrong time,' she'll just give up and die.

Then that's her decision!

How can you say that! Don't be so foolish. If you want her to live, then we need to help her recover. Before this thing spreads. And she can't do that if she's up all night worrying and praying! You know her! She gets depressed.

These people don't even know if Abue would choose to fight and live...

Oh, Mari, c'mon.

I love her—but she's not exactly the kind of person that chooses 'the right thing,' or strength, over beauty.

She's had two boob jobs!

And she won't leave the house unless her hair and makeup are done!

Look, it's just hard enough that I'm already Google Translating things for her like 'gallbladder' and 'mucus.' But now—I don't even know what I'm allowed to say?!

What if she asks me to translate TERMINAL?

What am I supposed to say? Oh—it means BUTTERFLY?

And the ONLY thing that Mom has done that tells me she's taking this thing seriously...is call Abue's sister Luisa.

Yes. Susana's mother, that one. Our villainous great-aunt.

Has Mom not told you?

Right...Because then she'd have to actually acknowledge the presence of the tumor with you. Like a normal person.

Unbelievable.

Well...Mom said that she called Luisa to let her know what's going on. 'Just in case we needed the help.'

You mean like, THE Luisa? Abue's youngest sister, who she loves to hate? Yeah, amazing 'help,' Mom.

She doesn't hate her! They just never got to know each other...Their age gap was large, and your grandmother left young. But all that stuff with Fernanda happened so long ago, it's time they made up.

Oh, so now it's just 'the stuff'? When before it was the freaking blood, sweat, and tears of my ancestors that I needed to listen to? And doesn't Luisa live in Colombia? Why can't Mari come if we need the help? She's closer!

Because I'm trying to protect your sister, Nana. And right now, she needs to keep doing what she's worked her whole life to do. Not become anybody's caretaker, like your grandmother. Learn from what I've told you! And Luisa lives in Jacksonville! She's old and available. She moved to Florida years ago to be closer to Susana.

Are you sure? Abue told me that she lived in a shack on the side of the road.

Stop listening to everything that woman says! She's ill. And besides, this will be good for them. They've never had a reason to truly communicate.

But I know that Mom just wants Luisa to come so that she and Abue can have some sort of 'aha' sister-breakthrough moment.

Like in all of her corny-ass holiday movies.

Probably just so she can continue to meddle in their lives even further... asking about even MORE of their ancient history and orphan sagas...all so she can happily lecture us with them for the rest of our lives.

Wow. You ARE having a midlife crisis.

No, no, it's okay...They already talk on some special occasions. And it's important, Luciana. Family is all we have. They need to be taking advantage that they're both in the States while they're still alive! I wish I had my own brothers to lean on right now! And one day, when it's just you and your sister, you'll understand and be grateful that you have her too.

But I couldn't even waste my time on how ridiculous it all sounded— Mom using Abue's medical emergency to force a reconciliation between her and her sister—because I thought that it would at least signal to Abue that something was wrong.

Like something DEEPLY and potentially life-alteringly wrong, if her estranged sister was coming to visit.

Luckily, though, I didn't have to keep it in as a secret for too long.

Because a little bit ago, Abue saw Luisa's name pop up on Mom's phone, lol.

Elena—why is she calling? What did you say?! Do not answer her! She will come and kill me herself!

Aw. Did you hear that, Mom? This is going to be fun.

Please just keep an eye on her while I take this outside.

And Abue basically already threatened to throw Luisa out the window if she ever actually came down to visit.

She's just calling to check on you, Ma. She's your sister.

No, she's not, Elena! And I don't like it when you tell people things! Why do you have such a big mouth? You're just like her!

So Mom's been taking Luisa's calls outside now.

And while I don't know what exactly they're plotting, every time that Mom walks back in, she looks like she was just forced to swallow a bag of nails.

Elena—who was that? Was it her again?!

No. Nothing. It's Jaime.

You can tell him that if my daughter says anything about my condition to my sister, and that wretched woman flies here praying for my death, then I will end this all with my bare hands.

And honestly, I'm too fucking scared to ask.”



Y la bendición?

“Hi.

Sorry if I’m out of breath.

It’s all the running away from our problems.

Just kidding, lol. I got lost and couldn’t find Abue’s hospital room.

Wow—

I! Am! So! Tired!

Yes, everything with Abue’s surgery went well, thank god.

Minus that one hiccup at the end. But she’s doing okay now.

She’s finally asleep and letting herself rest.

Which the doctor said is very important!

So I’m sitting in here with her now, making sure that she doesn’t fall off the bed or try to go sleepwalk.

No, no, she can’t hear me, lol.

She’s knocked out on pain meds.

And I talk way too fast for that woman to ever understand me...

Anyways!

I’m also feeling much better now!

If you were curious. Since you obviously care so much and were dying to ask.

Yup. Mom decided that once they discharge us, we could finally tell Abue everything.

Really?

Yes. But only after we go home. I want her to feel safe and comfortable in her own bed.

Fine, and then you promise to tell her the truth? That they're running tests now to confirm...but the tumor inside her could have been cancer?

Let's not use that word until we know.

No, Mom can't hear me either right now.

She's at the house, preparing everything for Abue's arrival. Since she's gonna be staying with us until she recovers.

But guess what Mom is also at the house preparing...Little Miss Almost Birthday Girl...

What?! Of course we remembered! Are you crazy?

Mom has framed pictures from every year of your life all over the house! How could we not?

And plus...I love you.

Okay fine, yes, we forgot! I'm sorry!

But given the circumstances—that's okay. Because just wait till you hear the updates...

And your birthday is not for another week anyway, so relax. Mom remembered this morning the second she woke up.

Oh, no. Luciana. What day is it today?

But it was actually kind of cute...Because I could totally tell that she felt like a failed mom, since I caught her shopping for you in the gift shop in the lobby.

Mom? Is that you?

What are you doing here?! Your grandmother can't be left alone!

She asked me to come get her phone from you...What the heck are you buying a stuffed animal for?

It's for your sister's birthday. I—I haven't had time to shop.

And I honestly felt bad, cuz she looked so tired and defeated, so I told her to just go home and put something together while I handled things with Abue.

Really?! You're not gonna make a scene about staying here by yourself?

No. Just go. I am still mad at her, but she deserves a good birthday.

Thank you, Nana, thank you. I'll be quick.

Obviously—I came off looking like a selfless hero.

So I couldn't tell Mom that I had also been an asshole. And begged you to come home all night the day before without ever mentioning your birthday.

Which I'm sorry about, okay?

But you know how I am with numbers.

Especially during times of crisis.

And I won't ruin all the surprises, but just know that there are some ADORABLE refrigerator magnets coming your way...with LIFE-CHANGING inspirational quotes on them. Courtesy of Mom and the hospital gift shop.

Yes, I think your roommates will love them, lol.

Oh. And Abue is sending you ten dollars and a flashlight.

Why? Who knows.

That's between her and God.

And I think I'm gonna keep my gift a surprise...But you better text me about it the second you know.

No, c'mon! I don't want to ruin it!

It's going to be so funny.

FINE. IT'S A FUZZY BLANKET WITH OUR FACES ON IT.

Lol...yes...

Okay, please be respectful.

It was very expensive!

I'm kidding, lol. The gift shop had a two-for-one deal and I gave the other one to Abue.

I couldn't resist that little machine that prints out pictures and puts them on T-shirts and blankets.

This is perfect. Libras are obsessed with themselves.

What?! I thought it'd be a great idea! Now you can think about how you've abandoned us every time you get cold.

Okay, relax...sheesh. We don't have to talk about it.

Forget I even said anything, birthday girl.

Even though I do think it's incredibly selfish that you're siding with Mom just because it's convenient for you.

Luciana, stop fighting me on this. Mari will be here with your grandmother soon. We're getting close to the holidays. It's not worth bringing her now! It's expensive! And I've already coordinated more help.

Yes, good idea. We should talk about Abue.

Someone who actually does understand the meaning of loyalty.

Um, when can we go home? Hmm, great question.

I think they said that by the end of the week? If no other complications come up?

Or at least that's what the last nurse told me.

Which would be nice. Since you could cook a steak on my head with how greasy it is.

And because I've officially stress-sweated through every one of my outfits.

I'm serious, dude...I was so anxious while Abue was in surgery...that I couldn't do anything besides sit there and pant.

I think it's why I'm so tired now?

Luciana. Stop biting your nails.

I can't, I'm scared. How are you so calm?

I'm thinking positive! Feel my heart. See? Mind over matter. It works.

And the nurses were giving us these crazy-ass updates the whole time... making me feel dizzy...So I had to ask hot doctor Sandy to explain everything to me like three separate times.

The mass we found measures about two-point-five centimeters. Think of it as the size of something between a peanut and a grape. We also believe it has the characteristics of something called a Klatskin tumor. That means it's right in the center of where her left and right hepatic duct meet and

leave the liver. Think of it as sitting in the middle connecting point of the letter Y. Does that make sense? I'm sorry. I know this is a lot to take in.

That's, um, okay. I'll explain it to them.

Unfortunately, we have also found blockages in other parts of her bile duct. The tumor has metastasized to some of her lymph nodes. We will need to remove those now too.

Hold on. What does that mean?

It means that we will do something called a Whipple procedure. It's a very common surgery for tumors outside the liver. It will involve removing and connecting certain parts of her organs, so that her digestive fluids and bile can begin to drain properly. This will hopefully prevent her skin from turning yellow again.

Well, what if—

Here, write this down. Your grandmother has an extrahepatic bile duct tumor. You can look that up. It means that it is located in the small tubes that carry her bile fluids outside the liver, right before they reach the small intestine. It also means that we are lucky this time. Not all of these masses can be removed. But it will require a very complicated and delicate process. Which is why we are taking our time. Can you tell your mother that, please?

No wonder you drink so much!

Being the only sane person in the room is exhausting...

Every time Sandra came out with another update, it sounded like she was talking about some extinct animal they had found in the Amazon.

She's doing great. Her heart is strong, and her breathing is fine. Her blood pressure is a little high, but it has stayed the same. So we're monitoring it. And we're going to send some parts of her bile duct, liver, and tumor to the lab for testing. That way we can determine the stage of everything.

I was also trying to draft emails to my teachers the whole time, explaining everything that was going on, but every time the doctor came out, I had to delete and add something new to my story. Ugh, okay, one sec. Backspace backspace backspace...Dear Mrs. Pain-in-the-Butt-Nelson.

And then at the end—when I was already drowning in a puddle of my own sweat and fingernails—Sandra broke the news that they would have to leave a small part of Abue’s tumor inside.

We tried. I’m very sorry. But it’s too risky to completely remove. We’d severely damage the surrounding tissue area. With some radiation, though, she should be okay.

And that’s also exactly when Mom decided she could speak.

How—how much radiation, Doctor?

Omg! If you can understand her, then why have you been making me talk this whole time?! I’ve aged like fifty years with this stress!

Ay, Luciana. Shh! I can’t hear. I’m sorry, Doctor...Please continue.

No, that’s okay. And, well, my hope is that it won’t be much. But cancerous or not, radiation will still be necessary.

I see. And when?

She has to go home and rest first, Mrs. Domínguez. For at least two months...She’s been under for many hours, and her body will need the recovery. Complications post-surgery could also still arise. The focus right now should be on her healing. And after that, then we can discuss her treatment options. But she can’t be rushed. The sooner the better, yes. But too soon is also not good.

To me, they were clearly saying: What just happened was pretty serious, and recovery plus treatment is going to be difficult. The fight is not over yet.

But, of course, it seemed to go over Mom’s head.

Thank you, Doctor. See, Luciana? If we just give her positive energy, once she recovers, she can get the radiation and put this all behind her. Everything one step at a time.

Mari—I know that Mom is just acting naïve and dumb because she’s scared, but duh? Same?

Things don’t just go away if you ignore them!

I’ve tried that for years!

And she’s been using me as her stupid buffer now for everything too.

Cuz whenever there's a serious conversation, Mom just yanks me in the room and says, Luciana—do your job! Entertain! Explain! Translate!

And I can't believe that I failed Biology, Mari, because I'm fucking running this place.

Mostly because of *Grey's Anatomy*. But still.

Because if you talk to Mom, or Dad, they'll both tell you that everything is fine.

But they're only referring to now—in this moment. Because I learned that in order for Abue to truly be okay, there's a few things we have to check off first.

Yes—every time I search Abue's specific tumor online, it says that they are extremely rare and aggressive. And that you REALLY have to be on top of all the doctors and nurses to make sure they don't fuck up.

Because the patients that get the surgery and survive get to live—yes—but that's only for like five more years!

What the hell? Mom, have you heard about this? Why hasn't anybody mentioned it?!

Everything one step at a time, Luciana. Remember what the doctor said. Let's get through this part first.

Like, um, HELLO?

Was the surgery just a band-aid?!

Because that's fucking depressing!

Which I guess is Mom's whole point...but we should at least be coming up with a plan here!

This seems a lot more complicated now than just 'waiting for her results.'

Like—what if we push her through the horrors of chemo, Mari, only for her to be painfully sick during her last few years?

Everything I've read online says that is possible!

Luciana, this is WebMD. Get it out of my face. We don't know anything yet. The tumor could be benign.

How?! They said it had spread!

Some benign masses can do that...

Wait, really? Omg. Wow. Thank god. Hold on—how do you know?

But I'm gonna need a clear head, and a fresh shower, if I even wanna think about going up against Mom.

Her behavior and mindset are extremely unpredictable.

You should have seen her and Dad when Abue first came out of surgery...

They were acting all weird, like terrified teenage contestants on *America's Next Top Model*.

What is wrong with you guys? You look like constipated statues.

Just quietly standing across from Abue while she lay in bed (obviously she's Tyra), waiting for her to spit out whatever direction she had for them, before hurrying on out with their tails between their legs.

If you need anything, Mom, you can also ask Luciana. She's here to help too.

No. She's a child.

That's what I said!

Leaving me there, alone, with their medical secrets on gag order.

And you wouldn't even have KNOWN that Abue had just gone through a lifesaving medical procedure.

Because the first thing she asked when we were finally alone—was how bad the damage was to her precious stomach.

Yup.

The one that she had paid 'a fortune for years ago,' and the doctors 'just had to rip open.'

Couldn't they have gone around it?

No. Do you know where your gallbladder is?

Do you? You don't even know where your own head is!

I was like, Um, how are you this awake after an eight-hour surgery? Lol.

But you should have seen her before too. Before they gave her all those drugs that knocked her out.

Because she was walking around the entire floor like a peacock... strutting her feathers up and down the halls...

Flaunting her yellow-ass body in everybody's face.

Like she was looking for a challenge. Or a mate.

I want them to remember me.

For what?! They're seeing you tomorrow.

And she had that scowl on and heavy hip swing going too...

Like she fucking owned the place.

Like she had somehow invented gallbladders.

And gallbladders had never looked this good on anyone.

Can you come back in the room, please? You're starting to scare people.

What? They've never seen a beautiful woman before?

And whenever they rolled another patient in, if they were even remotely pretty, Abue would shoot them a death stare and say, Why are their eyelashes so long?! And why is their hair so thick? *They better be careful or I'll trim them both in their sleep!*

She was even refusing to put on her hospital gown like thirty minutes before the surgery, dude.

Abue, they can't operate if you stay in your crop top. Will you please just change? And where is your daughter? I need a break here!

Like...would it kill her to just cover up for once in her life?

I don't get it.

Is that really how she wants to look when she's FaceTiming her sons?
And you know how much they love to talk about tits.

Don't say things so grotesque to me, Luciana.

You're the one practically walking around in a bra!

But it's probably where you get it from, huh?

Right?

Yeah, I saw those pictures.

You posting about getting shit-faced and taking shots at TGI Fridays with your tits out...

All while I'm sitting here—on no sleep. In a reclining vomit-stained chair. Trying to pull our grandmother through this insanity.

At least BLOCK ME next time, Jesus.

Um, maybe I'd ask 'how you're doing,' Mari, if I didn't already know from your Instagram.

And look, I know that being a drunk slut is just how you cope, but if you're not coming home, I'm gonna need you to be doing more here.

Calling Abue ONE TIME before surgery wasn't enough.

I need you to be calling Mom, every day, and asking her what the long-term plan is.

Because the vibes here are—too chill.

Everyone's acting like after her surgery, and with a few sprinklings of chemo, Abue's going to be just fine for the next thirty years.

That might not be true, Mom! Can you please just look at this?

I told you that I'm not reading anything from WebMD.

THIS IS FROM A PAMPHLET IN THE LOBBY.

Even the nurses think Abue is perfectly fine and hilarious!

Whenever they walk in, Abue's immediately all, 'Ay so beautiful, so beautiful!' So then I have to explain to them right away that she's not actually flirting, those are just the only words she knows in English.

That's okay, hon. I love her. My patients on this floor are usually very sick.

No, I think she is very sick...She just doesn't know it yet.

And Abue is such an actress too.

The poor nurses never know when she's serious.

She asked if I had any mascara earlier. Does she still need that?

Ugh, no.

So I told them that they just had to assume the answer was never, or their heads would explode. *Like mine. See? Look at these greasy, gray hairs. And I just turned eighteen in June.*

She's a total performer, that one.

Which is also why I have to constantly check her medical records to see if what she's saying is true.

Luciana. My foot hurts. Call the doctor.

No. I'm not bringing anyone else in here to play with you. They didn't operate on your foot!

At this point, I'm even scared that she's never gonna wanna leave the hospital!

Because at least here she's got a parade of nurses strolling in and out all day, fawning over her. *How is she doing? Is she okay? Does she still need a hair dryer?* And all anyone wants to do is mention her beauty, or her energy, or her attitude to me. *She's a fortress. She's a vision. Is she really seventy-five?*

So I can already see the wheels turning in Abue's head, with her thinking, Hmm...I could get used to this...

And freaking Mom just lets Abue sit there, in la-la land, unaware that her problems are closing in on her. Because she thinks that everything is fine now that Abue is acting normal again. *She's doing so good, Nana. Aren't you glad that you listened to me?*

The only person that understands the situation at hand is this Haitian nurse named Junior.

He loves to discuss astrology, and practice his Spanish with her. And knows that Abue's performance is one whole long con.

My uncle had the same kind of tumor. So she can try and fake it with me, but I know she's in pain.

Good! I need an ally here!

And he's got her wrapped around his finger, ever since they discovered that they have the same birthday. So now they're both obsessed with being Aquarian little bitches.

Luciana, where's Junior? I haven't seen him again today.

He even calls her 'diosa' whenever he walks in. *Hola hola, diosa! How is my diosa goddess today?*

She probably thinks the tumor is worth it...just for that.

Junior! My beautiful boy. Ven aquí, sit. Let's chat.

And whenever Tío Ivan or Tomás calls, Abue pretends that it's one of her 'many rich boyfriends' from far away, calling to bother her again over something meaningless. All so that she and Junior can both giggle and say, Hello, Xavier? Is that you? *I can't hear you. I think we have a bad connection.* And so then they can both roll their eyes and scream, What, Xavier?! I told you that I didn't want the yacht parked out front! And how

did you get this number? Your assistant Erica was supposed to save it as my private line!

Diosa! Tell him to stop bothering you on our girls' trip!

Xavier, I have to go. Junior is taking me and Nana out to lunch. Be well. Kisses. Tell Erica she is fired.

So I asked Abue if her boyfriend Xavier could also call my school and tell them what's going on.

Because I didn't actually die evacuating for Irma in a Georgia swamp, like they probably had thought.

I'm just still missing because I'm here—at Mount Sinai Hospital—worried that my grandmother is dying and no one is telling her.

And because my sister wants to party, she's not flying here tonight.

Oh! And did you also know that because you're not coming home right now, Mom has officially asked Luisa to come in your place? Or were you just going to gloss over that too?

Hmm. You knew.

Remarkable.

Well, I'm terrified about what would happen if I was ever stuck in a hospital and in the hands of you two... You're both so conniving!

But you fucked up.

Because I can't wait to tell Abue that it's your fault that Mom has orchestrated the visit of one of her mortal enemies.

So good luck, lol.

Mom—I don't think this is a good idea.

Why not? We need the plus-one and Mari can't fill that spot until later. I don't want to hear about this from you again!

Do you even feel bad, Mari?

Like at all?

Cool. So you don't care that while Abue was in surgery, practically fighting for her life, Mom was on the phone with Tía Luisa, explicitly betraying what could have been Abue's final wishes.

All because you wouldn't just say that you wanted to come home!

Next weekend? Yes, Luisa. That works. We should be home by then.

MOM! Did you just say yes to her? Shouldn't you talk to Abue first?!

No. This is more important than your grandmother's ego. Luisa is a good person! She wants to help! And I don't care if your grandmother doesn't want her here. We need the extra pair of hands. If it were up to her—she'd be dead by now! We can't wait for her to resolve things anymore, Nana. We need to just give her a little push.

Omg, you're obsessed with the pushing! This isn't the time for another one of your history lessons, Mom. Abue needs to be at rest and focused on her recovery.

Exactly. And this is the perfect opportunity for her to realize that time is not infinite. Because her actions can hurt people too! So if she doesn't make up the time now, for the years she has lost, she's going to regret it for the rest of her life. I am sick of her turning away people that just want to love her! Don't you want more for her? To be less alone?!

Um, I have no idea how that's going to go...

And I can't even think about it.

Because the last time I heard about Luisa, Abue was trying to change her phone number because she had just tried to call and say happy birthday.

Emilia? No, not here. She's dead.

Emi, is that you? It's me. Luisa.

Wrong number.

*One time, I even asked Abue why she hated Luisa so much, and she just was like, Well I used to love her. *Past tense*. 'So what forms over that—is hate.'*

I know...I was like, Okay. I still don't get it, lol.

She was my sister. I took care of her. And then she turned her back on me. That's how I feel.

But when I asked Mom how she was going to tell Abue that Luisa was coming, she was like, What do you mean? I'm just going to tell her that her sister is visiting.

Omg.

So along with the tumor's long-term consequences, Mom is also denying the existence of a decades-long feud.

There is no ‘feud,’ Luciana. Don’t be ridiculous. It’s just regular sibling drama! Over typical things, like money. But this will heal them, trust me. It’s the only good thing that will come of it. Family is family—and you only get one.

Colombians are so funny, dude...

Your own mother could stab you in the face, and they’d still be like, Es tu mamá! Solo tienes una!

But then why can’t Tío Ivan or Tomás come? Or Víctor? They’re family too.

If your grandmother saw all of her children in one room, it would give her a heart attack! She’d think something much worse than a tumor was going on!

So now thanks to you and Mom, I don’t know what the hell I’m supposed to be more afraid of here.

Telling Abue that she might have cancer—or telling Abue that she’s seeing her sister.

So fuck you!

Because that’s so annoying!

I was really looking forward to going home next week...

To finally see Rosy...and sleep in my room.

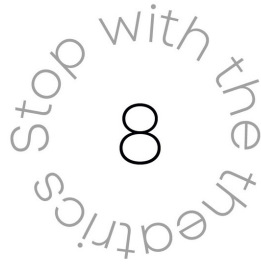
And maybe even have a normal day.

Where I didn’t have to text you or Nico, an update on Abue, Irma, or Mom.

But now—I think that we might be more safe here!

At the hospital.

Since I don’t know what going home will bring.”



Deja el show

“I think this may be the last time you hear from me alive, Mari.

Yup.

Mom did it.

She fucking did it.

They sent us home after a whole week in the hospital, and the second we got through our front door, Mom told Abue everything.

I don't think I can hold it in much longer, Nana. We're getting too close to Luisa's arrival.

What? Now? No. We just got here. Wait for her to settle in first.

Actually, it was worse than that.

Because like a psycho, to make it as quick and painless for herself as possible, Mom decided that she couldn't wait anymore and blurted the news out while Abue was sitting on the toilet. *It's for protection. I need the barrier of the bathroom door between us.*

Omg. Should I be scared?

Yes, Mari.

As in, the minute that we entered our house, Abue said that she had to pee, and Mom was just like, Perfect. This is my moment.

No, it's not!

And she then proceeded to help Abue up the stairs, running the speech in her head for like thirty seconds, and then she pressed herself against the bathroom door and said, Mom—your sister Luisa is coming. *Okay? She's coming here to help with your care.*

I—I don't think I can hear you, Elena. What did you just say?

Before you say anything, Ma, please just listen. Luisa is coming. Okay? I need her help. I know you might be upset but we have no choice. She's already booked her flight for next weekend. I need to get back to work, and Luciana has school. We need someone around who can help. And the only people who do that for free—are family.

Obviously, Mom wanted the whole thing to be an ambush.

So Abue didn't have much time to prepare or fight.

Next weekend? What do you mean she's coming next weekend? No, Elena. She's not coming at all. Don't do this to me. I could fall through this toilet right now! You're taking advantage that I'm weak! Get in here and hand me the toilet paper!

But it didn't work.

Because when Abue came out of the bathroom, she immediately told me to open a window and push her out.

Do it, Luciana. Get up here! This isn't funny!

And she was serious too.

Had her nostrils flaring and everything.

Okay, okay. Just don't pinch me.

So Mom, seeing where her secret mission was heading, had to start getting in Abue's face trying to do damage control, telling her that she didn't have to worry and it was all going to be okay.

You should be grateful that she wants to help! You need twenty-four/seven care! I need to teach more swimming lessons to pay for these bills, and I know you don't think Luciana goes to school, Ma, but she does.

Elena—I told you that if that woman ever came, I would never forgive you. So go! Get out of here. And you, Luciana, help me get into this bed. I don't want your mother's traitorous breath going anywhere near me.

And that's when things got a little dark...

Because Mom should have just faced the consequences of her actions.

No...Mom...What are you doing? Not right now. Give her a minute. She's already in pain.

But she decided to twist the knife in Abue's back instead.

Luisa is coming because you might need more treatment, Ma.

Excuse me?

Yes. Mom grabbed Abue's hands and said, 'We're not sure what the mass inside of you was. So we need to be prepared for the worst.'

And that—of course—very abruptly got Abue's attention.

What do you mean?! I thought the doctors took it out?

Yes...But not all of it. Like I told you. They had to leave a few parts in... And those might still require, um, some treatment.

What KIND of treatment, Elena? I won't survive another surgery!

I know. I—

No. Hush. I need to understand. You're telling me, that my sister is coming—invited by my own daughter—and now I might need to go back to that hospital bed?

You seemed perfectly fine while you were there...

I couldn't wear my own clothes for a week!

But you were being so nice to everyone?

I was trying to survive!

I wanted to scream: STOP. This is not what I meant! I didn't want to tell her like this!

But then all of the oxygen evaporated from the room...

When Abue took a deep breath and said, 'Elena. What do I have?' *And this time, don't lie to me.*

And apparently you could HEAR me gulping in the corner.

Because Abue turned to me right away and said, Hold on, what do you know? *Do you know something else here? Can you help me understand?*

And. It. Broke. My. Fucking. Heart. Dude.

Luciana? Why won't you look at me?

YES...I felt so stupid and guilty again...

For letting it all get to this.

And for listening to Mom.

When I knew that I should have been listening to my gut.

And also, because Abue looked like she couldn't decide between breaking down or marching over to strangle me.

Nana...No...You? But I tell you everything?

So Mom had to stop her from killing me by saying, 'They think that the mass inside you could be something...more.' *They're testing what they removed from you now to find out.*

Then the three of us just stood there in silence.

Like we had just gotten hit by a massive wave.

Watching Abue process the news and her eyes start to glaze over...

As she retreated to somewhere deep inside her brain.

Fuck, what do we do, Mom? Should we hug her? Are we supposed to act like it's sad? Or like she's going to be okay?

I don't know.

And after what felt like an eternity, Abue finally just said, 'I had a feeling. When does Luisa get here?'

Wait, hold on, Ma. Did you hear me? What do you think about what I just said?

Nothing. Thinking is not going to fix this.

But we still can! Once you recover. The doctors will get a closer look, and if it's anything serious, we will figure out how to take care of it. Nothing worse has to happen. Not if we don't let it.

I don't want to talk anymore. Luciana, put my news show on. I already missed last night's episode. And Elena, please leave me alone. I'm exhausted and have a stomach wound the size of my face.

Just think about what I said...I'll come back in a few.

After that, I REALLY wanted to get out of there and take a breath, to avoid any more of Abue's questions. But when I tried to leave the room, she didn't let me.

No. You stay. You betrayed me but I need help reaching for things. Unless you want to go with your two-faced mother.

Which in hindsight was probably for the best. Because I got to avoid the rest of Mom's bragging.

Did you see that, Luciana? I knew she'd shut down if we told her.

Why are you so happy about that?

I'm not. It's just a good lesson for you, to listen to me. We might have a big hill up ahead to climb. And we need to be on the same team.

Once Mom left the room though, Abue didn't skip a freaking beat.

Cuz she tried talking shit about Luisa like immediately.

You don't want to talk about your health, dude? Don't you have questions?

No. I know my treacherous sister Luisa is the reason I have this mass. She must have planted it decades ago...With her evil snotty hands. Likely as a favor to our crooked mother. And now she's coming here to finish off the job herself! Ah-ha! You'll see I'm right, Luciana, you'll see. The second you meet her. People never change...

Mom said that she just wants to help you.

Help me DIE, probably!

But before Abue could give me any real details, or start to yell at me again and disown us, she miraculously somehow just fell asleep?

I know, lol.

It was incredible.

To her, talking shit is like taking a Benadryl.

Oh, and Abue fell asleep in my room, by the way. If you were looking for even more reasons to feel bad for me.

Because it's where she lives now.

Since Mom and Dad were too scared to put her anywhere else.

For how long?! I can't do my homework around other people! I get distracted.

She's the most comfortable with you, mi amor.

So you don't care if I fail? Why'd you tell Mari to give me a pep talk about my grades then?

You're an adult now. If you want to do well, you will. No one can force you anymore. And you shared this space with Mari your entire life! You can

make it work for just a few more months. Privacy alone isn't going to get you the A.

Oh yeah. It's tight in here.

I'm sure you remember.

Dad even brought in Abue's big-ass Tempur-Pedic mattress to make sure that she felt more comfortable.

Ugh. Is this about her butt popping again? I'll throw up. And does it really have to go right next to mine?!

You need to clean up in here, Luciana. This mess isn't going to work with two people.

That's all of Abue's clothes!

The game plan is for Abue to stay here until she recovers, and then she can go back to living alone. Which I'm sure you can assume, she's really looking forward to.

I think I feel better now, Elena. I'm going to go home. I don't want to have a stroke in here with all of Luciana's farts...and it's best that Luisa has her own space. That way we can lock her in here if needed during her visit.

No. And slow down! Be careful moving, Ma. Your wound is still fresh. Stop trying to get up. The both of you need to get comfortable. This recovery is going to last for AT LEAST two months.

And I know this is gonna sound weird...

But for a second there earlier...

It almost felt like we were back to old times.

Yeah.

Like I was fifteen again and you were still here. Downstairs on the phone with your friends or something. And Mom was probably outside, saying bye to one of her swimming students. While Abue napped in our bedroom upstairs. Letting her nightly news show fill the house and blast on.

Things were just, so...nice?

Then?

With all of us just waiting for Dad to come home. Ready to spill the day's gossip at the dinner table.

And it felt really sad...to think that we were never going to be like that again.

For honestly—a lot of different reasons.

But it made me regret not cherishing how simple it all was.

When we were all doing our own thing...But together.

I think maybe there's something that I'll always miss about then.

Even if I fucking hate it here.

Ew, Mari. No!

You're so predictable.

I'm not 'guilting' you over leaving and not coming home!

I'm just sharing my feelings!

Not everything is about you. Jesus. I'm sorry if that's shocking and difficult to understand.

Whatever, man.

Abue ruined the moment too.

The second she woke up, she asked me to check on her Facebook wall to see which of her many boyfriends were wondering where she was.

I need to keep track of who cares, Luciana. It's important. I haven't been able to check since before the surgery.

It was actually kind of hilarious though...because she was right.

They were all freaking out.

All the messages on her wall were like, What's going on, Emilia? Are you there? We haven't heard from you in weeks. *Hello? My queen? Was it something I said? I'm sorry. White wine is not good for me. Please respond to my email at your earliest convenience.*

I swear, lol. You can check.

I wanted to comment: I'm confused too, bro, and I talk to her every day. The more I hear, the less I understand.

And I also don't think they realize that everyone can see their messages?

Because she had like five men revealing personal information on there.

Please come to 5516 Sea Shore Drive. I'd like to see you again.

And don't they see each other's posts?

Can't they see she's dating all of them?

Hola siempre la veo en el chat. ¿Por qué no responde? ¿Le molesta saludos de mi corazón lindo?

Are you in town this weekend? Want to meet for dinner and some fun ;)?
Will you wear that red dress again?

Abue definitely doesn't know that everyone can see her messages either though.

Because she told one of them that she was out of town on a trip to the Bahamas. *With my family. Sorry. Bad service here.*

Dude, delete that. Bahamas just got rocked by Irma.

All of their messages kind of reminded me of when Abue first made that online dating profile? Remember?

Back when we were in middle school?

Yeah, lol. When she became a Match.com sensation overnight.

WOW—do I remember some of those first dates.

Sometimes I wish I couldn't.

So much visible skin...

So much gore...

SHE couldn't even believe that so many people wanted to take her out.
They don't care that I don't speak English?

I guess not?

And then one night, she met that man named Rusty. Who loved the Hard Rock and managed those senior living facilities.

Yes. Him.

The one that said he'd pay her to come and liven up their Saturday night socials.

Whenever I ask Abue about it, she's always like, Rusty was such a salesman! He only ever took me out on those dates to see if I wanted the job!

And he'd spend the whole night after trying to flatter me. Saying that I was beautiful and that I had the perfect look to sing and entertain for his clientele. And since I had 'vocalist' under hobbies on my profile, he thought he had struck gold!

It's incredible that that's how she ended up performing weekly at the old people homes. Singing and dancing with their live bands.

Making her weekly allowance to go blow at the beauty aisle of the supermarket...

While picking up a few old hotties along the way.

And her outfits back then were ICONIC.

Like—I'm sorry, Mari, but you and your sorority sisters could never.

I just wish that Abue still had that same slutty goth style now.

Looking like the daughter of Morticia Addams and Celia Cruz.

Standing behind the mic with full-bodied makeup, and giant earrings the size of the stage.

Plus, those platform heels. That were ten inches high.

And an all-black sequined, mesh, or latex outfit on her five-foot body head to toe.

Winged eyeliner and dark purple on her lips to match.

I had to look like a professional, Nana! Like it was worth coming and seeing me perform!

Lol. I remember that Mom was so stressed back then, over how popular Abue was getting on the South Florida nursing home circuit, that when Abue still lived with us, she'd unplug the telephones at night so the directors couldn't call. *Are you sure this is safe, Ma? Why do they want to book you so bad? What exactly are you doing over there?*

I get everyone up and dancing, Elena! I sing!

So, you dance? Is there a stage?

It's good for them! Better than sitting down and feeling depressed.

Like—THAT'S the woman that I want people to remember is sick.

The one that would rather spend her last night being adored under a disco ball.

Than in a hospital room getting pricked and prodded.

JUST because she's not in her violent, seductress, demon uniform—doesn't mean that she's gone!

And she's definitely not the kind of person who needs decisions made for them.

She's always known what she wants.

C'mon, Mari...Let's be serious here.

Abue's a fucking giant!

She's not just gonna do what's 'expected,' or what everyone else wants.

Like, hello?! She made even yellow look good!

If this is truly cancer...then it's not a given that she's gonna wanna do the chemo.

You know that, right?

That she just might want to wear her crop-top collection until her body falls off?

Okay. Good.

Cuz we can't just keep waiting for the doctors to call and confirm her results to have a conversation about that.

We need to be realistic.

And if no one else will do it, maybe I'll be the one to start."

Part II



Hay comida en la casa

“Hi.

I’m so tired that I almost just put feta cheese in my coffee thinking it was almond milk.

No, I didn’t sleep well. At all actually.

Abue kept me up all night again with her fake praying.

Yes. Lucky for us, ever since coming home from the hospital, she’s discovered a new commitment to her faith.

Last night she was screaming, Oh my merciful God! Please, my sweet Jesus from Bethlehem! Wake me up from this nightmare! I’ll take the tumor—JUST PLEASE—take my sister!

Dude. I heard praying works better when you do it in your head.

No. I need to cleanse this space. I need to get rid of the stench from that woman.

She’s already been here for a week, and you’ve survived. So go back to sleep. You’re gonna be okay.

Oh, yes. Luisa is still here. And she is still alive.

Abue has not tried to poison her yet.

But good question.

Because let me walk you through this arc...

So you understand how I got here...

Getting yelled at about God—and sharing a room with two volatile seventy-something-year-old women.

Yes. Since you've obviously been too busy 'studying in the library' to call your neglected little sister.

Nope! I don't want to hear it!

You can just make it up to me once you're here.

Now shut it. Because I'm running on no sleep and can collapse any minute. And we need to throw it all the way back first to—Luisa's Arrival.

Thank you.

So as you know...once we came home from the hospital...Abue only had about a week to torment us before Luisa's visit.

However, she used her time wisely.

Can we change the locks? And can we call the embassy? Is the radio station still doing those prank calls? How fast can your father train Rosy to attack?

She yelled at us every hour from her bed like a toy soldier, saying that if any one of us went to the airport to pick Luisa up, we were traitors and she would deal with us 'accordingly.'

Mom was not fazed by her threats even slightly, though.

Don't listen to her, Nana. Stick with me. She can't ignore us for too long. How does she expect to shower? She can barely even stand up on her own!

So I told Abue that I was sorry, because I was definitely afraid of her, but I was way more scared of my mother.

Just look at her, dude. There's nothing I can do.

And when the day came to finally get Luisa from the airport, Mom just jumped in the car like it was nothing and told Dad to hang back.

Why? She won't talk to me.

That's the point, Jaime. Less interactions for her to manipulate. If Luciana stays, the two of them will be out of the country by lunchtime.

And I thought Dad's job to supervise was simple—just stand by the door and make sure Abue didn't escape.

But he was acting like we were asking him to babysit Ted Bundy.

Hold on, hold on. How long are you gonna be? And what's the mileage? Nana, why don't you stay back? With me? There's only so much I can do here.

Just watch the window, Dad.

Why?!

He was being a baby, Mari! I do it all the time.

You just give Abue like an eye shadow palette, or a magazine or something. Anything that sparkles or shines. She gets distracted by it for hours! She's a slut for that, just like you.

And it was a one-hour job, anyway...Dad was just getting hives before we even left.

No, Nana, no. Come back. Please don't leave me here.

That's how I feel about Mom. And you always leave me here!

But on the opposite end of the stress spectrum, you had Mom. Looking like the glowing picture of toxic positivity, driving to and from the airport with music on and a giant smile. *Oh, I can't wait to pick Luisa up! She's going to be so much fun.*

It's amazing...I can't tell if you actually believe that.

And then when we finally got to the airport, and Luisa came walking on out, Mom practically threw herself on the poor woman and screamed, LUISA! We're so happy that you're here! This is going to be so special! *I mean it. Thank you. We are so grateful.*

There's no need to thank me, Elena. She's my sister. I want to be here. And Nana—wow! You look like an adult now! The last time I saw you, you barely made it up to my hip!

Hi, Luisa...Oh. Really! It's been that long? Interesting...

And on the drive home, Mom started talking up a big game, about how we were all going to make this visit work—no matter what. 'Because family is family and it's all we got.'

Bravo, Elena. Well said. How is Emilia doing though? You sure it's okay with her that I'm here?

Not mentioning at all that we had left Abue on a hunger strike back at home.

Oh, you know! She's...processing.

So I was beginning to hold major tension in my jaw, hearing Luisa talk about all the plans that she had for her and Abue.

I found lots of activities that could help her recover!

Because she was like: We're gonna go on so many walks together! And sing our old favorite songs! Even try out some new cooking recipes, and paint the 'beautiful mountain landscapes' of our hometown. *I think it'll help her relax.*

So I was like, Wow. You REALLY haven't talked to Abue in decades. She thinks that painting is for uncultured morons who want to fill their time with delusions. And she definitely doesn't eat.

But before I could finish my sentence, Mom interrupted me with, AW! THAT'S WONDERFUL. SHE USED TO LOVE MAKING ART!

No? She gets light-headed from the paint smells?

That's just her normal state. Luisa—don't listen to her.

And Dad wasn't helping my anxiety either. Because he was blowing up my phone texting the whole time.

You guys on the way yet? There traffic? What's Luisa saying? Does Emilia always lock the bedroom door like this? Why is Rosy whimpering in there again? Is that normal? Do you think I can step away for a second to make some coffee? How much longer exactly will you all be?

In his defense though, lol, Abue had barricaded herself in our room with the door locked for over an hour. So he was starting to get a little concerned.

What do we do? If she stays in there?

So once we heroically made it home, Mom had to run inside fast to 'check on Abue,' while I waited outside patiently, guarding Luisa in the car.

Oh my. Luciana—is that your dad? Walking out the front door? He looks the same! Except the sweaty T-shirt. He must have just been working out. Jaime—hello!

Shit...Dad, are you okay? What's going on in there?

Hello, Luisa! Good to see you. Thank you for being here. I'm just going to go for a little drive.

But then things started to take too long, and I got worried, so I worked up the courage to get out and bring Luisa inside.

And when I got upstairs...I found Mom pounding on Abue's door like King Kong, begging for her to listen and urgently open up.

Stop being a child, Ma! Your sister just flew here to help you.

Um, Mom. Please be careful. I need that door too.

So for a second there I was like, Okay wait. Maybe let's pause and think about this?

If Abue has kept up her drama, then maybe we shouldn't force her to see her sister? She obviously really doesn't want to!

This feels extreme. Even for her. And we just told her that she might be sick...What if she needs more time? Shouldn't we respect that?

But Mom basically just spit on me and said, It's too late for that, idiot! Help me open this door! *She's just not thinking rationally. We have to do it for her. Their generation never learned to communicate!*

Oh, I think she's communicating.

She cannot die with this grudge, Luciana! Help me! She needs to know that people loved her. PUSH!

And Mom was really starting to scare me, with all of her pushing and grunting, so I told her to step aside and let me handle the door problem.

Abue. It's me. Please open. Or I'm going to have to pick the lock.

No! Stay out of this, Luciana. You're too young! Go enjoy your life. I wish I had!

Then I braced myself for impact...slid my debit card between the door and latch...and opened up.

I come in peace, Abue.

Walking in trembling. But with my arms raised high.

And I told Abue, 'Suit up. Luisa is here.' And I don't know what happened between you two, but Mom does not give a shit. She is making this happen. *It's out of my hands now, I'm sorry. I am simply warning you.*

But then Abue just screamed at the top of her lungs.

Which Luisa heard from the living room downstairs, and for some reason took it as a sign to come on up.

Fuck...

Oh yeah, she started stomping up the stairs. Yelling and everything. Screaming: ‘Emilia! There’s no need to do this!’ And that they were grown now, older and past everything, and this time, Abue was the one who needed help.

Luciana, look at me. Look at your grandmother. Do not let her come through that door.

I have to! She’s not just going to stand outside the entire visit! And you have Mom crying in fetal on the floor!

Lock that door! I don’t care what your mother says!

UGH. I hate when you two do this.

And I think that’s when I finally gave up.

Because in the middle of my panicking, I started to look around for a place to hide, and I thought to myself, What? No. What the fuck am I doing?

I warned everybody that this would happen! Everybody!

I TOLD them that Abue wasn’t going to take this well. And that it wasn’t the right time.

But now, what?

Dad just gets to leave and avoid the fallout?

While Mom cries like a helpless baby by the stairs?

After letting this bomb with hair and legs waltz in here?

Fuck that. I’m not the freaking feelings janitor.

And I couldn’t believe that once again, I was being ignored, yet I was still gonna be the one to have to fix everything.

So for the first time in my life I said: No. I don’t want to do this job today.

And I told Abue that I was sorry—but I was opening up.

Whatever happens, this wasn’t on me. I can’t do anything more here.

And my moment of bravery should have honestly been more highlighted...

But Luisa took my thunder.

Because right on cue, she sprinted in past me.

Emilia! Mi hermana!

Yup.

With all their years of heartbreak and trauma.

DO NOT COME NEAR ME.

Along with their teenage selves, and their attitudes.

Like a flood.

I'm sorry, Abue.

And I swear both of their hands swung to their hips so fast that they practically smacked me. Creating a gust of wind.

With their lips suddenly looking perfectly pursed.

Ready for a fight.

I'm just here to help, Emi. I promise.

No, Abue didn't attack her, lol.

The first thing she did was just take a deep breath and close her eyes.

Lord, I am asking for your strength.

And then she looked at me and said, 'Go get me some water.' Like a fucking WWE fighter getting ready for round one.

Like she didn't want me sticking around to see the bloodshed.

Um, is everything going to be okay?

Yes. Just go.

Of course I was scared, Mari!

But I happily obliged.

I didn't want to be there for whatever explosive-ass interaction was about to happen...I'll have you remember that the woman has perfect aim. I ran out of there immediately and sat down with Mom in the hallway.

Scoot in. And don't make a sound.

No, Abue didn't actually punch Luisa then either, lol.

She can barely lift a pillow.

Well, at first...all we heard was some stomping and yelling...And a lot of 'Why are you here!' and 'Please! I just want to help!' But then there was

a lot of crying, and a lot of sniffing, and after a heated back-and-forth that was too hush-hush for us to understand, all we heard was silence.

Oh my god. Did we do it? Did they come to a truce? Luciana, go in there and check.

But unfortunately for me, Abue then screamed: LUCIANA. GET IN HERE WITH THAT WATER.

No. Mom. Don't make me do it.

She asked for you.

And when I walked in, it was clear that: Things Had Been Said.

Because whatever it was—had obviously made Luisa upset.

She was sitting at the foot of the bed, crying...quietly wiping the tears off her face.

All while Abue just looked at her, with disgust, slowly shaking her head.

Here's the water you asked for...

I seriously wanted to say, Peace out, Girl Scouts. This shit is too awkward for me. But Abue abruptly grabbed my arm and said, Luciana—tell her she can stay.

Really?!

Yes. If she keeps her promise.

Both Luisa and I then obviously almost broke our necks in SHOCK. Looking up at her in disbelief.

I will, Emi. I promise. We don't have to talk about anything that you don't want. I'm only here to help with your recovery.

And once Abue said yes, again, Luisa got up and ran out to the car to get the rest of her things.

We'll see how long that promise lasts.

Yes, Mari. You idiot. Of course I asked Abue what went down. But she gave me nothing!

What happened? What is she talking about?

My girl...what didn't. But go change the sheets on your bed. Your mother said that's where Luisa is sleeping.

Omg. Really?!

Yes. They're putting a cot for you on the floor. You should complain.

And I thought about pressing her for more info, but the whole day had already been too much. My IBS is flaring up again now just thinking about it.

Which is why I'm so thankful—that ever since that initial confrontation—all we've had in the house is silence.

An intense, charged, and threatening silence, yes. But at least it's quiet.

Cuz could you imagine, Mari?

World War Sister Edition while I'm trying to catch back up in school? Trying to figure out how to apply to colleges?

Like, Sorry I couldn't go over the *Macbeth* lesson, Mrs. Nelson! My grandmother is just in my room trying to kill her sister!

I'm kidding, lol. Chill. Abue hasn't attempted homicide yet.

And believe it or not, she's actually now even been starting to warm up...

Yeah.

I think she finally believes that Luisa really is just here to help. Since it's been over a week now, and she hasn't been forced into any reconciliations.

But the second she starts asking questions, she's out! Do you hear me, Luciana?

I don't think she will, dude. Mom's the only one who wants you two to sing "Kumbaya."

I don't understand why! Your mother needs to be more careful. Because she wouldn't take it well. If Luisa and I talked. She's too sentimental, and it would ruin her fantasies.

Let's just try to keep the peace going here. I don't want anyone else's stupid decisions to derail us from what's important. We can't forget about your health...And maybe, you know, we should start thinking about what comes next...for when the doctors call.

Yes, Mari. I know YOU would have asked Abue more questions, but you're not really here to deal with the consequences of that, are you?

Exactly.

And we can't get distracted just because the doctors haven't called with her results.

The faster that we can help Abue get better, the faster we can deal with the part of the tumor that's still left inside.

Cancerous or not.

And she's been in less pain lately too. I don't want to rock the boat.

Plus, I even think that she's starting to get a sick pleasure from having Luisa at her beck and call...

Yeah. It's like her new kink.

Luisa? Where are you? It's time to hang my clothes again. No, not there. On the top rack, you'll need a stool. Yes. By the door. And organize by colors this time, please. And texture too. But make sure you start with the crocheted mesh on the right.

Why don't we do some of your stretches first, Emi? That'll help you recover. I can always clean up later while you're asleep.

No. This is better. This helps.

So I guess that's the short version of how we got here—where things have remained civil.

Through inverted power dynamics and asking no questions.

But Luisa's seriously been a champ though. Really.

She doesn't sweat the small stuff, or any of Abue's bitchy comments.

She just wants to be useful and help. And make me these delicious sandwich lunches...I even somehow get yelled at way less now.

Luciana, go clean your room.

Don't have to. Luisa already did it.

What are you eating? Is that a croissant?

Yes. Luisa got them from Costco.

She ran your errands?!

Yeah, Luisa said that to her, the goal was simple.

She was here to help her big sister navigate the harder chapters of her life, just like Abue had helped Luisa navigate hers. *There is no use in getting stuck in the details.*

And while I'm definitely still Team Abue, it's nice to finally have a comrade around here! Another witness to all the craziness.

Did you hear that?

*Yes. I think your Mom is doing pull-ups again against the wall.
I don't get it. It's like she's training for a marathon or something.
I haven't quite understood it either.*

Who knows—maybe I won't even need you anymore!

Okay. You were supposed to get mad at that.

Not agree. I hate you.

You know...if the roles were reversed, I'd be acting like the BEST older sister right now.

Yeah! I'd be sending you care packages and shit, checking in on you. Making sure that you were still alive, and Mom wasn't subjecting you to torture.

But what do I get? You.

An older sister who's too busy snorting Adderall off frat boys' dicks to pay attention.

No—I don't care that you've been 'worried about your classes!' You've never gotten a bad grade in your life.

And is school seriously that much more important than us? Your grandmother and sister?!

Actually, don't answer that.

I don't want to hear your answer.

And I'm just glad that you finally called me back...

I've been wanting to tell you this other thing that Luisa said. And I couldn't really just spring it on you over text.

Yes. And I knew you'd want the drama update first anyway.

But um...Luisa told me some things about what happened to Abue. When Fernanda first took her out of school. And lucky for you—it all sounded like it fucking sucked.

So I'm going to just be grateful that we're both busy getting an education right now.

Just for this once.

Because Luisa told me that she didn't mind coming here to help now, since Abue had dealt with a lot by herself growing up. And back then, Luisa hadn't always been as helpful.

What exactly happened? My mom said that Abue got pulled out of school...But that she didn't know what came next.

Yeah. She said that after their father was shot, their mother, Fernanda, became like, brutally unrecognizable with pain.

She was very angry. And under a lot of stress. Worried that without money, they would take her children from her far away.

And that she started acting like Abue had shot the man herself.

What? Why?!

I think a part of our mother had convinced herself that Emilia really had. By making him delusional. Or blinding him with love. She had never been warm with us growing up, so we were much closer with our dad. But Emilia, especially. His first girl. He wanted to provide for her and us by any means necessary. And that's what our mother thought had killed him. Because he would have done anything for his children. Even if it put him in harm's way.

So Luisa said that after the murder, once Abue was taken out of school, Fernanda only ever let her cook, clean, or take care of her sisters. And that she wouldn't even let her leave the house!

Emilia had to stop seeing her friends. And going to choir practice. Doing anything that made her feel like she had a normal life. Fernanda needed her at home, while she left the house during the day looking for jobs. And the plan was extreme, I know. But our mother had no other option. She was a widow with four kids. Emilia only did what she had to do because she was the oldest. It would have been me or someone else if we had come first. But I know it was hard...It's sad to see her struggle again now. After everything.

I know...And that after a while, Fernanda became so clouded with grief and pain, that she started just coming down on Abue disproportionately hard. If she ever found a problem with anything.

She forgot that Emilia was just a kid, a teenager even. So you can imagine that they fought a lot. Your grandmother was tired, and she was stubborn. She didn't want to be strong at home or keep playing mom. She missed her life...And she didn't know how to deal with the loss of our dad.

But our mother didn't understand any of it. She didn't get why Emi just wouldn't listen. To her, it was clear that if she didn't obey, we wouldn't survive.

So after one too many fights, Fernanda and Abue just became fire and air.

The anger of one always heightening that of the other.

And that by the end, Abue wasn't just feeling resentment.

She was feeling straight-up RAGE.

From all her wounds...and the physical and emotional torment that had gone on.

There was one day I'll never forget. I know your grandmother thinks of it too. Our mother had come home in a sour mood, and she saw that Emilia hadn't washed the dishes. So they got in an argument. And Emilia told her that she was leaving. That she'd had enough—and she was getting out. Because she didn't want to keep living without a life anymore...But our mother stopped her and blocked the door. And she beat Emilia so bad right there, that all her limbs turned blue. It was horrifying...She made us watch so we knew what she'd do to us too. If we ever stepped out of line. So the rest of us were scared to do anything after that...And your grandmother, she hasn't looked at us the same way since.

Okay? That makes me feel sick?

If we could have done something, we would have. I promise you. But we were too scared, we only did what we were told back then. And we were told that we had to be perfect. To not give our family any more trouble than we already had. She was only trying to protect us—our mother. Trying to do whatever she could to keep us alive.

By BEATING you?!

It wasn't right! But it was common back then. And she knew that if Emilia didn't get in line, the rest of us were going to suffer. So I learned to forgive her. And our sisters did too. It's part of why your grandmother resents us.

Rightfully so, after that, Abue began to keep her distance. Hardly saying anything to anyone inside the house. And over time, Fernanda brainwashed

the rest of them into thinking that Abue only cared about herself. Telling them that she was plotting to leave anyway. Because she didn't care about what happened to her family.

It's sad, but we believed our mother. And I've paid the price with Emilia ever since. Years went by without us talking to each other. And when Emilia left, she was never heard from again. So we told ourselves that our mother had been right...But as I got older, I learned to see my sister in a different light.

And so when Mom told Luisa that Abue was sick, she dropped everything and jumped at the chance to make things right.

I had kept up with your mother over the years. Here and there. But when she told me that your grandmother was ill, I couldn't sit back and let her suffer again. I couldn't even picture it—can you believe it? I have never seen your grandmother cry...All those years under our mother, and she never let herself crack. That's what breaks my heart the most. That she lived with her pain in silence...Our other sisters told me not to bother, that there was no good in regrets or bringing up the past. But I had to try.

And listen, while I thought that what Luisa was saying and doing was really nice, I started to get a little fed up. Because it was a lot of information! And I didn't understand how she could still be defending their mom!

But how can you be here now? Trying to help my grandmother? And still have sympathy for this person who hurt her?

I don't mean to upset you, Nana...We can take things slow. So you can understand.

Luisa was like, I hear you—but there's a lot more that you don't know. So why don't we take it day by day here? *We're only a few weeks into her recovery. And I don't know which feathers I'm allowed to ruffle.*

Yes, it was annoying, and ominous, but she was totally right.

I couldn't handle any more information.

I was already getting heated—AND I'm a terrible liar. I wouldn't have been able to keep it from Abue or Mom.

And then that would just radicalize them both in the opposite directions...

Because Mom would think it's even MORE of a reason why Abue and her sister should talk, and Abue would just set fire to the house with Luisa in it. So no thank you. I need their heads in the game here! Not getting sidetracked with blasts from the past.

I could barely handle it, Mari! And I'm the LEAST involved.

And I should probably hear Abue's version of things first too. Before I 'awwww' at or believe anything else that Luisa says. Because you gotta keep your eyes peeled around here.

They're all manipulators.

Who knows what is even true...

What I do believe, though, is that Abue thinks her sisters are pussy-ass traitors. Kind of like someone else I know.

YES, MARI. She's all about loyalty!

One time I watched an episode of *Riverdale* without her, and she didn't let me talk to her for like two weeks.

Why do you care? You don't even know what they're saying!

I like to look at their outfits!

A full household betrayal would equal DECADES of silence.

And it's actually even kind of creepy to see Luisa and Abue side by side...

Because you can tell they share something, it's in their walk. But other than that—there's not a single drop of chemistry there that says, What's up? We're sisters!

Oh. That's true, lol.

They do have that identical five-foot frame.

And those same meaty thighs...that funnel into tiny, cute, compact calves.

Practically making them look like bitchy baby ponies.

I'm looking at them now.

I wouldn't laugh, Mari. You have the same ones.

But THEN...you get to their upper bodies...and it's like night and day with those two.

First—you have Luisa. With a lesbian haircut and full head of gray hair. And boobs that are calmly resting down her chest. Like they're fucking supposed to.

Like they've lived a long, happy, and healthy fulfilling life.

And she's in that crunchy hiking outfit that she's always in.

The one from her WhatsApp profile picture.

But then on the other side of the ring you have Abue...with those loud, giant, perky knockers. That basically push the skin up on her face all on their own. Screaming at you to stare at them—from freaking ten feet away.

And then her perfectly done blue-black curls.

Ready every morning.

I mean, it's wild to even think that these two people share DNA.

Science is crazy.

Like...Luisa is who you go up to at the mall when you can't find your Mom.

And Abue is the reason you run.

So, it's absolutely SHOCKING to hear that she wasn't the original mean girl in her life. Since there's probably so much less trauma in the world since she never made it past the ninth grade.

But whatever. I can't think about that right now.

Or I'll get depressed.

I just have to keep my eyes on the prize here...

For Abue's sake.

Especially since it seems that I'm the only one focused on her recovery."



Por pendeja

“What the FUCK is a ‘Turkey Trot,’ Mari?

Are you racing and training birds now?

Is that what you’re doing?

Is that what you’re taking Mom and Dad’s hard-earned money to learn at college?

Because that’s what it sounds like!

That’s what everyone is going to think that you’re ditching your family for.

Fucking turkeys.

Oh, yes. Mom told me.

I’m officially aware that you’re abandoning us for Thanksgiving. Congratulations. She did your dirty work for you.

Luciana, I’m only going to say this once. Because it’s not up for discussion. We have way too many other things to worry about right now. But Mari and her sorority sisters have raised so much money for diabetes research this fall, that the national headquarters of the organization is inviting them to participate in a 5K race this Thanksgiving in New York City. They’re going to travel and go raise awareness there, all expenses

paid. It's an opportunity that she can't give up. And you should be proud of her! They picked her and only one other member from the sorority. It's a selfless and noble thing to do.

Elena. Are you serious?

I don't want to hear it! We'll see Mari right after for Christmas. And you should really be thinking long and hard to yourself about what she's doing...Because she's opening doors for herself and creating new experiences. Exactly what me and you talked about on our trip!

Our 'trip'? I can't believe this.

Mari's Thanksgiving break is too short anyway! You should have seen the prices for those flights...New York will be good for her. She's never been!

I—I don't even know what to say.

Don't say anything. Or you're grounded. I promised her that if she went, it would all be okay. That no one would be mad at her. And your grandmother would be fine.

Um, what about ME?!

You're already here! The day you work hard and earn new experiences, you can do just the same.

And I can't even actually say how I'm feeling right now!

Because Mom put me under gag order!

But just know that I think you're pathetic for hiding behind our mother.

Actually, no.

What's pathetic is me—offering Dad money to help with your plane ticket.

Yes, it's how I found out!

No, Nana. It's okay. Your mother said Mari is having issues with her schedule. But this is very nice. I know how much you love your sister.

But she's coming, right?

You should talk to your mom.

Because like an idiot, I thought that money would be the only thing that would ever stop you from coming home.

But joke's on me! Because you actually just don't want to be here!

Luciana, if your feelings are hurt that your sister isn't coming, just tell her. I know you miss her. But stop using your grandmother as an excuse.

I KNOW that I'm seeing you on Christmas, Mari, but still...You came home for both holidays last year. This will be the longest that we've ever been apart!

UGH.

And with everything going on right now—I NEED YOU.

Are you really going to start making me say that?!

Ugh. Now I have to hang up before I start to cry...I won't be able to handle your fake-ass pity...

But why the hell would Mom decide TODAY is the best time to tell me this?!

This day already COMPLETELY FUCKING SUCKS.

Yes—and I know that Mom already told you. So you can drop your little act with that too. It's only making me MORE angry.

Please, Mari. Of course I already know. Who do you think runs the show around here?

The second I got home from school, Mom told me that Abue's doctor had called.

And I knew exactly then what she was going to say.

Luciana, come sit. They called with your grandmother's results. It's cancer, mi amor. I'm so sorry. I know you're scared, but we have to figure out what we are going to do.

I'm fine, Mari. Unlike you—I'm not acting like it's a total fucking surprise.

Since I've actually BEEN HERE. And have been paying attention.

So am I upset? Obviously. But am I shocked? No.

I was printing and handing out pages from WebMD WEEKS ago.

I am only worried now because—what the fuck is wrong with you people?!

Mom is acting like it's the first time that she's ever heard of the word 'cancer,' and now you think it's appropriate to travel despite the news?!

Do not guilt Mari with the diagnosis, Luciana. You don't get to do that. Everyone deals with things differently. And her delaying coming home for one more month isn't going to fix anything. It's good that your grandmother has this space! Before more people know.

Like...I know that Mom used to tell us to go on a run if we were ever upset...but this is just a whole other level.

Wouldn't you rather be sad WITH a six-pack, Luciana? Or be crying in a museum instead of your bed? Think about it!

And I can't even count on Abue!

Because she's the first one to pretend that there is nothing to do!

Oh, c'mon, Mari. BARF. Spare me your bullshit optimism. Abue wouldn't even evacuate! She's not gonna opt into anything that makes her life hard!

Or any less hot...

ESPECIALLY treatment.

She's gonna just choose to take that gamble every time.

Even if it costs her her life...

I'm sorry. But I had to say it.

Because it's the very simple deductive reasoning from what's GLARING right in front of us.

And I wish you'd use that big stupid brain of yours to see that!

Um...it kills me too, you know?!

She's like my favorite person!

No offense.

I want her to fight, Mari, I do. But I also don't want to waste my time with her hoping for that.

Lesson LEARNED from Irma.

No? I am not 'intellectualizing' my feelings?

What the fuck does that mean?

Ew. Don't even try telling me that you've started going to therapy. Because if you did—it's impossible to tell.

Lol. 'Archetypes'? 'Radical acceptance'?

Oh god...You are so much more far gone than I actually thought.

I HAVE THE INTERNET, TOO, DUDE. I KNOW ABOUT ‘ATTACHMENT STYLES.’ STOP MAKING THIS ABOUT YOU.

All I’m gonna say is that when Mom told me, ‘The doctor called. This thing with your grandmother could be serious. The long-term prognosis is not good.’ I knew then that you were all stupid—and all of my Google searches had been right.

Because the fine print now is that without chemo or radiation, this mass is going to kill her.

And we should have been fucking talking about that in the hospital, and she should have fucking known that before her surgery. You’ve had her here at home for weeks now thinking otherwise!

And now I just feel so fucking STUPID.

Because this all confirms that I should have been listening to myself from the BEGINNING.

Since I’m the only one who actually LISTENS around here.

Instead of rolling over and letting YOU ALL call the shots!

She would have said no to the treatment then, Luciana. She was in too much pain. We needed her to rest and recover...At least now, she has a chance! So get over it. Because we have an appointment with her doctor to discuss our plan of action in a few weeks.

Plus, on top of all that, Abue confirmed my biggest fears when I tried to talk to her today.

Yup.

She saw me crying and was like, Oh. You’re home? I see they’ve told you. *Here, wipe your tears.* It doesn’t matter. They might as well have not even called.

Omg. What does that mean?!

That I’m going to take my time getting better. And then I’m going to enjoy my life. I’m not going back to that hospital room ever again. All it’s done is bring trouble.

Why don’t we just talk about this later? I think we all may need some time to digest...

And even though I was fucking livid, I knew that fighting with her wasn't going to be the answer. Especially after hearing everything that Luisa told me.

I'll have your back, Abue. Always. But it's okay to take some time before making a decision. We can help you.

That's fine.

I'm serious...Maybe we can find some treatment options that won't make you sick.

Can you pass me the telephone? I need to call the pharmacy.

Right now? Why?

My new hair dye is in.

But then she just randomly ended our convo anyway by giving me a list of things that I needed to pick up from her apartment.

What the heck is this?

I'm sick, Luciana! We'll talk later.

And if you saw the list, Mari, you'd be in shock. Because it's the OPPOSITE of what someone going through a medical crisis should want.

And I wish that could be comforting for me—but it's not.

I know that most people would rather see that their loved ones 'have not changed,' during tragedy or illness. But we're sitting over here like, No please? Can you? Your life may depend on it.

Oh, Nana. When are you going to learn that it's the same thing? If I want to feel good, I have to look like myself too. Every day could be the performance of a lifetime! The tumor should have shown you that.

How do you do that?

Do what?

Switch gears so fast. You were grumpy and emo like a second ago.

You told me that you were getting my things!

And she also said that if any of the items weren't at her apartment, then I had to go across the street to Walgreens and buy them. *Ask for Florencia. The pharmacist. She knows what I like.* Even if they weren't on sale.

So I was like, No? That's gonna take forever? *I want to be here. With you.* Given the size of this list, the tumor is gonna grow back by the time

that I'm done!

Sorry... 'Not funny.'

Forgot you're a fucking virgin when it comes to good jokes.

I'm just saying that it's remarkable, Mari—that's all.

That Abue can drive me crazy, like it's any regular old Tuesday. As if the doctors hadn't just called and said that her bile ducts were all knotted up.

Cuz you're lucky!

You just get to 'be sad' and 'miss her!'

While I'm the one here, on the ground, trying to be proactive AND understanding. Even though sometimes she makes that really fucking hard.

Why aren't you moving, Luciana? Go! Before Florencia gets off work.

You know what this all means, right? That you could turn yellow again? And it could get painful for you? That we could end up right back where we started? Before they removed anything. Wasn't that horrible? Let us help you!

What's horrible for me is this interrogation. Goodbye.

She's so strange...

I don't know what she's plotting.

Because as I said—you really should have seen the list of things that she needed me to pick up from her apartment.

Yes. It had like four different nail polishes of the same shade of red on there...All because she said that she needed to 'try out different brands.' *For what? You're on bed rest!*

And then she also had these weird little flower nipple-cover things...that she puts on the inside of her bras. And her deep-V set of see-through white shirts. With her dark purple lipstick, bright blue glitter eyeliner, and an old deck of cards. *Where are you going? The circus tryouts?*

And she said that IF Luisa dared to ask what I was doing or where I was going—or if she even just BLINKED in my direction—to absolutely, under no circumstances, let her see or touch her stuff.

She only knows how to drown the things she loves!

I know. Incredible stuff coming from the lady with a stomach wound three times the size of her face.

Sometimes with her you just have no choice BUT to laugh.

If anything, just so you don't cry...

Because she's constantly gaslighting me without meaning to.

Just by being herself.

And at this point, I don't know even what I would regret more...if something ever happened to her.

Not pushing her harder to do 'the right thing.' Or not sitting down with her to have more laughs. I have no idea.

Oh my god—SEE? Abue just emailed me saying that I picked up the wrong hair dye.

From her iPad in my own fucking room upstairs.

You got me B17. I need B19. Please. I told you it's urgent.

What is going on here?!

Where is her freaking head at?!

And I don't even know where she gets her energy from...Because she doesn't even eat.

Yeah, and she says she's not hungry, but then the second you eat around her she's like, What is that? Is it good? No, I don't want it. But is it good?

You do the same thing too, Mari—so watch that shit. I don't need another militant spaghetti at my graduation.

Every time somebody meets Abue, or you or Mom, they always look at me and ask, Wait...Are you sure that these people are your family, Luciana?

It's something I have to live with every day, but yes.

Like—you were all BORN with organs!

The least you could do is have enough body fat to house them!

The least you could do is PRETEND like you still want to LIVE.

Cuz whenever Mom is like, Luciana—suck in. I'm like—Suck in what, dude? My LARGE INTESTINE?

You're seriously getting too obsessed with my body, Mom. At this point, it's creepy.

I just want you to be healthy! What if this is genetic?! What if we can prevent it? You need to start paying attention to what you put into your body, Luciana. You heard your grandmother's story! They struggled and had to live off terrible food...So if you've been eating more chips lately, just to get a rise out of me, then that's a big 'screw you' to everyone else that came before you. Who weren't as lucky to have access to good nutrition!

Omg...YOU are gonna give me the tumor.

And SO WHAT if I've gained weight?!

Maybe that's just my body!

Maybe I'm just going through changes!

Maybe my mom is crazy, my sister ditched me, and the doctors just called to say that my fucking favorite person is DYING."



Me duele más a mí que a ti

“Bro...

Oh, sorry. I know you hate that.

Dude...

Do you wanna hear the telenovela of the freaking century?

Yes, hi, Mari. It's me.

I'm over my tantrum now and calling you back. I know it's been a few weeks, but you don't have to pinch yourself.

This isn't a dream.

The truth is simply that I became very religious over the past few weeks, and now I see the light.

I'm kidding, lol. I just started smoking weed again.

And I realized that ignoring you as punishment for not coming home was only hurting myself. Because I found out...A LOT of shit.

That I'm gonna need to tell you now before I self-combust.

Especially because I already tried telling Nico and he was no help.

This is really sad, Luciana. How do you feel?

Like I'm watching a Lifetime movie!

And weed alone is not going to cut it this time.

Mari, I'm over the Thanksgiving thing. Please. We don't have to talk about it.

Your betrayal is in the past now. I've found something way more interesting to focus on.

I'm going to just eat some delicious turkey next week without you and that's okay. I hope you enjoy NYC. I've heard it's a lovely city.

I hope that it snows so bad they can't walk outside, and that then they get horrible food poisoning.

Luciana! She's running to raise money for diabetes! You should be ashamed of yourself.

I hope that she cries when she sees that all her friends are down here at the beach.

Will you just let me talk?!

No—I don't want to 'hear' about how school has been. You're not even doing anything interesting. You think that just because you blocked me from your Instagram stories, I wouldn't be able to see them?

You're so fucking scatterbrained lately that you forgot to block Nico!

Yes. So I saw all of your posts about partying at the 'seventies-themed' Sig-Kappa-whatever rave. And don't even get me started on 'CEOs and Office Hoes'...At least you wore a fucking suit to that.

Exactly. You're an embarrassing imbecile. So I don't need your disturbing updates adding salt to my already very open wound.

OBVIOUSLY I'm still mad at you, Mari!

But I'm putting aside my pride right now. Because I really need to tell you this.

Thank you. So as I was saying...things have been a little unpredictable around here since Abue's diagnosis.

Some of us are mad, some of us are scared, some others are abandoning their families during times of crisis—there's really a wide spectrum. But for whatever reason, yesterday Luisa decided to cope by listing all of her sisters and their kids to me by name and occupation.

So you can remember them. For when I'm gone. And maybe so you can get in touch with them...if something happens. I don't want you to lose the

rest of us too.

Okay...

But when she got to her sister Ileana, she was like, ‘Y tu tía Ileana y sus cuatro hijos, Daniel—abogado, Rodrigo—dentista, Santiago—gay, y Marcelo—apuñalado.’

I know, lol. I was like, Wait, I’m confused. What do Santiago and Marcelo do?

And she was like, I told you? One is gay and the other got stabbed? Keep up?

So naturally, I got very awkward, and had to make a joke about the whole gay thing before I looked suspicious and passed out.

Ah, yes. Death and dating men. Two of the hardest professions.

Ha! You’re funny, Nana. Did you know that? You always make me laugh.

Yes. I think so.

You’re like your grandmother, before everything. She was the biggest clown. I feel like I’m sitting with her right now.

She’s still pretty funny. You’ve seen her.

It’s a gift she’s still like that with you. You should cherish it.

But then she just started to cry?

Luisa, are you okay? What’s going on? Is this about the rest of what you wanted to tell me? Let me know because I haven’t even washed my face... And Abue could walk back into the room any second. She’s not as slow as everybody thinks! She just takes long in the bathroom to hide from you all.

No, no. Don’t tell your grandmother that I’ve said anything. Please. She’ll never forgive me. The cancer news just has me...stunned. It wasn’t supposed to be like this. Not this fast. She’s still carrying so much from everything that happened to her. I don’t know if I’ll be able to get through to her in time.

You can just say it, Luisa...Abue is sick. And she might die. You’re sad that she won’t talk about these things even though she might die.

It’s hard to see the state she’s in now...and not say anything. But those are her wishes. And I’m trying to respect them. But I think that you deserve to know the whole story while she’s here. While you can still hug her.

Then just tell me. I'm sick of people hiding things!

And then, shockingly—Luisa actually explained to me why Abue had been ex-communicated from their family—which was just as fucked up and confusing as everything else I've heard!

So are you sitting? Cuz you should get cozy.

This is gonna be your way of making up to me that you're not here.

But first—you have to promise that you won't tell Mom or Abue any of this. Okay? They'll set the house on fire if they find out...

Because I know it sounds hypocritical, but we have Abue's appointment next week to discuss her diagnosis. And I need everybody absolutely focused.

Especially since we already had to cancel the last one because she wasn't feeling well.

Great. And you said you were sitting, right? Because this is about to be so much more absurd and dramatic than you think.

And it starts with why Abue's mom, Fernanda, was an orphan to begin with.

Yup. Now let's throw it back to early 1900s western Colombia.

Where Luisa said that Fernanda's biological parents, the Ortegas, were a white upper-class family of aristocrats.

Oh wow. Mari makes so much sense now. You guys knew who they were?!

Yes. But your grandmother doesn't like to talk about it.

These people would have been Luisa and Abue's maternal grandparents, yes.

And look, I know that explains how vitamin D deficient we are, and your need for external validation, but we'll talk about that later.

Because what I'm sorry to tell you now is that the whitest thing they ever did—was marry each other.

Yes, Mari. Your great-great-grandmother and your great-great-grandfather were first cousins.

I'm gonna need like ten edibles to forget that, Luisa.

It wasn't that uncommon back then. I promise.

So with that beautiful, amazing, and stunning fact, Luisa broke the news to me that our incestuous great-great-grandparents got married and started a family. *Disgusting*. But what she really wanted me to understand was that at that time, in that place, you were either born wealthy—or you were born straight into ‘generational poverty.’ *There was no existence of the middle class. The economic disparities were astronomical, and they often meant life or death.* So hoarding and maintaining the family wealth was top priority for these people. And much more important to them than actually living. Because society was the noose around their necks, and money was the stool that kept them standing.

I thought having money was supposed to be fun?

And as we know, our family lived in Pereira. A city near the Andes Mountains in the Risaralda region of Colombia. And according to Luisa, the only thing that wealthy women did back then there was—work on their physical appearance. *They hired housekeepers to take care of their children.*

That sounds like right here. Down the street.

Well, no, she didn’t say it like that. But she didn’t have to. And when I rolled my eyes about it, she was like, NO! LUCIANA, LISTEN. You have to let most people addicted to their beauty in this world have it. It’s all they got! *There wasn’t much else for women to do back then.*

So their appearance, their house, and their reputation were very important.

I’ve noticed...

And unfortunately, this was even more severe in our family’s little corner of Pereira.

Because Luisa said that much like with the wealth, in their neighborhood, you were either born pretty, or you might as well have been born dead. *This one was actually harder to live without than the money.* And as the story would go, our great-great-grandmother—Fernanda’s biological mom—was born very beautiful. So she had a long list of suitors waiting for her hand in marriage. But for whatever reason (JK, it was money), she decided to go with her cousin Héctor.

Oh, here we go. Hand me the popcorn.

Luisa said that Héctor himself wasn't as beautiful, but he had a great set of eyes and a thick head of hair. Which went a long way in their town. And I'm not entirely sure what he did, or what exactly wealthy people did back then. *Hurt and exploit others?* But for whatever reason, they had a lot of money. So they had a lot of kids.

Six to be exact!

Five boys and one girl.

So much shared DNA...I'm gonna throw up.

And I don't get why anyone would do that! Because childbirth in the early 1900s already looked like demonic shit...I Googled pictures of it earlier and it looked like a scene from *Saw IV*.

Yes, dude. No amount of money-hoarding in the world could get me to do that! Let alone six times. Wealthy cousins or not.

But whatever. Luisa said that wasn't the point.

Because she said that with these six incest children, the story of our family began.

No, not 'our' story. That's all you guys. I was born in Miramar, Florida.

Yes! Great detective work, Mari. The youngest of the six kids, the only girl, was our great-grandmother Fernanda.

And while the details around her birth remain a blur, what was absolutely clear—was that her mother hemorrhaged to death during labor in the middle of the night.

What?! Omg, see? Saw IV. That's horrible!

That as the midwives pulled Fernanda out from her mother's womb, her poor mother was already passing over to the other side.

May she rest in peace. Because what came next was the true horror.

And once the terrible news was told to Héctor, he sank into a despair so deep, that he wasn't able to look at his baby girl ever again...

But he named her after her mother. And his first love/cousin: Fernanda.

Oh, god. Where is this going?

And because apparently Héctor was also a dumb-ass pussy who didn't know the first thing about raising a newborn and—surprise—he had already

been having an affair with his other cousin (Tatiana), he decided that the baby needed to be dealt with.

Like a typical Colombian hijueputa. Can you believe that? He was enjoying his secret bachelor life so much that he didn't want to let go of it. So he chose to get rid of his baby girl instead. His own daughter. All so he didn't have to play the part of grieving widower with child.

Yes. You heard me.

Héctor insanely decided that he didn't WANT his baby anymore—the already poor motherless child—and he paid off every midwife in that room to lie and say that the baby, Fernanda freaking Jr., had passed away during the delivery too.

Right alongside her mother.

Oh, so then 'what happened' to the baby, Mari? Another great observation from you. Good job. You seem to be awake this time.

HE TOLD THE MIDWIVES TO 'HANDLE' IT, DUDE.

A.K.A.—drop the baby in the fucking DUMPSTER. Or whatever they had back then.

Yes! He wanted them to kill her!

To kill his past, and anything else that stood in the way of his new life. Like the homicidal incestual maniac he was.

And you bet your bottom dollar no one is going to 'It-was-normal-for-the-times' their way out of that one! No one can convince me that shit was normal. NO ONE.

Okay? So he was obviously the devil?

Yes. He almost ruined everything for our mother.

Like, you can't just CONSTRUCT your own reality and click Submit? Especially while you commit murder!

Thankfully though, the midwives didn't have worms in their brains and decided that they couldn't go through with it.

Oh, thank god.

Of course not! How do you think we got here?

Sorry. I forget we're related to these people.

The midwives had agreed to Héctor's terms, yes, but only to get the baby off his hands. They had zero intentions of actually killing for him.

Instead, they discreetly took baby Fernanda to an orphanage in the next town over. Saving her life, ultimately. But dropping her off with no explanation or story. Just those eight emblematic letters to her name.

Why couldn't they just have gone to the police? Or told everyone the truth?

It wouldn't have mattered, Nana. Héctor and his money were too strong. Times hadn't started changing yet. So they needed to hide her, or she wouldn't be safe.

And so that is why, my sweet sister, the whole time that Fernanda grew up in that orphanage, innocently playing basketball with those other girls, thinking that she had been left there by her poor starving parents—or that they had been dead—she was one hundred percent being lied to.

Wow. I can't wait to tell my mom that her 'learn from your family' orphanage saga was actually just the evildoing of monsters.

No...You can't tell anyone what I'm telling you. I'm sorry. Your grandmother would just get even more angry, and then she'd never look at me again. You have to keep this to yourself. But use it to understand us. Because you're still young—you can help everyone by having the full picture. Not just the good or bad that your mother or grandmother want. Fernanda should have made better choices. But she was forced to start from nothing.

Luisa said that after that, Héctor just slipped into the town's finest image of mourning.

A single dad, left with his five kids—dealing with the loss of his beloved wife and baby girl. Forced to emotionally rely on his other cousin Tatiana just to make it through.

Everyone was just glad he'd found another woman to take care of him.

And because nobody knew what Héctor had done, no one ever had a reason to look for baby Fernanda.

Especially because, allegedly, Héctor had even staged a funeral and burned a dead chicken to use as her ashes! Crying down on his knees the

whole time...

Omg. This family is full of actors.

And then to really top things off, in a disgusting second bout of performative grief, Héctor renamed their family farm in her name: La Niña Fernanda. All so no one could ever suspect what he had done.

But in a way, he couldn't either!

Because he had no idea Fernanda was alive.

Exactly, Mari. Just as much as Fernanda didn't know that her brothers and father were living it up, twenty minutes down the street, neither did Héctor!

So then how—you ask—did everyone eventually come to find this out?

That's the golden fucking question.

And in order to understand that, please kindly fast-forward to the murder of Fernanda's husband, Eduardo, thirty years later.

YEAH. Remember that?

The story that Mom lectured me with during our evacuation?

Well, like I told you then, Eduardo's unsolved murder made the newspapers. Because the main suspect in the investigation, his landlord, got blown up in a car just a few months later.

Right. Yes. I think I'm gonna need a timeline now with some pictures.

And because this is all basically a Telemundo soap opera—one of those specific newspapers eventually made it into the hands of a man named Gerardo, Héctor's oldest son. *Fernanda's biological brother. And the person in charge of their late father's estate.*

Which is important!

Because included in that newspaper story, was a printed photo of Eduardo and Fernanda. Explaining that she was the surviving widow, and he the victim in the case.

And hold on to your knickers, Mari!

Because apparently the second that Gerardo saw that photograph—he was immediately struck by Fernanda's face!

Since NOT ONLY did she look JUST LIKE his dead mother.

But absurdly enough to him—they shared the same name!

Héctor, you fucking idiot.

And that connection didn't just come to Gerardo out of nowhere. Because he later confessed that after his mother and sister's passing, he had become increasingly suspicious about the circumstances surrounding their deaths. Since to him, it felt like their father had drastically changed after burying each one.

Gerardo told us that Héctor had become cold and distant around then. Weighed down by a guilt they could not place. And that slowly, there began to be no more dinner parties. Or bedtime stories. And no more talk of the legacy he'd pass on. Just a strange, empty sadness, floating behind his eyes.

So in the end, presumably consumed by all his secrets, Héctor drank himself to death.

Jeez. What a tragic life...

That's right. It's possible to have pity for people who do horrible things. You can feel sorry for them that they didn't know any better.

Um, we'll see. So what then confirmed everything for Gerardo?

But it wasn't until a few years after Héctor's passing, that an anonymous note was finally left on Gerardo's door.

It read: 'You have a sister.'

In bold black ink.

And though Gerardo didn't make much of it then, dismissing the note as an attempt to extort him, when he saw Fernanda's face in the paper, he couldn't shake the odd coincidence from his mind. *He kept thinking...could my sister really be alive? Could my father not have known? Or could my terrible suspicions have been correct?*

So Gerardo then immediately contacted the paper, and paid them a fortune to find the widow in the photograph.

But anonymously, of course.

Since there could be no trace of what his father had done.

If it was true, Gerardo was gonna have to work hard to safeguard the family fortune. Whose manufacturing business rested solely on the integrity of their last name.

But you said that money ran their town? Would people really have cared?

Yes, Luciana! By then, people fortunately drew the line at baby killer. Classic.

Thus, it became clear that Gerardo needed to find out if the woman in the photograph was truly his sister.

Because if she was—he needed to find out what she needed, and deliver it to her quickly.

Ensuring her silence, and hopefully, peace and quiet for everyone.

He didn't want Fernanda finding out first, given our recent tragedy, and trying to cash in on some much-needed money. She was a grieving single mother tasked with survival. He knew that people like her always found a way. And thanks to his father, he believed that people were capable of anything.

But on the day that Gerardo finally got her address...and he showed up at her door...Fernanda looked even more like their mother standing before him, and his entire plan just fell apart.

I'll never forget the look on his face. When our mother first opened up. At first, he seemed confused. But then he dropped to his knees.

What about her?! Was she in shock?

Yes. I remember her falling into him.

Gerardo was SO overcome with emotion that day, that he decided to just tell Fernanda everything. Including all the horrible secret things the midwives said their father had done...

And so by the end of the visit, Fernanda's world had completely changed.

She found out that not ONLY had she been abandoned, but that she had TEN other siblings as well. And they were all—filthy fucking rich.

She was particularly happy about that.

Yes, ma'am.

Five older full-blood brothers from her same set of parents, and then five younger half brothers from her father's second marriage. *To Tatiana.* Which I know sounds irrelevant, but I promise it's going to become important.

Isn't that horrible though?!

That's TEN other people that could have loved her, Mari. She didn't need to be in that orphanage!

She was the only daughter of a man with eleven children. And that's exactly why he didn't give a shit.

But according to Luisa, Fernanda didn't want to waste time on how sad or bizarre it all sounded. She just wanted to focus on the money. Right away.

And lucky for her, so did Gerardo. Because he took one look at her life, at their unfortunate circumstances, and the potential of trouble that was heading his way—and he pledged thousands right there on the spot to save their lives.

It was meant to help us, of course. But it was also to keep us controlled. He wanted us satisfied, and close by. So we wouldn't use what we had learned against them. And he promised to speak to the rest of the brothers about setting up a fund. To show there would be immediate and long-term benefits for everyone.

So besides learning about all the terrible things in her family's past, Fernanda felt like she had hit the fucking jackpot.

To her—finding an army of long-lost Prince Charmings, ready to save her, was nothing short of a miracle. And after such a hard life, she thought she deserved the treasure.

She was finally living the very dream she'd had every night as a little girl...So she didn't ask questions. And she allowed the brothers to enter our lives during her point of weakness.

What dream? Her father tried to kill her, and then years later her husband was shot!

But she had a family now! You have to remember that. And money. After wanting those two things her entire life. That changed everything. It made the stress of everything else go away. Though unfortunately...for your grandmother, they only brought nightmares.

And it COULD all have been a miracle. If one of the younger half brothers hadn't eventually tried to get rid of Abue.

Mm-hmm!

Get ready to wanna fight, girly!

Because Luisa said that this half brother, from Héctor's second marriage to Tatiana, had just opened a new doctor's office in town. And he wanted to offer Abue the front-desk receptionist job.

They thought that Emilia would do well working for him. As the oldest. Since she had already been taken out of school. And that it would help offset some of our family's expenses—while Fernanda stayed home taking care of us. It was the most natural arrangement, as they needed things to look like business per usual...To avoid people's questions. But your grandmother, she just wanted to go back to school.

The brothers also told Fernanda that what Abue needed was structure and discipline. Because without it, her 'behavior issues' would get worse and she'd never mature or move past the family tragedy.

And because Fernanda was so lost back then, susceptible to outside opinions, she instantly believed them. And started hoping that after all their fighting, order and responsibility would finally make her daughter right.

It also gave our mother a way to pay the brothers back. For all their help and generosity. She didn't want them to think we expected to receive for nothing in return.

But sadly, it wasn't long before the gig became too good to be true.

Because this half brother, the respected man and new doctor in town, who was supposed to act like a mentor or stand-in dad, claimed that one day—Abue tried to steal from him.

In the office. Right from under his nose. When she was being trained and he wasn't looking.

There's no way. That's so not her?

I still don't know...But they were adamant that she had.

And though obviously it was a lie, and Abue immediately told everyone that it wasn't true, Fernanda didn't fucking believe her.

Like a total drama queen.

But that makes no sense! What would Abue even need the money for? You just said that she only wanted to go back to school. How much can one

tiny person even steal?!

Enough to be of concern...They didn't give us the details. But after all their arguing, and your grandmother's threats that she would leave, to our mother it wasn't that inconceivable.

So since Fernanda was mortified (stupid bitch), she told everyone that Abue had tried to sabotage their new family's wealth and keep it all to herself. To hopefully quickly put some distance between her and 'the problem.' (A.k.a. her freaking daughter).

And BECAUSE OF THIS, the Prince Charmings told Fernanda that Abue needed to be dealt with then. Or their financial and emotional support would not continue.

Because with Abue—trouble would only inevitably come their way. And in their family, lying and stealing would not be 'tolerated.'

Okay, lol? So just murder and incest?

As a solution, the brothers then spitefully convinced Fernanda that Abue needed a strict regimen and constant supervision. And that she should even consider sending her away, to a 'special place' for troubled teenagers. Because they knew good and 'experienced' people there. Who could teach Abue some values and 'get her into shape.'

Simply put, the brothers couldn't trust your grandmother. So they wanted her restrained. Away from their family secrets, name, and money.

Over some stealing?! Don't tell me Fernanda fell for that! Of all people. They were practically insinuating that she send Abue to an orphanage!

So Fernanda thought long and hard about what to do...

She thought about herself, and the rest of her children.

Their ability to live decent lives, without the help of these new people.

And she was furious with Abue.

For making things 'harder for everyone.' And making her choose between her children.

So when the day came to finally make a decision, Fernanda said, Fuck it. Don't worry, boys. My daughter doesn't need some fancy place for teens that I probably can't afford. I'll do you one better! I'll stick her down in the basement right here.

I'm sorry. What?

Yup. Fernanda moved Abue into the motherfucking basement, dude.

I'm clenching my fists now just thinking about it.

Like to LIVE, Mari! And to lock her up!

Yes, idiot. With all of her clothes, bedding, and everything. Under lock and key.

Fernanda wanted to make sure that Abue slept down there, alone, completely isolated from the rest of the world. So she couldn't be outside, causing any more problems. Or need the constant supervision.

It sounds horrible, I know. But they told us it was just another floor of the house back then. That they needed a door that could lock from the outside. To get Emilia temporarily under control. And that it was much better than having her sent away anyway. But I agree with you, it was strange...It always felt like there was more to the story that we didn't know. At the time though, and I'm ashamed to say it, we were just glad that it wasn't us.

Um. What exactly did they say to you?

Fernanda told the rest of the sisters that Abue had tried to hurt the family, so she needed to be punished.

And that she should only be allowed out during certain parts of the day.

To cook and clean. And take care of her sisters.

Promising them that if they and Abue behaved, she could eventually be let back up.

But until the brothers felt comfortable, Abue would stay down there so their family could keep receiving Gerardo's financial support.

They kept your grandmother isolated down there for much longer, though. It wasn't just a few months. And they wouldn't let us talk to her either. So she was always very closed-off and distant...when they would let her come up. And I understood why, of course. But I was too scared and filled with guilt then to ask questions. Of both your grandmother and our mom.

Dude. Your mother was cold-blooded...There's no coming back from that.

That was her then. But she got better over the years. Once things stabilized. Your grandmother was eventually let back up, but yes, the damage was done. And then we grew up with that rift between us. Because she felt betrayed we had chosen our mother's side. But we didn't know what else to do, Nana. We were only children.

After almost a year, Luisa said that Fernanda let Abue move back up. But this time things were different. Because Abue settled in quickly to her routine of full-time mom.

It was eerie. To see her so obedient and accepting like that. It was as if a full person had gone down there, but only a quarter had come back up.

Until one day, Abue finally spoke up. And she told everyone, very seriously, that she had just MARRIED in secret—and was getting her things and moving out.

THAT'S when she met her ex-husband?! How old was she?

Seventeen. But he was also young. He was just a boy in the neighborhood. Who she had been communicating with in the evenings. After telling him that she needed to get out.

Did you know that, Mari?!

That that's when Abue met and married our grandfather?!

No wonder they didn't work out!

Yeah, it's crazy...and impressive. Apparently once they let Abue up, she just started putting the moves on the boy next door. And the second they made it official, sneaking out to the courthouse that very day, Abue finally had the legal authority to leave her house.

So she took it!

And Luisa said she was never heard from again.

Damn. She's so cool.

No, Luciana. She was in pain. We all were.

Yeah, I'm sure Fernanda was heartbroken...

Our mother was shocked. And bitter.

And then everyone just lived happily ever after!

I'm kidding, lol. Fernanda obviously spent the next forty years until her death telling everyone that she had gotten rid of Abue, so the rest of them

could survive.

I hope Emilia can understand that our silence only came from that pain. And from not having the full picture. Because we loved her. Immensely. She was our big sister. And we waited for her to come back for a long time...It's what I came here to tell her.

So I was like, That's it?

Fernanda was just a horrible person—who let her own child slip through the cracks of the family tragedy? What the fuck?!

But Luisa was like, No, no, I'm not here to tell you what to believe. My goal is just to help your grandmother heal...To fill back some of those old wounds, and hopefully let things go. Because if she won't talk to me, then she should at least still talk to somebody. Or the heaviness of everything will continue to affect her. *Physically. If it hasn't already.*

Yeah...she meant like a therapist or something.

Or this 'spiritual healer' that Luisa also brought up.

An adviser of sorts...Who could give her a cleanse. Of what she's been carrying.

An adviser?!

Yes. Like a spiritual medium, or guide. The one I saw helps people understand their pain and where it comes from.

I know.

I was like, Dude, I don't need a freaking witch to tell me what bad people look like. And you're starting to sound pretty close...with all your weird, abuse-apologist 'healer' cult vibes.

No, that's the wonderful part! You don't have to see anybody as good. Just detach yourself from their stories. I want your grandmother to find her pain and release it, Nana. To be able to finally move on. I know she didn't want me here, and that already says a lot. But if this thing is going to make her sick, then she should at least go without the other stuff inside her.

I was like, Um...Okay. Now you've officially taken this too far. I'm getting dizzy. There's no need to involve the 'spiritual realm.' The answers are right here—right in front of our faces. Fernanda may not have been a

bad person, but she WAS a bad mom. And she hurt Abue's feelings with her actions, beyond repair.

Because Abue was just a child! Who had lost her father.

And what she needed wasn't a fucking job.

What she needed was her mother!

Yes, but it's too late for that. Because the cancer now—it's part of it. And if you can get her to release some of that old pain, then maybe you can get her to fight. To feel hope again...and want to live. Because the physical always mirrors the emotional. And bottled-up feelings can cause blockages. So releasing them will help her to prepare for whatever she decides. To fight this or not. She deserves the peace to at least choose that.

Yeah.

It was a lot.

And I told Luisa that even IF I somehow convinced Abue to see this medium, I couldn't promise that she'd want to talk about any of THAT.

You never know. The healer is who convinced me to come visit. I never thought that I'd be here—and look at us now. Sitting in the same house decades later. I was mad at your grandmother too, for a long time. I couldn't understand why she had just abandoned us. It made me feel like I had lost both my sister and my dad. But then this medium helped me reconsider. And she helped me grasp the magnitude of your grandmother's pain. After everything we went through. But by the time I felt ready, your mother called and told me the news.

Okay, well, hold on now. Because this sounds like a lot of pressure.

Here—just take the healer's number. In case you convince Emilia to do it. There's no time to waste.

Oh, fuck my life. Mom just got home.

Ugh.

I'm gonna have to call you back, Mari. I can't whisper now or Mom will think I'm up to some gay shit.

I'm sorry! I don't like it either!

Omg. See?! You already have me whispering shit. Goodbye.

But remember—you can't say ANYTHING to anyone about what I've just told you.

Not until I talk to Abue first. Or figure out what I'm even going to say.

Because this just feels like I'm stepping on a fucking minefield here.

And of course I want Abue to live! To 'release' or whatever...and feel loved.

But I get why she can't let herself feel Luisa's love or kindness now.

It's just too much.

And it would just open the floodgates.

Of all the times she probably wanted to, but couldn't."



No seas cochina

“Oh my god.

‘Shape of You’ is playing on the radio again.

One sec.

I need to breathe through it or I’ll cry.

The club isn’t the best place to find a lover, so the bar is where I go...

What is this?! Like the THIRD time I’ve heard this song in the past hour?

If I hear it one more time I’m gonna drive this car into the Everglades.

MARI...no. YOU LIKE IT?

AND YOU ALMOST SAW ED SHEERAN WHEN YOU WERE IN NEW YORK?

Fuck. I should have seen this coming.

No, never mind. Just forget I ever brought it up. I thought going to college would make you less basic.

What are you also into now? After your freaky little ‘Turkey Trot’ trip? Hollister and the American flag?

Wow, lol. That’s amazing. You learned the words to the national anthem like last week.

Omg. YOU LEARNED THEM IN FULL WHEN YOUR SORORITY DID A WET T-SHIRT CONTEST TO RAISE MONEY FOR INJURED VETERANS?

Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, let's just move on.

I hope you had a beautiful holiday...serving your country.

No. I can't express my real thoughts on this right now.

Mom said she'd give me fifty dollars if I managed to go one phone call without calling you a 'dumb loser.' And I'm reeeally fucking close.

Yeah! She actually specifically asked that I retire those two words! So I wonder who she heard them from.

And listen, I may not be able to call you a loser, but I will say this: I saw that you got another all-white mani-pedi on your Instagram again.

Yes, thanks for unblocking me. It's been so fun.

But it's like...c'mon, Mari, lol. We get it. You're not getting enough attention. What are you gonna do? Get an angled bob next?

Right, you'd never. Hair means too much to Colombians.

Oh, wait, I get it. You love Hollister and the American flag so that boys like you! That's at least on-brand. I'm less worried now.

Anyways, on the topic of bizarre family members—I haven't been able to stop thinking about everything that Luisa said.

Even today during Abue's doctor's appointment.

I was trying really hard to focus...but was looping in my head the whole time.

What do you mean, 'about what,' Mari?

Picturing our poor grandmother in the fucking basement!

Like...is that why she's so good at just sitting in her room? Do I have to stop making fun of her for that?

I mean, I'm kidding. But not really.

No—God no. I haven't said anything to Abue yet. So don't you dare talk to her.

I still need to figure out what I'm going to say.

There's just been a lot going on...

And a part of me thinks that I shouldn't even say anything to Abue at all. Because she should just get to live in her own little protected shell...If that's truly what she wants.

But then the other part of me wants to kick it down and SCREAM!

So that Abue could see that she deserved better—and maybe use that fury to want to live!

Does that make me sound insane though?

Ugh. I feel like it makes me sound insane...

Omg. Do I sound like Mom?!

Fuck. What am I even saying? I'm eighteen! My brain hasn't finished developing!

I think I've officially just been hanging out with Luisa and Mom too much...That's so embarrassing.

Cuz like, who does Luisa even think she is?

Would hearing that her sister admits that what their mother did was truly wrong—really make Abue want to live?!

Would that actually make her consider the treatment?

Cuz saying it now, that sounds SO dumb.

Abue's probably just gonna laugh at us and say, You dumb, crazy, stupid bitches. You're not nearly as important as you think you are...

Okay, so you agree?

See? It's a bad idea. Not a good plan.

And I need to be careful, because I don't want to be manipulative like Mom. Who just threw Luisa and Abue in a room and walked out.

I need to be strategic AND compassionate here. Since I know what being FORCED into something looks like...

So until I figure things out, I'm just gonna be really nice to Abue.

Even if it freaks her out.

Yeah. She'll be like, Luciana, can you hand me the blanket? And I'll say, Of course, my beautiful perfect angel. I'll hand you whatever you want.

What is wrong with you?

Even though what I really want to say is: Yes—you glorious warrior! Who lost her father so young! Who was then expected to lead her family to

survival! And was just then taken advantage of by some horrible people. I'll hand you whatever you fucking want!

You're acting strange. Go watch your show downstairs.

I think I have the greatest show right here.

And I know that it's not the point, but it makes me really sad to think that Fernanda never had a mother. Because obviously it fucked her up...but it also robbed Abue of having a grandmother. The most startling and breathtaking experience of all time!

My life would be so different if I didn't have her...

What would I even have to focus on then? SCHOOL?

LOL.

THE PAIN OF YOUR ABSENCE?

LOL.

I'm kidding, don't cry.

But when I realized that—I looked over at Abue and said, Oh my god. I cannot imagine not having you.

Is this some sort of sick game you're playing for the internet again? Another one of your pranks? Ow! What in the world are you doing?

Nothing. I'm just hugging you.

They didn't say I was dying tonight, Luciana! Loosen your grip.

Abue hasn't been as receptive to my hugs lately though...

Which is fine. I understand. She's not having the same kind of emotionally groundbreaking experience.

But I just don't know when I'm gonna be able to bring up anything that Luisa said.

Or talk about that 'spiritual healer' thing...

Especially since I can't even say it with a straight face.

It's a real practice, Luciana. They help people.

I believe you, I'm sorry. It's just so funny picturing Abue speaking to dead people. She'd probably be so rude, like, 'Why am I listening to you, dead man? You're not even here!'

They have known your grandmother for her entire life. They will understand.

Are you sure? Because the last thing she needs is to go pissing off the underworld.

Yes. Healers connect to your spirit guides and guardian angels for wisdom. The exact beings that have loved and protected you your whole life. Emilia's will understand her quirks! They've helped her! Some of them can even be reincarnated family members. Isn't that cool?

If that's true, then some of them don't really seem to like her very much...

Liking someone is a human experience. I am talking about her soul.

I think that needs help too.

Which is a bummer. Because I think that Abue would be so much more down to do something like this, than ever go see an actual therapist, lol.

And I was even gonna bring it up to her today, after her doctor's appointment, but she wasn't exactly a ray of sunshine during her visit.

Why aren't you looking at anyone, Abue?

Why do I have to?

She was sitting with her arms crossed and sunglasses on the whole time, furious with Mom for letting Luisa join us.

Why is your grandmother being so difficult today? What is her issue?

Oh, Mother. You have no idea.

And I'm right here, Elena! You don't have to talk like I'm already dead. I told you, I don't want Luisa in here if we're going to discuss personal information.

Good luck, dude. She's talking to the angels.

What did you just say to me?

Nothing...

I'm only here to help, Emi. But I can wait outside.

Stop calling me that!

The doctor was like, Is everything okay? You told her she has cancer, right? *Yes, she's just having a hard time processing.*

Okay, and fine—yes. I'll admit that I was also in my head because hot doctor Sandy had gotten a new haircut, and she looked so good that I almost passed out.

Luciana? What's the problem? Why are you just sitting there? Start telling her what we talked about. I'm not signing you out of school for nothing!

So I was flustered and dealing with a lot.

Right. Yes. Sorry.

And then my mental ability to go from Abue being abused, to spiritual angels and demons, to having fantasies about Sandra Bullock really shocked and terrified me.

Hello. Um. So we wanted to...well my mom, she wanted to...

What's wrong with you, Luciana? This isn't funny.

I know. I'm just...having some heartburn.

But despite it being chaotic for everyone involved, I'm really glad that we went.

Because we got to finally address Abue's results, and come up with a plan. Which at least feels WAY better than not doing anything at all.

No...not with the chemo yet. Unfortunately. But things are in motion.

Before we could even talk about the cancer, Abue slammed her fists down on the table and said: We need to discuss my stomach.

Okay? What about it?

Tell her that this isn't normal, Luciana. I look huge! I'm having a lot of pain and I can't sit up right. And my stomach is the size of this room! What the heck did they do to me?!

Okay...My grandmother says that her stomach has been hurting. And that she's very bloated?

Hmm. Please tell her that is very normal with abdominal wounds. But we can run some tests just to make sure. Is the pain located on the surface? Around the incision area? Or is it coming from inside?

Abue—does your stomach hurt on the inside? Or does it hurt where you had the stitches?

Inside! Where else? Did the supermodel forget her brain?

Um, she says it's inside, Dr. Parker.

Okay, good to know. Is she doing fine otherwise?

Luciana. Tell her that I haven't been able to suck in.

Yes. She is.

Great. Let's tackle the abdominal swelling first then. Looking at it from here, it does seem a bit bloated. And I want to make sure that there are no fluids building up or leaking into her stomach area. Does that sound good to you, Mrs. Domínguez?

But, Doctor, how fast can she do the chemo?

Well, she needs to get stronger first. And quite frankly, our priority should be her stomach. Complications post-surgery can be small, but serious.

So it was decided today that we'd run a few tests first, to figure out the pain in Abue's stomach, and after that, we could start talking about her treatment options.

Your mother's immediate recovery is more important, Mrs. Domínguez. But I'm happy to answer any questions you might have about her results. I know we only spoke briefly about it on the phone.

It's okay. Her tumor—it will spread, correct?

Most likely. Yes.

Okay. Then will you tell her she needs the treatment?

I will tell her what I recommend as my professional opinion. I can promise you that. But let's draw some blood and get some images first. And we'll see where we're at in a few weeks.

Oh yeah. Absolutely. Abue left that checkup thrilled.

She was ecstatic to hear that no one could nag her about the chemo yet. And that Sandra Bullock was going to fix her stomach.

She even took off her sunglasses on the drive home!

Elena, can we stop at the pharmacy? I need a new hair dye. Luciana still hasn't brought me the right one.

No. Why hadn't you told me about your stomach pain, Ma?

Because you never asked!

Is it really that bad? Let me see.

No, get away from me. Not while Luisa is here!

I can't even see, Emilia. My god. I'm driving the car!

Can you look up some medical terms for me though? I'm gonna text you the names.

I want to be prepared for when Abue is ready. Because I know she's just going to veto whatever Mom says.

I read online that you can 'eat' your way out of certain cancers with superfoods, Ma. And that we could put you on a special diet to strengthen your immune system.

I'd rather die, Elena.

MA! How can you say that?

How can you ask me to change this late in my life? I'm seventy-five!

Yes. On the other hand, I'd say that Mom left the appointment today very concerned.

The second we got home—she grabbed her workout bands and started screaming, IT'S LEG DAY, PEOPLE! LET'S GO.

Elena, I just said that I can't move my stomach. Don't get hysterical.

But the doctor said that if we can get you stronger—you can recover faster.

No, she didn't!

And she even had these spooky pink ankle weights in her hands for each of us...

Where did you get those, dude? They're terrifying.

Diane down the street was having a garage sale.

And you went there?

I was like, Mom, whoa, put the weights down. I don't know who would faint faster here—me or Abue.

She's right, Elena. And I'm not doing any of the exercises with Luisa around. She's just going to take pictures, and tell the rest of the world how out of shape I am. If you want me to move, get her out!

Emilia, I promise to not say a word. And you're being very unfair today, but I'll leave my phone in the other room.

Impossible! You're addicted to that thing.

I then tried running out the door by saying I had cramps, but Mom immediately grabbed my arm and said, 'She has a tumor and you have

pimples—you're doing the fucking exercises.'

Okay, sheesh. You're hurting my arm.

So I had to try and bargain with her, and said that if she showed me where she hid the Advil, I'd do her precious YouTube workouts.

Fine. Two pills for one hundred jumping jacks.

Deal.

But Abue had my back. Because around jumping jack ten, she convinced Mom to hand over the entire bottle.

Give her the damn pills, Elena! I can't handle her crying!

She's faking it, Mom. She always does this. She just wants an easy fix for all her problems! Instead of developing healthier habits!

Omg. You know what's crazy, Mom? Endometriosis is also like cancer. It can grow anywhere, at any moment, and cause insurmountable amounts of pain. It doesn't just get 'fixed' with fruits and vegetables! During all 'your research,' you should consider LOOKING IT UP.

Don't say that word! And they don't even know if that's what you have!

BECAUSE YOU WON'T LET THEM OPEN ME UP.

Elena—please. Hurry. Every time she yells, it makes my stomach worse. Just give her the medicine.

Abue gave me a little wink afterward too...Reminding me of who was really in charge.

But unfortunately, my victory didn't last long.

Because after I downed the pills, Mom told me to go and pack up my stuff. Because she said that three people in our room was too much. *The cot arrangement is no longer working.*

And that I was gonna have to start sleeping downstairs on the couch until Luisa left.

Whatever. As long as my uterus is numb.

So, that's how I ended up roomless tonight. Bracing for torticollis and a busted back.

Begging the aliens to come down from Mars and finally do their thing.

No, it's not Luisa's fault, lol.

Mom just wants me and Abue separated, so that she and Luisa can have more ‘sister bonding moments.’

Even though I was like, Dude, drop it. *Trust me.* All of Luisa’s attempts are NOT working.

Especially because ever since her diagnosis—Abue has been even MORE pissed that Luisa is around.

That woman needs to leave, Luciana. I can’t sleep with her here. And she stays up all night texting on that phone of hers. Probably rattling off health reports to all of Colombia! Giving them minute-by-minute updates on my deteriorating health and beauty! They’re probably all saying, Yes, of course our dear Emilia is sick. Have you seen the way she lives? Have you seen the things she does? Have you heard the way she breathes? Eats? Dreams?

I think she’s just playing games on her phone, dude...I saw her download solitaire.

Don’t be so naïve, Luciana. People always want to know what I’m doing!

Do you, um, wanna say more about that?

No. Go steal her phone and see what she’s saying.

Omg.

Maybe Abue is extra grouchy because she knows that Luisa said something to me.

She always has been kind of psychic...

Oh my god. Should I be scared? Do you think that Abue’s mad at me?

Because Nico and I wanted to get frozen yogurt yesterday—and she wouldn’t even let us use her car.

Please, Abue! Why not? You don’t need it, and Mom and Dad are at work.

No. You’re gonna crash it. Your dad’s always at work. Figure it out.

And I thought that it was just like Abue’s classic, regular go-to thing when she’s pissed. That fucking 2005 Honda Civic. *The only thing I can control!*

But her rage was so random this time that even Nico was like, I don’t get it. What’s the problem? Her car just sits in the driveway all day?

She's got trust issues, dude. Mommy AND daddy trauma. And now her sister is here to remind her. It's too much for me to get into.

But we just wanted yogurt?

Oh, and you wanna know what we did instead, Mari? Since we couldn't get fucking froyo?

We smoked and prank-called people. At the skate park. Including all of your exes.

Which COULD have been fun, if we hadn't gotten bored in the middle of it and downloaded Tinder. Because whose profile immediately came up?

Sigrid's. The very sexy—yet very closeted—daughter of Mom's scariest neighborhood church friend.

Yes! The one that wears those crazy wooden rosaries around her neck. Exactly.

I've never screamed and deleted something so fast in my life...

Nico. Omg. Throw the phone in the lake.

What do you mean, 'why,' Mari? Are you a fucking moron?

Do you know what would happen? If that girl's MOTHER went through her phone? And she found ME in one of her Tinder messages?

On TOP of everything that Mom already has going on?!

I would get annihilated, Mari. Simple. Completely and utterly wrecked. Physically. Verbally. Emotionally.

And we'd be the talk of the town. With Mom just sinking deeper into another one of her homophobic depressions. Plus, then Abue would just die by herself—falling through the cracks of THIS family tragedy once again. Because I too would be long gone, getting shipped off to some Catholic-ass conversion camp. All while Dad and Luisa fake-prayed and answered the church's investigative phone calls.

Which I'll NEVER understand!

Since we don't even GO TO CHURCH.

So can you tell me why the hell we even care about those people?!

It's bigger than that, Nana. It's our culture. This whole place. Your mother just wants to protect you from a life of stares.

Look at me, Dad! They're staring anyway!

She'll come around. Give her time.

And I literally mean it. I'm not just trying to be funny here.

So don't get mad at me again for 'joking' about 'inappropriate' things.

Because to you they may be jokes. But to me, they're the real fucking deal.

I'd have the blood of like four different people on my hands! My anxious little Tinder-swiping hands!

So no thank you. I don't need that on my plate right now. And you're literally rude for forgetting why.

Not all of us are just—OFF IN THE WORLD! ALLOWED TO EXPLORE THINGS IN PRIVATE!

And as I told Nico, I don't even have TIME to think about girls.

I'm just trying to get through each day here!

It's always like: school, tumor, cramps—my great-aunt telling me random depressing-ass shit from our family's past—school, tumor, Nico—and then a meltdown from either Mari or Mom.

And I'm pretty sure that I have EXAMS next week!

But we should go back to Ladies' Night, Nana. Once we're on winter break. You need to chill and relax for a bit...or you're gonna explode. And you could meet so many hot girls!

No. I'm too scarred from last time. I think that the alligator was a sign. And I'd have to somehow steal the car again anyway—it's just too much.

How are you ever going to meet anyone then?! You won't even download a dating app!

I'm dealing with a lot right now, Nico. Fuck off. You know that.

So what? You're just gonna go to college a girl-virgin? Is that really what you want?

Omg. At this point, am I even gonna go to college AT ALL? Problem solved!

Ugh.

I can't believe that I almost outed myself to the entire county's freaking church circuit, just because Abue wouldn't let us use her car.

To get frozen YOGURT, Mari!

Jesus.

That woman doesn't know what she does...

And you see?

This is why I'm not doing better in school! Not because I'm 'scrolling' on Tumblr.

I have to actively spend all of my time stressed out about hiding my identity from girls on the internet, just so I don't accidentally kill our grandmother or mom!

UGH.

Thank GOD that we're gonna be getting a break soon...

Because I could really use the time away from school over the holidays.

And plus, I'll finally have you home."



Eso no se hace

“Dude...

Duuuude.

I am fuming right now.

Really? After everything that I told you?

About what I am dealing with around here?

Are you serious?

I stay off my phone for ONE WEEK and you go ROGUE?

While I'm trying to cram an ENTIRE SEMESTER into my BRAIN for FINAL EXAMS?

YES.

YOU CALLED MOM AND SAID THAT I WAS 'BEING RUDE' FOR 'GUILTING YOU' INTO COMING HOME FOR LONGER THAN JUST CHRISTMAS.

LIKE—what is your fucking problem?!

That woman already yells at me for everything I do!

And I hadn't even THOUGHT to ask Mom about your travel plans. Because I thought that they were already ASSUMED.

Since at least to me—you coming home for the entirety of your winter break was the most obvious thing in the world.

But I guess I was wrong.

No! I don't want to hear anything that you have to say right now!

God FORBID that you care about anybody but yourself, Mari! Just for once!

Let alone your sick ailing grandmother...Who you allegedly love 'soooo much.'

This isn't all just FUN AND GAMES because I'm getting gossip from Luisa, you know?!

Nana. When Mari tells you, you need to be nice.

Why?

She's got a lot going on.

No, she doesn't, Mom. She's going to frat parties.

Sometimes you're so predictable it's infuriating...

You could have just told me that you already had a trip booked with all your friends.

Before everything happened.

That you were only going to come home for a few days around Christmas anyway, and then spend the rest of your break eating stale croissants in Paris. Thanks to your little friend having an extra spot on her family's private jet.

Have fun destroying the environment for New Year's! Because that's what the internet said is going to happen!

No, really. It's okay. I would have just told Abue that you said to go FUCK herself!

Mari doesn't even like bread, Mom! Why are you letting her do this?

She is traveling to experience new cultures, mi amor. There is nothing wrong with that. Your grandmother and I wish we could have had those opportunities at her age.

This is unbelievable. She was supposed to be here!

Luciana, she's still coming. Just not for as long as you thought. And that's okay.

Have fun with bitchy Ghost Abue when she riddles you with guilt for centuries. I'm sure the people of Europe could teach you a little bit about that.

You should be proud of your sister, Nana. She's worked really hard this year. She's been studying constantly, and not losing focus. Keeping up her grades for all her scholarships. It's what we need her to be doing right now. And she's got two jobs! On top of all her classes. She needs a real break soon or she's going to fall apart. You know how hard on herself she can be...Coming here isn't going to fix anything. No more lives need to be derailed by this thing.

I should be the one going on a trip! I've done everything! She's done nothing.

She is doing things, mi amor. They're just different. Her responsibilities are to do well in school right now. That's what we need.

But I'm stressed out too! ALL THE TIME! All I can think about is if Abue is going to be okay—and this was my year to get it together. So don't be surprised if that doesn't happen! Since you have me here alone playing nurse.

No. Don't do that. It wasn't just this year. We told you to take your education seriously when you were a freshman. But you didn't. So now the only person to blame here is yourself.

Oh. You mean the year that I was ADJUSTING? To going from middle school to high school? And had to make a whole new group of friends? Yeah, GREAT time for a pep talk, Mom!

Ugh. No. Stop it.

I hate when you cry.

Whatever, Mari! You just always get to do what you want—and that's just life.

It's not your fault that Mom and Dad only agree with your priorities, I guess.

So I'll just see you on Christmas, and the forty-eight hours before your extravagant European vacation.

But what about Abue?! And her diagnosis?

Mari is seeing her on Christmas! And hopefully by then, your grandmother will have agreed to do the chemo. So we can all talk to her about it together. But you heard the doctor. There's nothing we can do until she recovers.

Okay, then. If that's it with Mari, then I'm going to start acting differently now too.

Excuse me? How so?

We'll see. Maybe I'll start eating more chips.

This is officially a long-distance relationship now, okay? Me and you.

And you already know how those go. So get ready.

No offense to your many failed attempts.

All you need to know now is that my current long-distance relationship with Dad is going great. Because we just really commit to NOT TALKING.

Wanna watch a movie? It's the only night I'll be home from the farm.

Sure. But not 'The Revenant' again.

Oh, c'mon.

You made us watch it last week!

Fine. 'Dunkirk' it is.

But what's even more depressing...and what breaks my fucking heart... is that I'm still sitting—HERE! Calling you!

Holding on to one last shred of hope. Like a fool.

Wondering if maybe, JUST MAYBE, I disobey Mom's orders and tell you the truth, you'll finally decide to come home and stay awhile.

Don't tell your sister any of this, Luciana. Okay? Do you hear me?

Yup, so here it goes.

Here is my last and final attempt to get you to see clearly—I am on my knees.

Abue is going back to the hospital in January, Mari.

Okay?

Yes. She needs another procedure. To fix her stomach swelling.

And Mom didn't want me to tell you, so you could go off and get drunk under the Eiffel Tower guilt-free, but I'm done playing by the rules of her little games.

Promise me, Luciana? That we'll tell Mari about your grandmother's procedure only once we're all done and back home safe? It's nothing major, and I don't want to worry her. We won't even be gone for more than a day.

Yeah so—now you know!

That Mom has been lying to you!

All so you can go out and live her international wet dreams.

Meanwhile, I can't even get a ride to Ladies' Night—in freaking downtown Miami—which is just comical at this point...

But don't worry. Because you're not gonna hear a peep about the hospital from me. *Au revoir!*

No, no! Don't cry now.

Aren't you happy with your decision?

You're not gonna guilt me with your crocodile tears, Mari!

You coming home was the **ONLY THING** I was looking forward to.

I've been pushing pushing pushing—thinking that there was gonna be someone else to help carry me through to the finish line, but I was wrong.

So how do you think I feel?! I have to hold the baton now and keep running!

Oh my god...

You're so annoying.

FINE. Stop sobbing or you're gonna jinx us again!

I wouldn't actually say the hospital thing, Mari, if it was something serious or scary...I'm not a total monster. That's like seven years of bad karma right there.

We're only going in for one day, okay? Happy?!

Yes...For something simple.

The doctors got Abue's test results back, and they said that she needed this thing called a 'stent.'

Oh, just Google it, dude. I don't have it in me anymore.

It's a small tube that they're going to place inside her bile duct, to help bring down her stomach swelling. That's all I'll say.

They won't even have to cut Abue open.

Unfortunately, your grandmother has developed pancreatitis from what's left inside of the tumor. And the inflammation that it's causing is preventing her bile fluids from draining properly. So it's likely what's causing her swelling. But it's good that we caught it early. The stent will help open things up.

How does that work?

We're going to insert a small tube inside her mouth, and then place the stent in her bile duct through there. No incision necessary. She'll be under for only a few hours.

Did you hear that, Abue? It's just a little tube this time.

Nothing more, Nana. Please. Tell her I can't handle it.

I know. I promise.

They actually said that it's very simple, it just still involves a procedure. Hence: the dreaded post-holidays hospital visit.

That I'm also gonna have to fucking solo-man now.

Because I'm sure you've heard—with you and Mom doing all your talking in secret now—but Luisa is also leaving.

Yes!

She's running and packing her bags at this critical juncture. Can you believe it?

Some 'sisters' you guys are, huh?

Man...And you should all honestly be more careful.

When scheduling your betrayals.

Because I could snap—and then this whole operation would go under.

Yeah. Cuz I'm reeeeeeally starting to see how you all benefit from me loving Abue so much. And how you know that I'm never gonna leave her.

Because I mean—how could I?!

How could YOU?

After everything that Luisa told us!

And now I'm even wondering if Luisa just told me all that shit herself—just to nail me down to the cause...Getting me to do her dirty work for her, and clearing her lazy decades-old conscience through me!

Do you really have to go right now, Luisa? Seriously?

Yes, Nana. I don't want to cause any more problems for your grandmother. I want to give her the time and space to deal with this stent on her own. This is about more than just helping her recover now. And sadly, we're not having the reconnection I expected. But I'll still be nearby. In case anything happens. I'm just going to visit Susana.

I haven't been able to talk to her though! You can't go yet!

She's not ready to open up, my Nana. I'm sorry. It's not my choice. My presence is only causing more harm than good. And that stress isn't good for her recovery.

So that's it?! You're just going to give up on her?

No...but I want her to be happy. And healthy. Focused on these next steps. My getting out of here will help her do that.

Wow. I really thought you wanted to help her. I believed you.

I do! This is how.

See? A lot can happen here in one day.

You should remember that.

And I'm telling you, Mari...The dam is breaking.

Luisa is officially a traitor again and now leaving, and you're officially brain-dead and abandoning this family. All while Abue prepares to go back and terrorize that hospital. Merry Christmas to all!

Are you going to at least try to come back? Once she's better?

I don't know. I won't lie to you, it's been painful here. But you should still try to get your grandmother to see that spiritual healer we talked about. It's the most I can do from afar—try to point her in the right direction. And if she won't do it, then maybe you should. Because grief changes people, Nana. You want to be prepared when it comes.

Do whatever you want, Mari.

Just don't lie to yourself.

With this stent—everything is going to get pushed back.

And then whatever part of that tumor is still left inside Abue...is gonna have a lot more time and room to grow.

So I hope you think about THAT. While you're planning your trip to Paris.

Because you're not gonna hear from me again until you're here.

Oh, yes. That's a promise.

And you know what?

I'm sorry, but I have to say it.

Just like how things didn't get resolved between Luisa and Abue—this might not either.

And you should be prepared for that.

Because it's going to hurt us all.

But from where I'm standing...it's especially going to get you.”

Part III



Mete la barriga

“Good evening to the world’s most self-absorbed fuckface.

Hi.

Yes. It’s me.

Your ‘long-lost’ sister.

I’m calling you from Abue’s phone because I refuse to use mine, and she wanted me to tell you that we’re at the hospital already.

Whoa, dude. This room is so much nicer than last time.

Don’t get comfortable. I want to be in and out of here. The patterns on these cushions are emphasizing my stomach.

That’s right, this is strictly business. She begged me to answer your voicemails like five times.

Will you stop ignoring your sister, Luciana? She’s very alarmed. And look—she’s using up all my data. I can’t get any of my usual calls or texts!

No? How are you all so forgiving? And you don’t need data. No one else is calling you.

Forgiving? Please. You don’t know what it’s like being the oldest. Cut your sister some slack.

Um, I actually now kind of do? And no. Because I don't want to talk to her.

Well you have to! She's driving me crazy with all her questions! Your mother says that she just wants to see how I'm doing, but good Lord that girl can talk. Tell her that she doesn't have to make herself sick worrying about me! I'm okay. And she was just here a few weeks ago? You had no problem accepting Christmas gifts from her then.

Omg. Was I supposed to just ignore her in my own home?

Yes. I do it all the time. So admit it—you were happy to see her! And you miss her! I can see it now through your teeth...Go call her before I have to change my number again!

So surprise...I'm breaking my no-contact rule temporarily right now. For official use only. Because I'm Abue's current secretary. And I can hear in your voice that you're thrilled.

Yes. The stent procedure is tomorrow, January thirteenth. Didn't realize you remembered.

Or cared.

Um...Abue is doing good. She's fine.

She's mostly just excited to get her stomach back.

But listen, Mari. We don't have to chitchat. I'm just giving you her updates so we can hang up and move on.

Why?

Because I'm still upset with you.

Just because I was courteous with you in person for the sake of the holidays—doesn't mean that we're gonna go back to just talking like normal again. I at least have SOME mild self-respect.

Up until yesterday, I didn't even think that you deserved to hear from me ever again!

Yes. But then lucky for you, I was reminded on Tumblr that 'We can forgive but we can't forget.' So it's my new thing now. With everything. And it helped me understand how to move on from your betrayal.

By just never forgetting that it happened, exactly.

So fun for us, right? Sister things!

Oh, please. Get off your high horse.

You were traveling!

I wasn't gonna buy international minutes just to yell at you...

Dad would kill me.

And besides, you barely fucking noticed that I wasn't calling or texting. Because you weren't even watching my Instagram stories.

Look, Nico. She doesn't even care. Fuck her.

Bro. You need to stop acting like you're dating your sister.

Oh my god...Do I sound like my grandma?

Worse. You sound like your mom.

And you knew that I would eventually somehow make contact today anyway!

I wouldn't just let something happen to Abue and not tell you...

You're a traitor, but I still have compassion.

Even though you hardly deserve it...

Because your behavior was still just straight-up disrespectful over Christmas. When we only saw you for like five minutes.

Since clearly—your main priority was just running around and hooking up with your friends.

Wait, where's Mari?

She's sleeping at her friend's tonight.

AGAIN?

There's no room in here, mi amor. Can you blame her? And she already took your grandmother out to breakfast this morning. Her friends are also only here for a few days. It's okay that she sees them. And she said that you're barely talking to her, Luciana! Don't make her regret coming home.

Ew, Mari. I WAS being nice to you while you were here. Stop lying.

Sorry I just wasn't BEGGING you to spend time with me.

Because I was simply waiting at home, seeing if you'd finally decide to stay in one night and hang out with your family. But since that day never came, you hardly saw me. So there you go. Mystery solved.

No? I did not sleep in every day until two p.m. while you were here?

Who do you think walks Rosy?!

Okay. That only happened ONE time when we stayed up late watching movies with Dad.

And that night didn't even count! You only came home early because you got 'food poisoning' while out with your friends.

Right. I'm sure your two-cracker dinner did a number on that Smirnoff.

So I'm sorry, Mari. But the only person to blame here is yourself.

Omg. Fuck.

I sound like Mom.

Again?!

Nothing. Forget it.

But just because I'm making contact and might be starting to forgive you—or more so, learn how to 'deal' with you—doesn't mean that things are gonna be the same around here. Because I see what you value now. So don't be shocked if I start acting differently too.

I don't know what that means yet! We're gonna see.

Maybe I'll start by hiding girls, brownies, and Advil bottles under my bed!

Oh no, wait. That first one sounded weird.

ANYWAYS. I KNOW THEY'RE BAD FOR YOU, MARI.

BUT SO IS HOPING THAT PEOPLE WILL CHANGE. I DON'T CARE.

Great. Glad you understand.

And now that we finally got THAT out of the way—I'll allow you to fill me in.

So, how was your trip?

Yes...I'm asking for real. I might as well get updates if we're being forced to communicate.

Okay, cool.... I'm glad that you 'ate a lot of food.' Even though I don't believe it. But hey, I'm extremely proud that you didn't get kidnapped by the way. Because I didn't know how that was going to go. You obviously don't have the best instincts.

And did you finally kiss that hot Parisian bartender you kept posting about?!

No? Why NOT, Mari? She said she liked your glasses! Like three times!
My god...You are your mother's daughter...

What do you mean, 'She's hot but I'm scared of vaginas'? You lost your virginity to someone who referred to David Guetta once as the Beatles of our generation. We are past horror.

Oh, so now you're just too LAZY to sleep with women? Because of the learning curve? That's extremely out of character for you. You normally love doing homework.

And how do you think I feel?!

I actually WANT to do it...AND I have learning disabilities.

So c'mon! I need you to do it first so that then you can teach me!

I'm kidding, lol, chill. I'd actually die if you hooked up with a girl faster than me on your treasonous Euro trip...That would be the thing that finally did me in.

And you'd probably just freak out and cry if you ever did it anyway. Which would be so embarrassing for me.

They'd be like, Whoa, what's wrong? You never seen two girls kiss before? And you'd have to say, No! We forced my sister to live in the closet her whole life! She was too busy!

Even though I'm seriously starting to realize what a loser you'd be if you didn't have me.

Since I force you to engage with things outside your Lilly Pulitzer bubble.

Because otherwise you'd probably like...use Facebook or something.

Or have a dog filter on all of your profile photos...And then look forward to the Fourth of July.

I think I just got chills.

Oh, and can you IMAGINE having to deal with this entire family by yourself? Ha! No, I could never!

Sorry. Last dig.

I just need to get better at repeating my mantra.

You can forgive but you don't have to forget.

Um...I'm feeling okay...

Thank you for asking...

A rare thing with you these days.

But this stent thing should be easy. And Abue is fine. She's just being an even bigger bitch than usual.

Yeah. It's just me and her in here right now. Mom isn't coming in until tomorrow.

She's trying to teach as many swimming lessons as she can before the procedure.

You sure you got it, Nana? You'll be okay? I'll be there first thing in the morning. I promise. We just need every dollar we can get.

Yes, Mom. I sleep next to her every day. I got this.

Abue was like—And can we move away while Luisa visits Susana? I don't want her knowing where to find us when she comes back.

That's not a bad idea. Maybe that'll teach Mari to not be so absent.

I told you to get over that! It's getting very irritating.

Keep talking and I'll leave you here too.

Do it. I'm a professional.

So besides being a dick—Abue's in good spirits.

She was even just yelling at me for not being a Colombian nationalist.

Yeah, lol. We were watching her news show on Telemundo, and they were running this story about how a massive wildfire had raged on in this rural town in Colombia. Because all of the firefighters were missing and blacked out at a bar.

So I was like, Classic. This is why we can't evolve as a people. *We drink way too much.* And that made Abue—super pissed, lol. I think I hit a trigger.

She was all, That's rich! Coming from the girl who falls asleep at every Juanes concert. Have some respect for La Patria! It made you who you are!

That happened ONE time, dude.

No. You did it during his UNICEF concert too.

Omg, that was prerecorded! And since when do you care about 'respecting' Colombia?!

It's everything to me. I just can't go back.

Yes, you can? I'm tired of you people being so dramatic. You can go on Spirit for like ten bucks!

So I'd say she's doing fine—and not worried at all that they're about to stick a tube down her throat.

And since she seems to be not concerned, and the procedure isn't until tomorrow, I'm going out later tonight with Nico after she falls asleep.

What?

I'm allowed to say fuck it and go out too?

It's time I started doing things for myself around here!

They're not even opening her up, Mari! Don't act like you care now all of a sudden.

Omg. Where am I 'even going'? It's like you don't even listen...

To Ladies' Night, idiot! It's FRIDAY.

And you might have FORGOTTEN, since I've been a FREAKIN' ANGEL, but I don't actually HAVE to be here taking care of Abue and this family.

I can get drunk and throw up too.

All right, all right—relax. It was Abue's idea...She's the one who even brought it up.

I swear! She said that I should go out and 'do something' tonight while we waited, instead of just 'sitting around' and looking at her. As if there was nothing else I fucking do!

I don't need you here until the morning, Luciana. Why don't you go outside and do something interesting with your life? Don't you get tired of just staring at me?

She practically kicked me out.

And if that didn't already hurt bad enough, it then hit me how PATHETIC it was...that I didn't really have anywhere else to BE on a Friday night besides my grandmother's hospital room.

So I said, Fine. I'm calling Nico and telling him that we're going out.

Good. Get out of here.

But if you need me, I'll just be in the café downstairs. Waiting for you to call when you realize that you can't even use the bathroom on your own.

Sure. 'The café.' And I'm Jennifer Lopez.

Excuse me?

I wasn't born yesterday, Luciana. I don't care what you do. Just don't get in trouble, and don't tell your mom. Now go out and meet some new people! You're beautiful! And young. But please tell me you brought something else to wear. You can't possibly go out wearing that.

Oh god, maybe I shouldn't go anywhere...You are starting to sound kind of sick...

I'll call you if I need anything! Just go. Take my car. I need to be left alone. It's been months.

Why are you being so rude today?

You shouldn't have to be here!

Ugh. The hospital is like five minutes away from the bar anyway, Mari...I'll be right around the corner if I need to come back.

Because I'll have you know that I show up!

Rain or shine!

And it has rained—a lot around here.

Yes, but I even had to do Abue's roots yesterday.

That's another moment when I wanted to call you and cry!

I need a full black head, Luciana. No grays. Or I'm not going back to that hospital. I have a reputation to uphold, but I don't have the energy this time. So I need my beautiful hair to distract from my stomach.

And you already fucking know how that went...

I can barely put my own hair into a bun...

I even tried telling her that she didn't WANT me to do her roots.

And that I got us both sent home from a Barbie makeover party once in third grade, when the host dared me to eat one of her eye shadow palettes, and I was so fucking bored that I DID. But Abue didn't care. She just said that if I didn't learn how to dye her roots—she would die.

And you think I don't know what a man you can be? Who do you think folds all your clothes while you're away at school? The tooth fairy? But you're my only option! I can't let anyone else go near my head, it's not smart.

Oh, and then she of course complained and cried the whole time.

Saying that I got the wrong color again...Or the dye must have changed its name.

Because the liquid didn't look this dark last time—and I'm pulling too much here, but not enough there. And I really should be wearing gloves. And not checking my phone so much. And would it kill me to just use the right brush?! Why am I standing so far from the mirror? Why don't I understand how serious this is? Why am I even alive? Et cetera.

Can we stop? You're just going to be lying down in a bed the whole visit. It's one night!

No. If you're beautiful, they treat you better. And then they move you up in line.

What line?

Like at the airport.

That's priority boarding.

No, Mari. I don't think that Abue 'caring about her roots' is a good sign, lol.

You're just telling yourself that so you don't feel guilty over not staying home.

Did you not just hear what I said? She's crazy! You can't reason with her.

She is only going to do what she wants.

And I promise, after they fix her stomach, that's going to be flirting with perverts on Match.com.

I'm not being a pessimist, dude—I'm being a realist.

Abue has not mentioned chemo ONCE. And it breaks my heart to admit it...but I don't think it's in her plans.

Plus, if you were here, you'd know that she doesn't exactly have 'her head in the game.'

She was yelling at the nurses earlier for just taking her blood!

What's this for?! Where's Junior? I only agreed to the stent because it's going to fix my stomach. Nothing more! All you people ever do is poke and then leave me—this isn't the beach!

The nurses were like, Is she good? And I had to fake-smile and say, Oh, she's so good. Don't worry.

Liar! I'm going to write a book one day, and it's going to be called: 'All the Lies My Granddaughter Said About Me.'

Go ahead. I'll write the sequel. 'Things My Grandmother Pretended Not to Understand.'

And then when I asked the nurses about Abue's blood work, trying to stay up-to-date and INFORMED, she tried throwing her pillow at me and screamed, Stop talking to the nurses, Luciana! If you're so nosy—then why don't you go to medical school!

Um. Cuz I hate blood?

It's not like you have to drink it. Toughen up. This world is hard.

Omg. I know? Bye. I'm not talking to you. The doctors and I have some IMPORTANT business to discuss.

It better not be about my hair!

And not to scare you, Mari, because I'm being serious this time, but the nurses told me that Abue's blood work today wasn't as strong.

Yeah. And that she's probably having a lot more pain in her abdomen than she's letting on.

Which I think at least explains why she's being extra irritable lately... And the only reason I'm going to forgive her.

But it's very normal for patients with your grandmother's condition. And thankfully, the stent should help stabilize things. If it doesn't, then we'll know that something else is going on.

Is that likely?

It could happen. But we'll talk about that once your mother arrives.

And like the good and responsible granddaughter that I am, I was going to explain everything to Abue, but then she just interrupted us by saying: Okay, everyone! Chop-chop! Enough with the small talk. I'd like to be alone. Luciana—go find out what they're bringing for dinner.

Again? No. Hold on. I'm talking to the nurses.

Stop that! You're going to get crazy ideas like your mother.

And I don't even know why she makes me check!

Or pretends like she'll even eat it.

Last time we were here, she cried because she said that the hospital food reminded her of hog shit. *And my ex-husband's face. Oh god. Hurry. Get it away.*

So when I told her no...and that if she was going to be rude, then I was going to leave. She just turned to me and said, Fine! Then just hand me the iPad and GET OUT!

Jesus. What is with you today?!

I don't feel like talking. I have the depression and blood pressure of a teenager. I don't need it going up.

Okay, whatever. I'm exhausted.

I'm in a lot of pain, Luciana...

I know. I can see that. But I'm just trying to help you. So that you can get better.

And that's making it worse!

Why?!

BECAUSE I CAN'T GIVE YOU THAT.

And I was so fucking mad.

At everything.

And at you.

That I said, Fuck it.

I'm going to Ladies' Night and not looking back."



Y me cambias la cara

“Ugh, hi. I’m gonna cry.

Hello?

Are you awake?

Yes. It’s six a.m. here too.

We also have clocks in this dimension.

Okay, I’m sorry! I thought you’d be up for your stupid workout class.

No, nothing’s wrong.

Well, kind of.

But not with the stent.

I’m back at the hospital with Abue now, and they’re going to start the procedure in a few hours. But something else really sad happened while I was out...

Yeah. Abue said that Luisa called, and told her that one of her childhood friends, a woman named Nela, had just died of a heart attack the night before.

What?

And Abue seemed...really fucking distraught.

I didn't want you to be here when I got the call, Nana. I'm sorry. It's why I tried pushing you out. Luisa told me that someone had died...I just didn't know who. But I wasn't expecting this. Nela had been my only real friend growing up...I can't believe I didn't know she was sick.

Hold on. When was this?

She passed last night. But she was my best friend until I turned sixteen. The first months after my father was shot.

I know. It gets even more tragic.

Abue explained that she had heard from Luisa, who had heard from one of their other sisters, Ileana, who had heard from someone else in their town, that Nela was in the hospital with complications from a heart condition. *They wanted me to know. To say my goodbyes.* But by the time the game of telephone got to Abue, Nela had already passed.

I'm so sorry, dude.

And Abue said that when Luisa finally called, telling her the news, her whole body just went into shock. *My chest, Nana. It still hurts.*

Then she told me—through her tears—that she thought her heart ‘had just burst into pieces.’ *Like a part of the muscle is falling out.*

Omg. Are you having a heart attack too?

I think—

NURSE!

And because I have never heard Abue say anything vulnerable like that in my life, I was also a little in shock. *Abue? Can you hear me? What's going on?*

So when the nurses confirmed that she was okay, I decided it was now or never to get Abue to open up.

And little by little, Mari...she did just that.

YES. Abue told me about her REAL, actual feelings.

It was—bizarre.

Well, first, I learned that Nela and Abue had been like sisters growing up. *She didn't have any, and I was much older than mine.* So much so that if Abue closes her eyes now, and thinks about it, she can picture her childhood

home with its many rooms and open doors. And all of them are filled with Nela. *And her giant laugh.*

Aw. What was she like?

Back then? She was funny and brave. Kind of like you. Always making me laugh. But very obedient at the same time. The nuns at school loved her for that.

Abue then said that in the first rooms of her memory, she is about five or six. And her mother is pregnant with Ileana, her first sister. But that her father is alive, and he has a steady job. And he's spending most nights at home with their family.

We were all...happy? Then?

Happy?!

It's hard to picture it, but we were. When it was just the three of us. Before all the trouble came. Nela lived only a few streets down, so we'd spend entire days at each other's house. We loved to run, sing, dance, and paint. Riding our bikes along the water on the weekends. Playing hide-and-seek in the neighborhood after school.

Apparently—things were good?

And because I have ALSO never heard Abue say anything positive about her childhood ever—I was staring at the ceiling again in shock.

Are you telling me this because you think you might die?

No...It's just strange. Everyone else in that memory is gone. Nela was the only one left. And now I'm here. As the only one who can remember.

But I think that Abue shocked herself too.

Because it looked like she was also hearing it for the first time...

She even stretched out her hands and said, Isn't it crazy? That from all that—came this?

It plays so slow in my head. When I think about it. My childhood, and these rooms. In some, I'm even playing outside with Nela and Fernanda. And she is spraying us with the hose while we jump. Around us everything is perfect. Alive and captivating. Hot, humid, and a vivid green. Fernanda used to even make us this sweet lemonade. From sugarcane. Though she'd

have to go back inside sometimes when her stomach hurt. Because the babies started coming into the picture then.

In other rooms—we're even happier. I am sitting on my dad's lap at the dinner table. And Nela is in a chair to my right. We're laughing because he's telling us stories about cows and chickens, later throwing himself on the floor just to make us smile. I loved everything back then. He was home all the time.

In the ones toward the end, Nela and I are older. And we're allowed to walk by ourselves to school. But we'd still always pause. Whenever the bus drove by. Putting our hands together for safety real tight. We thought it was loud, and scary. And it reminded us of when our baby siblings started to cry...We also talked about how mean our mothers got back then. How distant and foreign they felt. And how they would get so tired, and so angry, that their eyes would get stuck looking for something that wasn't there.

Abue then whispered: I never think about that time. It's so much easier to forget.

I can tell...This is the first I'm hearing of it.

But then she just asked me if I believed in heaven, lol.

You're smart. What do you think? I gotta know where we're going.

And I told her that I wasn't sure.

But that Luisa had taught me more about reincarnation, and I thought the concept of coming back as someone else was pretty cool.

I'd be careful before believing anything that woman says, Luciana. She'll sell you a dream. And it's a shame. Really. Because I always thought she'd grow up to be the best of us some day. As the smartest and youngest.

Well, see? If she's so smart—then maybe she's right about the reincarnation!

Maybe...If it's true, I'd want to come back as Princess Diana.

That's not how it works, lol.

Because I told Abue that I had read online...that when you reincarnate, you can continue to meet the people you already know, over and over again, in each life. Because once we died, our souls just found ways to come back to each other. Every time.

In different bodies, of course. But our hearts always stayed the same.

So maybe there's a chance that you could see Nela again!

And so I thought it was comforting, that even if we all died, we'd still get the chance to see each other again. At least one more time. *It makes everything seem less sad and final.*

But Abue was like, That's weird—I don't think about the people I hate dying and coming back. I think about them frozen in time, and in death, forever. *Why shouldn't some things be sad and final?*

I just said they'd come back as other people, dude. You probably wouldn't even recognize them.

I would. My spirit would know.

Yeah. I guess you're right. That's the whole point.

After that, I finally worked up the courage to ask Abue why she and Nela had lost touch. Expecting to hear about some earth-shattering telenovela shit. But the truth was just way more quiet.

It's not a good story, Nana.

It's okay. I still want to know.

Abue told me that when things first happened with her father's murder, there were a lot of rumors flying around. *That we were unsafe. And involved with bad people.* So it was best for everyone there to just keep their distance. *Especially children.* And unfortunately, Nela's family got spooked and did just that.

Her parents made her come to our house one day and tell me that our friendship was over. They worried about her safety in our house. Without my dad, and because of him. It broke us both. But there was nothing we could do...Nela was crying. And Fernanda almost didn't even let me come to the door.

It was sad, yes...But Abue told me that over the years, once they both grew up and left their homes, she actually found a way to talk to Nela again.

I got her number from a woman at the supermarket. Who had told me that Nela had just moved to an apartment across town. I was over the moon. I couldn't wait to see her again.

And even though their reunion was exciting at first, and Abue felt their special bond start to come back, over time, their conversations just became too painful. Nela had a full life—and a family. And it seemed like she had just moved on. While Abue still felt sad, and alone. Just as lost as she was when they were sixteen years old.

It was too much for me to dip my toes back into the world that had abandoned me. The same one that had taken my father...And I was angry at Nela. All over again. For agreeing to end our friendship. And not putting up a fight. It seems silly now, but that's how I saw it. Because even though I had grown up and married, I still didn't know how the world worked. So I made up most things. And I told Nela that not continuing our friendship would be for the best.

Ouch...I know.

But Abue said that Nela actually understood why she needed the space.

Because Nela knew that she wasn't just a reminder of the bad parts. She knew that she was a reminder of the good things too.

Of all the love and joy we shared those early days. That always hurt my heart the most. Our memories before the sadness.

So Nela and Abue agreed to stop talking, and then eventually, Abue just moved to the States.

We'd each had our own kids, and then they grew up. And when I came here to help your mom, it just made it all easier to forget. That whole other part of my life. So it went away. But I still thought about Nela sometimes... And our old life. Especially her singing, Nana. She had the best voice. The only one better than mine in the choir. On some days, I even pretend I'm still singing with her.

I was like, Abue...dude. I'm so sorry. I'm sure you wish you could have said goodbye.

I don't know. I don't know anything anymore.

What? What do you mean?

It feels like there's a fog in my head now. And all of my decisions have been wrong.

Okay, how about you just stay here with me then? All right? So you don't get lost. And when we're back home, you can tell me about it. But for now, let's just get through this part. And thank god you're okay.

Why? God wants nothing to do with me.

With me neither then! We can choke on his flames together.

Luisa called right about then to check on us...Which was good.

Because I was about to tell Abue that she and Nela were probably in love.

Omg, I'm kidding, lol! Chill. I would never.

They were just really good friends, right? Winky face.

Oh, please. I know you girls love your homoerotic friendships. I've seen the pictures.

No, yeah, for sure...I love straddling my friends too.

Mari—I love my grandmother. Why on earth would I tell her that I'm gay?!

And nice change of subject, by the way. Don't think I didn't catch that.

No, dude. There's no way that I'm losing her before I have to. I'm not fucking risking THAT.

Besides...I don't feel like spending our potential last year together 'processing' anything.

Even though it's the simplest thing in the world! But whatever. I have to pick my battles here.

Well, sure...maybe...but even if she didn't care, she'd still know how the rest of their world works. I'm not trying to give her a heart attack now too!

And just because Abue is sharing her feelings, Mari—doesn't mean that it's safe to share mine.

She might be insane, but she's still a CATHOLIC.

I have to stay on my toes at least about that!

So don't you dare go saying anything to Mom about this, okay?

Because I'm surprisingly making some progress with Abue here. And I don't need you or anybody fucking that up.

I'm serious, dude.

Don't make me regret letting you back in.

Okay. Good. And now on that note, I should probably go back to check on Abue. I can see the nurses starting to walk toward her room.

And I also need to see what the heck I look like...Because security hasn't taken their eyes off me since I walked in.

Yes. And when I got back from the bar last night, they were even like, Are you here to see someone? Or are you here for yourself?

Great question. But I'm here to see the light of my life. Room fifty seventeen. Fifth floor. I know the way.

Which totally wasn't fair. Because I was already REELING from Ladies' Night.

Since Yessi and I had accidentally made eye contact while I was fake-waiting for drinks at the bar.

Ugh. Let's discuss this later, Nico. I just got back to the room and my grandma is still awake and staring at the ceiling.

Okay, but stop freaking out. Yessi doesn't think you're a weirdo! I was kidding. You're going to be fine.

But I don't even DRINK, dude! She's gonna know that I was just waiting there to look at her!

I didn't know I was gonna have to pull it together later for THIS.

Um, Yessi is my official Ladies' Night crush, Mari. I texted you this. She's the bartender I sent you a picture of.

Yes. With the shaved head. And the piercings. I saw her there for the first time the night of the gator incident.

No, I didn't talk to her, lol. Relax...I was just checking to see if she was bartending.

And I had my Keds on, Mari!

I was going to a hospital after!

My outfit was screaming: Underage Kid Using Fake ID for the Second Time. Not: A1 Pussy!

Omg. So, 'What happened'? Nothing. I just buckled over in pain when she caught me staring at her from across the bar.

Nico was like, Babe! What's wrong? Is it cramps? *Worse. Yessi and I just locked eyes.*

Oh. Then now we have to say hi.

No fucking way.

Are you serious? You followed each other on Instagram. She's going to think you're a stalker.

I'm okay with that!

Why?! Because I get nervous, Mari!

I'm not in sixth grade anymore, running around with a blue tongue trying to lick trees for attention. I'm stressed out twenty-four/seven now! So can you IMAGINE me around hot girls?

I could barely talk to Sandra Bullock about a freaking tumor...

Mari. No. Your friends weren't hot. They looked like clones straight out of the Mattel factory. I'm more into Barbie Ferreira.

Whatever, lol. I'm hanging up. Your friends didn't prepare me for shit. And I'm suddenly remembering why I had ignored you for so long.

Oh! And look at that. Right on cue—Mom has arrived and is now walking up to Abue's hospital room. Incredible.

I swear she has Spidey senses that tingle whenever I talk about girls...

It's like her homophobic superpower.

But she's about to have no idea, though, what she's walking into.

Because Abue's dealing with her own kind of girl drama right now...

And she's lucky that her crush doesn't have Instagram!

Oh, fuck! I just dropped my phone.

Ugh. DAMMIT.

It cracked.

See?! I have to go. Mom messes with the energy field."



Haz lo que te dé la gana

“Did you hear, dude?

Did they tell you?

Has Mom called you crying yet?

No. It’s not about Abue.

NO—Rosy’s not dead! Don’t say that.

It’s about ME, genius.

Yes, lol.

I shaved my head.

Well, actually, I just cut it super short. But with the way that everyone’s been acting, I might as well have.

Oh, c’mon, Mari! Don’t lie to me. I know that you and Mom discuss shit in secret now.

Which I’m still mad about—by the way—we’ve just had a lot going on. With the hospital, and the whole Nela thing.

So I’ve had to reinstate communicating and adjust my priorities.

And now on THIS momentous occasion, I urgently need to know if Mom has said anything to you.

I KNEW IT! What did she say?

Omg. That's amazing.

I'm gonna be sick with power.

Who knew that rebelling about something completely unrelated to a fundamental part of you could be so fun!

And easy?

Oh, yes. Mom has been screaming about it for hours.

LUCIANA! What did you do?! Is this some sort of mental crisis?!

And when she first saw me, she was like, QUICK—get inside. Don't talk to ANYBODY until we fix this. *People are going to think there's something going on at home!*

So I had to lie and tell her that I'd been thinking about it forever, just to get her to calm down.

It's okay, Mom...Relax. I've wanted this cut for months. And this look is in! It's high fashion! A fresh start for the spring, like you said.

NO. Why have you chopped off your head?!

But the truth is—that I did it on a whim.

Because I'm feeling fucking different lately.

And I woke up all sad yesterday...Thinking about how depressed Abue looked, talking about the only time in her life that she's liked.

So I said: Fuck that, man.

I don't want to be seventy-something and reminiscing about the 'good times' from ages five to fifteen. What the hell am I doing? *I want to like who I am right now.*

And I decided there was no need to wait.

Because if I didn't like my hair—and if I wanted to LOOK or BE any different—then I could at least start now. At eighteen. By chopping that shit right off.

Um...no, lol.

Abue didn't 'technically' hate it.

She just doesn't know that she was the source of my inspiration. So she was a little confused.

Oh my, Luciana. Be careful. Some rabbit holes are just too deep to climb out of.

What are you talking about?

That hair. Whatever you're going through. Don't take it out on yourself. At least get it professionally done...

And FINE—whatever. I know that I might have fucked it up. By doing it myself.

But I thought that I actually looked good?

And like I was finally seeing myself for the first time?

Like I could maybe even now ENJOY my days on this earth?!

But Mom was like, Why? You look like Pablo Escobar!

Hahahaha.

Why are you laughing? He killed hundreds of people and destroyed our country.

Because you're right. I kind of do.

No, seriously, Mari. That shit hit her hard, lol.

She even brought it up during my college-counseling session this week.

We were sitting down with Ms. Daniels, my counselor, who was going off about what a kind, brave, and outspoken human I am. And how she wanted to 'showcase that' in my applications. *Even if Luciana's only applying to schools that will one hundred percent let her in.* Because even though Broward and Dade are a good fit, and we have until May, she adorably wants to make sure that I still 'stand out.' *So, Mrs. Domínguez, do you have any good stories about your daughter that I could write about?*

Which I thought was really sweet!

Since I never imagined the 'college process' highlighting anything 'GOOD' about me.

But Mom just ruined the moment by saying, Well, Ms. Daniels, you should see her room. And hear the way she talks to me.

To which Ms. Daniels then said, Well, no one is perfect, Mrs. Domínguez. We are all here to learn and grow.

So then Mom finally finished her with: Yes, we can see that now with her new hair.

Omg. It's just hair, Mom! Can you stop?

No. This isn't funny to me. This is your life. It is your message to the world.

Good then! This is mine.

It's okay. I'm shockingly doing fine.

I thought that Mom's tantrums would be affecting me more...But I guess this is just what happens when you become FUCKING HOT.

I'm kidding, lol. Shut up.

I just know that Mom's reaction has actually nothing to do with me, and everything to do with Abue's new hair-problem thing. Even if she won't admit it.

Wait, what?

Mom hasn't told you?

Wow. That's amazing. You girls only make time to talk shit about me, huh?

Well. Some pieces of Abue's hair have started to fall out. From the back of her head.

And the doctors said that it's some weird, delayed side effect from all the anesthesia during both her surgeries. *She was under that first time for so long. This second procedure could have messed with her hormones.* But that things like this were expected, as she recovers, and it's nothing we needed to be worried about.

However—we just can't let her know.

Because Mom does not want to upset her.

Again, Ma?! With the hidey-hidey shit?

This is critical, Luciana. You can't draw any attention to her hair. And I can see that you're going through something...but you need to listen to me for just a little while longer. Your grandmother is finally physically feeling better. And we have an appointment to discuss her chemo very soon. So she can't be under the impression that she's getting any more sick, or she won't consider anything. And it's time! The stent has delayed things for long enough!

But I thought you said that she was fine? And that it was just a side effect from her surgery?

Reality doesn't matter to her!

Yup. Bingo. Mom wants to maintain the illusion that everything is fine, and progressing healthily, so that Abue can finally think about her treatment options with a 'positive and clear head.'

And this time, I tragically agree with her.

Which I know is another drastic change around here.

But it's been like four or five months since Abue's surgery! So I agree that we need to get a move on.

Especially if we're gonna have to fight against the decision that Abue's already made in her head...

I mean, duh, Mari.

There's been absolutely no mention of the chemo from her. Mom is just waiting to attack with it from the sidelines nonetheless.

No, the stent was good! You have it backward.

We needed it to bring down the swelling in Abue's stomach, and it's actually working.

We're only on like week two now and she's already feeling much better.

Well yeah, besides the hair thing. But she doesn't know about that yet. And she's honestly just been pretty chill and low-key ever since the news of her friend.

She almost didn't even want to attend the Skype funeral...

Yes, lol. Nela's.

I had to convince Abue like five times that she could still join without using her camera.

But what if they can see me?

How, Abue? Your camera is off.

They'll know that I'm right there! In that little box! I can't have that. I haven't spoken to these people in decades.

It'll just be your name in that blank screen! We don't even have to use a photo. Plus, if they talk to you, I'll be right here.

Oh great. Then the priest can see your hair and kick us out of the funeral. No. I'm only joining if you change my Skype name to Gloria Estefan!

Even though Abue's fake ass was just then focused on scrutinizing everyone else's faces the whole time...Spending every minute of the funeral investigating her old classmates' photos...Despite having just mourned and cried about her friend Nela for weeks.

So as you can guess, she didn't get much closure.

Will you take a picture of the screen, Luciana? With your phone? I need to go through all these people later. There's too much going on. Do you think that person is in an apartment? Or in a house?

And when I asked Abue why Nela's family was livestreaming the funeral anyway, she was just like, Because the church charges per seat? And it's very small? *I told you that she was popular, Luciana.*

Like, obviously? You brainless American idiot?

So, actually, despite being more 'low-key' lately, Abue's still very much being herself. You don't have to worry.

Okay. Can we log off now? The priest has been singing the same song for like two hours. I regret making us join.

Learn the words! It has a beautiful message! But zoom in over here first. I want to see their backgrounds. Do you think that's her boyfriend, or her son?

And then, as if I wasn't already having the Sunday of a lifetime, after Abue's Skype funeral, Mom took us to try a new vegan restaurant.

It's going to be fun! Let's go! You two have been on screens ALL day.

Which I didn't actually mind, since I could at least fit in at the vegan restaurant with my shaved head. But the second that we walked in, Abue started to protest.

Yeah. She was all: Ew! Why are we here, Elena? I'm a carnivore! I hunt! I need to eat something more than just a flower! And what is this? Shouldn't Jaime be at work? I thought no animals were allowed!

It's Sunday, Emilia. And I'm sitting right here.

I know. I just said that.

I thought we could all try something new, Ma! Since that seems to be... what people want...But these foods will be great for you. They're extremely important for your recovery. Will you please just try them? For me?

So the poor waiter didn't know our table was already heated...When Mom asked him for a special kind of cashew milk. That she had read online allegedly 'helps with liver function.'

Because when he said they didn't have it, Mom snatched the plastic straw out of his hand and screamed, NO?! AND WHAT IS THIS? DO YOU NOT CARE ABOUT OUR DYING PLANET? *And why would you do something called 'Fried Tofu February.'* That's disgusting!

Mom! Jeez. You can't just talk to people like that.

Luciana, don't yell at your mother. She's having a hard day.

Me too, Dad! She's yelling at strangers!

And then Abue made things worse by making spitballs. And shooting them at our mother through the straw.

Why are you yelling at the waiter, Elena? I taught you better than that.

Me? You're the one acting like a child!

So? Doesn't the world love children?

At one point, Abue even emptied an entire salt packet into Dad's drink because he asked why she didn't want to try anything.

Because I lost my earlier years, Jaime. And now I refuse to suffer again. Do you really want to get into it?

So obviously...things were a little tense.

And when we got home, Abue decided to deal with it by running straight to our room and slamming the door.

Yep. Like a pissed-off teenager, lol.

Just like me. So sweet.

But I think that it could just be some pre-birthday blues though...

You know how Abue gets around her birthday.

All quiet and sentimental...for the only twenty-four hours all year.

She even already spent that whole night scrolling through pictures of Nela's funeral and Colombia on her iPad.

Like a lovesick high schooler.

Well, no—it wasn't completely random.

She's been obsessing over wanting to go to this one place called the Cocora Valley lately. She looks at pictures of it all day online.

I think I'm ready, Nana. To go back.

Where? The hospital?

No, you fool. Colombia. Once my stomach heals. Here—look at these pictures. Isn't it gorgeous? I want to go see those mountains again...And touch the soil. We used to go there a lot with my dad as kids. Even with Nela. We'd run all around the valley and sing. Looking at all the grass... and tall trees. It was so big, Nana. Like an enormous dream. Making you feel alone, but connected to everything at the same time.

Which I thought was huge!

Since she never wants to get up and leave her room.

Let alone pay her old home country a visit...

So it was nice to see her softening up!

And maybe...you know, reconsidering connecting with certain parts of her past.

On top of just generally being excited about her future again!

But for some reason, Mom is convinced that it's the equivalent of just letting her give up and die.

How? By helping her relax? This is good, Ma. The stent is making her feel better. You're the one that said she needed to get up!

No. It's a death sentence. Trust me. She's moving into her head...It's not good.

Yeah.

Mom was like, Luciana, listen. I know you never believe me, but your grandmother is crazy and she's losing her mind. I don't think the stent is working. If she wants to travel—then there is something ELSE still affecting her inside!

I know, lol.

I was like, Maybe Abue just wants to travel because she's grateful to be alive?

That goes against the very essence of her being! And she hasn't been to that place in decades—the Cocora Valley. She doesn't even know what she's talking about! The only thing there now...are these ancient hundred-year-old palm trees. And they're very inspiring, I agree, but she doesn't know the

first thing about them. They're even rumored to be the tallest in the world! Did she tell you that? We thought they had gone extinct. When la guerrilla took over the valley. But once the peace treaty was signed, and the scientists were let back in, they found a whole valley of wax palms—just flourishing. Completely untouched! It was a miracle, really. In the captive arms of la guerrilla, the palms had been unintentionally shielded from human consumption. Isn't that wonderful? But now they grow everywhere! And there's nothing else left. Why does she want to go there?!

Omg. I don't care anymore. Just stop yelling. My brain has reached its Elena capacity.

No! You think that just because you have that haircut now—you can talk to your mother that way?

Lol, why are you so threatened by it? And maybe Abue's just feeling nostalgic, Mom! Because of her friend, and her upcoming birthday?

No. That's another thing that has me so concerned. Why is she so happy this time? Of all the years? She usually never wants to celebrate! And now she's smiling? She used to make me disconnect the house phone every year!

But...I honestly think it's fine?

And that Abue's just being herself?

Because you know what?

It's awesome that that fact can finally be comforting for me."



Auxilio

“Yo.

Did you call Abue for her birthday yet?

Yeah. She’s sitting downstairs.

In her all-white birthday outfit. Waiting for you.

Like a tiny angel with huge tits preparing for her present.

So hurry up! You’re like one of the only three people that she lets celebrate her birthday.

What?

No?

I haven’t been ignoring you ‘again’?

Why are you asking me that...

Mari. I told you that my phone cracked, and I was trying to go to bed early now.

Some of us have to actually TRY and get into college, remember?

Yes. Even to places with rolling admissions. So try not to sound so condescending about that.

My apps aren’t due for a few months—but I still have to focus here!

The school counselor's been on my dick lately about college essays, and you and I both know I can only do one thing at a time.

No, Mari...Just because you haven't heard from us, doesn't mean that Abue is in the hospital again. Relax. Go back to 'therapy' and work through your Irma nightmares.

I WISH that was my biggest trauma!

My adrenaline has spiked like ninety times again since that.

Omg...Were you seriously worried?

Wow. That's amazing. Ditching your family has really lit a fire under your ass, huh? Maybe the universe is working.

But listen, are you back in your dorm right now?

Because we actually do have some things that we need to discuss. Per our new updated sister contract.

No, no. Not with Abue's fantasy Cocora trip. That hasn't been confirmed yet, lol.

This is about Abue's 'health'...emotionally.

Yes. I told you that I'd call whenever an update with Abue's health came up, and, well, now I have one.

Which I've been absolutely completely avoiding thinking about. Due to the exact aforementioned college essay attention-span issues.

But now that we're both here—I think that we should discuss it.

Because, um, Nela's death last month has triggered an avalanche.

Yes. More specifically: Abue finally told me what happened between her and Fernanda...

Mm-hmm...

I'm getting goosebumps again now just saying it...

And I only sound calm right now, by the way, because I'm still freaking shell-shocked.

Because the true story is way more complicated than what everyone else believes.

And I think that Abue only even told me because hearing about her friend's death...made her think about when she was happy and shit. And connecting with that part of her brain—kind of like woke her up.

On top of, yes, facing her own mortality. With the arrival of her seventy-sixth birthday.

Because that's exactly what she first wanted to talk to me about.

Her fucking last will and testament.

Luciana, come here. Close the door. I want to make sure that there is a record of everything. So no one can take it from me. Even after I die.

Take what...?

My life! Just sit. I need you to write this down. Take out your notebook. I don't know how much time we have left. Seventy-six strikes at midnight! But go turn off your phone. Please. It's going to drive me crazy with all that ringing.

It was...not how I saw my day going.

Especially because Nico had texted me like five separate times about going to the mall to try on Rihanna's new lip glosses. *I think I'm busy?*

But it's FENTY, Luciana.

I know.

And it's—

I'm sorry! My grandmother is saying crazy shit again!

Oh, and before you ask, and piss me off, no you did not get the car.

Nice. Is it for me?

No.

But you don't even drive it, Abue!

Doesn't matter. I have other plans.

You can't get another face-lift. Medicare is going to catch on.

This is serious, Luciana. No jokes.

If anything, I should get the car! After cutting Abue's gross-ass toenails. And shaving the horrifying parts of her body that she can't reach. I deserve the Nobel!

But when I asked her why she was having me, an uneducated eighteen-year-old, write her official freaking will, she just said, Oh my god! Can't you do anything?! Enough with the questions, little girl!

So as you can imagine, we were fighting within seconds.

Why are you slouching like that? You're too young. Your boobs are going to sag.

Because I just woke up! I wasn't expecting this.

Me neither! Join the club. But what are you wearing? You've slept in that shirt for a week.

It's my PJ shirt?

So? You don't have to act like you want to be buried in it.

Keep at it and I'll put that in your will.

And I didn't even know where to start...So I had to Google 'LEGAL WILL TEMPLATES,' which just felt so fucking wrong...And when I showed Abue the different template options, she started driving me crazy by saying: Ew, ew, no, maybe, ew.

Because the only freaking template she liked was this twenty-five-page legal document. That I'm pretty sure came from a fake website trying to scam old people out of their money.

No, Abue. This one doesn't count.

Why?

It has a flower border.

I don't understand?

I know.

So after that, I just said forget it. No template. I'm just gonna pull up a Google document, and I'm gonna start to write.

Could we add our own flower border to that at the end?

No.

And that woman, Mari...let it RIP.

YES.

She started dramatically declaring a whole bunch of things, about her dignity, and her children. And how there should be no fighting, because everything was to be divided equally and amicably. Since they needed to remember that money could destroy a family.

What money are you talking about?

Exactly! This will teach them a lesson.

And that by no means, under any circumstances, should anything that was ever earned or held under her legal name, Emilia Molina Serrano, ever be given to her three sisters: Luisa, Barbara, or Ileana.

Even Luisa? I thought we liked her again? Sort of?

Since when? And she doesn't have to get anything. Weren't you the one who taught me 'We can forgive but we don't have to forget'?

Nor should her mother's name, Fernanda Ortega Molina, ever be said at her funeral or in connection to her, from the day she dies and there on out. Amen.

Um, could you repeat that again? Less hand gestures this time.

Which I thought was pretty funny...and also the end of it.

But then Abue slowly turned to me and said: And now are you ready? Because I'm going to tell you why. *When I die, I don't want the truth to go with me.*

And I got hives—all over, dude.

Like in every freaking crevice of my body.

Because, Mari! I'm a horrible liar!

How was I supposed to lie and pretend that I didn't already know the things I already knew?!

But it was fine. I initially panicked for nothing.

Because Abue immediately saw the fear on my face and said, It's okay, Nana. You won't have to do anything. *I just need somebody who will listen. Somebody I can trust.*

Okay...I think I can do that.

And then she started.

Right before I turned sixteen, my father was shot. And then began the rest of my life.

And so did my acting!

Because when Abue was like, 'We lost my dad, and then a lot of money trouble came. And as the oldest I was expected to help,' I had to be like, Really? Wow! No way!

Yes. Why are you talking like that?

Like what?

Never mind. But it's true. I was taken out of school. Permanently. And I was told I had to take care of my sisters.

I'm so sorry, Abue.

It's okay. There was no other choice.

I know. I'm just sorry.

For what? You don't know anything yet! You're gonna need thicker skin for the rest of the story.

And then she explained the part that we already know.

That after her father's death—Fernanda's biological brothers unexpectedly came into the picture. And they offered Fernanda money in exchange for Abue's employment.

They said that I was old enough to work. And my mother believed them. But she just wanted me to earn money for the family, and learn some discipline as a receptionist downtown.

However, as we know...it was exactly one of these half brothers, from Fernanda's father's second marriage (shoutout to murderous and cousin-loving Héctor), that gave Abue the job, and eventually accused her of stealing from him.

The brothers were all liars...They told my mother that they'd train me. And teach me new skills. But it never happened. They just wanted a way to control our income. And keep us quiet. About some of the things Fernanda's father had done.

And then I didn't have to fucking act anymore!

Because Abue told me that this half uncle—her new boss—the allegedly 'kind and generous' doctor who had taken her in like an injured dove—had one day tried to kiss her.

EXCUSE ME?

And it was his second mistake. Because the first was just expecting me to take it.

YES, MARI.

ON THE LIPS.

Her own FREAKING half uncle!

I was literally so disgusted that I couldn't even make a joke about the apple not falling far from the tree...

I'm gonna vomit, Abue.

It's okay. Thankfully, I was able to turn my head and slip away. But that was the beginning of the end for me. I knew that both nothing and everything had happened.

Yes, genius.

This is why there was a family fallout!

But NOT for the reasons that you might think!

It must have all been planned. Because the doctor told me that if it didn't happen that day, it would happen the next. And he had been very nice to me at first. Always checking on me, and making sure that I knew how to use the phones. Telling me that I could count on him...If I ever felt sad or alone. But he knew what he was doing. Because I was sixteen, and my whole world had just changed. I was sad and alone a lot.

So after the doctor attempted that HEINOUS act, Abue obviously started to skip work.

But only in secret.

Because she'd still leave her house in the mornings, but instead, she'd go and hide by the park near her old school. Letting herself sit, and watch the playing children, getting a brief glimpse of her old life. Hoping to maybe even see Nela again, and tell her everything that was going on.

I didn't know what to do back then. I was scared of the backlash. And telling my mother. Because I knew that our family needed the money. And I was so lost...that I had even wondered if it was my fault the doctor had tried to kiss me. Some gesture or signal I'd done without knowing. Making him believe it was okay. But now, I know that I could have worn a flashing sign that said 'NO' and he still would have tried.

Unfortunately, though, Abue didn't get to escape by hiding at the park for too long.

Because a few days later, she woke up to the police...and the doctor at her door.

Why?!

And according to Abue—Fernanda was beside herself.

I had never seen that color of fury on her face.

Because apparently THE POLICE were actually telling her that—wait for it—Abue was being accused of BLACKMAILING the doctor. In an attempt to EXTORT HIM. After having tried to seduce him multiple times. For money.

Dear God. This is so much darker than I thought...

I KNOW!

In my head I was like, Well damn! Luisa told me that you had been accused of stealing. Not that they were calling you a MANIPULATIVE SEX WORKER!

At fucking sixteen!

And Abue even said that the police told Fernanda that because the doctor ‘FELT SORRY’ for Abue, and because he ‘UNDERSTOOD’ that she was just a ‘confused mourning girl,’ he would do them a favor and not press any charges.

Because he just wanted his money back.

And for Abue to know that her behavior ‘wasn’t okay.’

Oh, I would have stabbed him right there.

I should have! But I was in shock. I just kept looking at my hands...and in my skirt pockets. Trying to understand what money they were talking about. Seeing if I had maybe taken it by accident. All while my mother just stood there...Like she finally hated me. And I had shredded the last bit of dignity our name had in that town.

No, Mari, lol. There was no missing money.

The doctor was just THREATENING her!

He wanted me to know that he was powerful. And that it was going to be my word against his. If I ever said anything to anyone about what he did. Because he could have just let me go. But he wanted me to think that I was nothing.

And so after hours of searching their house for money that was never there, the doctor announced that he was finally ready to leave.

But only on the one condition that Abue promised to never go near him or his office again. And that if she did—he would throw her in jail himself.

I wanted to promise it, Nana...I did. To make it all go away. But I was overwhelmed with something that morning. Watching the cops storm through our house. Because I couldn't stop thinking about how unfair it all was—what was being done to me. And how powerless I was still to stop any of it. So I looked at the police. Who hadn't even questioned him. Or asked me about my side of the story that day. And I made a decision.

Then with all the rage in her heart—Abue said: Sure. I'll leave the doctor alone. As long as he pays for his baby that I'm carrying.

WHAT?

Because if he was going to spread lies about me, then I was going to incriminate him right back.

OMG. LET'S FUCKING GOOO.

I know, dude.

I literally ran a lap around the whole room when Abue told me that!

And then around the whole house, lol.

Luciana! SIT DOWN. Your mother will know something is wrong if you're exercising.

Why do you guys always act like that's so rare? I skate with Nico all the time.

Please. We know that's not what you do at the skate park. But it doesn't matter. Just stop moving. I don't want anyone judging my decisions.

Decisions?! That man assaulted and then harassed you! You had the right to protect yourself.

My girl. Not everyone sees the world like me and you.

So obviously THAT got the cops' attention.

And complicated the doctor's allegations a bit further.

So Abue saw her opportunity and doubled down...

She explained to everyone there that she wasn't just 'stealing' from the doctor, like he had said. She was actually simply just taking the money that had been owed to her, and set aside for their unborn child, per her and the doctor's parental agreement. And that if they didn't believe her—they could

call the doctor's wife and brothers to find out. Because they had all been in on it.

Okay? But what the hell? Weren't they disturbed that you were a CHILD?

Of course! It's the only reason they paid any attention to me. Otherwise, they would have just called me a whore! And it felt good to say that then... to get some of my power back. But I should have been more careful. Because they were a powerful family, and I made an enemy out of him that day. It was clear that I had hit a nerve, and that his family had been through this before. Because he didn't want his wife or brothers knowing any of it. And a pedophile would be bad for the family business. So he left...Huffing away. Saying that we should be ashamed of the way we'd treated him. After all he did was try to help. But he eventually got his payback...Because he made sure I was all anybody talked about, after that day.

What do you mean? Why?

He wanted to bury me, Nana. And he almost did.

Abue said that the doctor took extreme measures to protect his name and family after that.

That he spoke to the other brothers, and told them that Abue had gone to the police with these fake allegations and stories. And that because she was spreading rumors about them all over town, she needed to be stopped. So they used their influence to make up lies. And question Abue's character right back. Telling everyone that she had done the same thing to others, and they knew many men who were broke because of it and living in shame.

I got a reputation overnight, my girl. All it took was three whispers to light a story in that town, and watch it burn through the whole place. The brothers and everyone else rallied around the doctor. Appalled with my behavior and gall. Smearing my name for their own protection, and telling all their friends the story of me. The fatherless girl they had tried to save, who had formed a bad habit that had come back to bite them.

And for whatever reason—even though Abue had told Fernanda the truth, and said that she wasn't fucking PREGNANT—Fernanda wouldn't believe any of it.

She didn't care that Abue had done what she did to protect herself. She only cared that the police had shown up at their door, and now she and the rest of her children would have a lifetime of shame.

So when the whispers at their church and the grocery store about Abue got too loud, Fernanda went home and decided it was time to make it all go away.

She called me a failed storybook fantasy. And said that she had heard the stories about me all over town. And whether or not they were true didn't matter. Because after what I had done, she had now finally lost everything. The hope for a good future. And the only real family she had ever made.

Omg...She's obsessed with the brothers!

Yes. She wanted their approval. Badly. And for everyone to know that she wasn't the kind of mother who raised a girl in that way.

So Fernanda said, Okay! I think I got this.

If my daughter is old enough to be a sex worker—or at least pretend to be—then she's old enough to face the consequences like an adult.

And she stuck Abue in the fucking basement, dude.

Fernanda told herself that if no one could see me, then the rumors would stop. And I wouldn't be able to sneak away, with any more plans of theft or seduction. Because as my mother, it was her duty to protect the town from me. And me from myself. So I was to only be allowed out during the day. To cook and clean. And take care of my sisters. But I would sleep and live down there alone. Unable to leave. Isolated from the rest of the world, until all the stories about me died down. And she said however long it took—was only my fault.

Um, I'm livid too, Mari...

TRUST ME.

Cuz I was like, Are you SERIOUS, Fernanda? Your daughter is fighting to be seen for who she really is—and you just push in the DAGGER?

Like, what is this?!

Our fucking family bingo card?!

If you had known her then, it wouldn't be as surprising. Though I'd never let her get near you. But she struggled with even the most elementary

of feelings...Especially when other people talked about us. I don't know how else to explain.

Yup. That's correct.

It wasn't 'the brothers' who had told Fernanda to get rid of Abue. As Luisa previously had said.

It was Fernanda HERSELF who came up with that plan! As a gesture to show her allegiance, shoving Abue down there like a sacrificial lamb.

And the messed-up part is that it worked!

Abue said that once Fernanda put her away, the brothers were impressed with her loyalty and continued their financial 'involvement' and emotional 'support.'

Why haven't you ever told Luisa this?! Or the rest of your sisters?

Fernanda was different with them...I don't know why, but she just was. She listened, and was softer. And after everything we had lost, I thought they should at least get to keep their mother. No one else was going to protect them.

So after THAT—I was like, Let's GO with this freaking will, dude. No single motherfucker who ever betrayed you will EVER be mentioned. As long as I live!

Good, now you're listening.

But tell me you're drinking water...

Or that you're at least still sitting down.

Because Abue cut my party short right then when she said: 'And don't forget to include Roberto.'

Roberto? Your ex-husband? Why?

EXACTLY, MARI.

I'M SO GLAD YOU'RE JUST AS CONFUSED.

Cuz when I was like, What do you mean? I thought you told me that my cheating, absent, alcoholic grandfather was dead?

Abue just insanely said: 'Dead to me? Yes. But dead to the world? I don't know.'

LIKE...WHAT?

WHO IS THIS WOMAN?!

Summoning people to and from the dead!

And I don't even think that I realized how fucking crazy this all sounded...Until just now...As I'm telling you.

Because when I ran downstairs to ask Mom, she just very nonchalantly was like, Dead? No. I don't think so? *But who knows. We lost contact when I was young.*

Then why the hell did Abue tell me he died like last year?!

We said that he MIGHT be dead soon. Because we had heard he was sick.

And when I ran back upstairs to ask Abue...how she knew if he was even still alive...She just looked at me, like I was the dumbest person in the whole world, and said: 'Because he's still my husband? They have to notify me if he dies?'

Like—Duh, Luciana? Are you being a fucking moron again?

My head is going to explode...Why are you two still MARRIED?

And I shouldn't have asked for clarification.

Because Abue then very bluntly said, 'So he can never marry that ugly whore he broke up our family for.'

Dude...that's a little mean. And why do you even care if he cheated on you? I thought you didn't want to be with him?

Because he chose himself, Nana! After all those years! And demanding children from me. After keeping me in that house. He knew I had suffered and been unhappy in our marriage for so long...I could have done what he did! But I didn't. I forced myself to stay. For him and our children.

So at that point, I was just like, What the fuck is going on here, dude?

Why did you even MARRY him then?!

But then Abue finally exploded.

Because she jumped up from bed and screamed: That's what I'm trying to explain! I had no choice! When they put me down in that basement—I had to find a way to get out of Fernanda's house. Without her, the cops, or her crooked brothers coming after me. So I decided that once they let me up, I would marry the first man that got down on one knee. 'Because if a

man's word was all it took to lock me up, then the same thing was going to get me out.'

Jesus Christ.

Don't look at me like I'm crazy, Luciana! I was down there for almost a year! The isolation was torture...You don't know what's it like. To be so young, and lose the person you love most in the world. With no one around to help. As your entire life just changed—in an instant. I needed to channel that anger and sadness into something, Nana. So I came up with this plan.

And Abue said that when Fernanda finally let her move back up, the timing couldn't have been better. Because Roberto and his family had just moved in next door.

Thus—Abue's conquest for marriage began.

I'm sorry, I believe you. I just still can't believe that's how you two met.

Why? He wasn't much older, and lived next door. It was very ideal. You have to remember that I wasn't allowed to leave the house, Luciana. He was my only choice.

And apparently, after a few first failed attempts at getting his attention, Abue eventually succeeded by just glaring at him, lol. From across the yard. Signaling toward these little notes that she was leaving for him in the sheets she hung out to dry. And I guess Roberto must have caught on quickly. Because they started communicating in secret after that almost every night.

I confided in him about everything. And why I needed to get out. He was very sensitive and caring then, so we grew attached quickly. Never having had a girlfriend before, or even many friends, he said he understood me because he felt alone too in his own way.

Pretty soon after that, Abue told Roberto that she had fallen in love. Or—what she assumed was 'love' anyway. But he was so taken aback by her surprise confession that he proposed to her that very night. Saying that he didn't care about the cautionary tales of the girl who slept with men for money. No one had ever paid attention to him, and he thought Abue was beautiful.

He was only twenty. And I seventeen.

So they snuck out to the courthouse the next day, and with a ring on her finger, Abue at last had the legal authority to move out of Fernanda's house. Because in the eyes of the law, she had a new handler now.

My mother was unemotional to see me go. To her, I was just another problem that needed to be dealt with. So I took care of it myself. She only told me that at least my reputation would be made respectable through marriage.

And Mari—this is where I need you to REALLY listen.

Because I am absolutely not ready to be an aunt.

Because Abue said that instead of just getting out and enjoying her new life, she went from wife to mother rather quickly. Discovering that she was pregnant with their first child—our Tío Ivan—just a few months into their marriage.

I was distraught. I thought that I had needed to please my new husband. For getting me out. But it ruined everything...We didn't talk about contraception or termination back then. So I had to just accept that my 'getaway' plan was over. Because I couldn't run. Or leave my baby behind. I refused to be a bad mother like mine.

So Abue said that she had no choice BUT to start a family with Roberto.

Even if it hadn't been in her plans.

And that over the years, Roberto grew resentful of her. Realizing that for Abue, their marriage was simply a means to escape. Because he wanted her to stay home, and keep having more children. But Abue just wanted to find work and be left alone.

I felt sorry that I couldn't be what he wanted. But we had never talked about kids! We had only been thinking fast. On how to get out. And then once the first baby came, he just didn't want to stop. He had this fairy-tale image of the perfect family in his head...So I thought about running. Or trying to separate. But the way he was with your Tío Ivan stopped me. Because it reminded me of the way my own father had been with us growing up. And how much I had needed him in those past few years. So before I knew it, our second baby was on the way. Your Tío Tomás and his big

head...And it's a curse, really! Because the women in our family can get pregnant just by the smell of it.

Yes, Mari. Abue said that you guys are VERY fertile.

So let's try to think about that on the weekends, okay?

Because Abue said that after having the rest of her children, there was no anger, or life, in her left. No part of her that anyone could take. Because after living a life defined and controlled by others, it felt like she was already dead.

Omg, Abue. That's so depressing...

Yes. But for a time, it was nice to feel nothing.

Until, of course, Abue caught Roberto cheating on her with the neighbor. Because that sure as fuck woke her up.

Oh, that was the END of staying and suffering for me! I took the kids and left! Told him to stay away, or I'd run with them. Into the mountains and he'd never hear from us again. But he wasn't even bothered...That bastard. Just told me that he was relieved our pretend life could be over. And then he stayed with that whore. Never fighting to see me or the kids ever again. So I needed something, Nana. For any—or all of it. And I decided to stay married to him. Refusing the divorce. Continuing to protect myself, financially and legally. But stopping him from ever marrying anyone else. Because in the end, he'd have to answer to me.

Damn...you love revenge more than I do.

Revenge? I was settling the score!

No, that's the end of the story, lol. Don't worry.

That's exactly when I reached my limit too.

I had to be like, Okay—enough! This is crazy but I understand now! Just please stop talking before my ADHD kicks in and I forget to write any of this down. I CANNOT listen to you repeat it.

Good idea. The doctors said Roberto flares up my blood pressure.

And when I finally finished typing, and showed Abue the Google doc, she had the fucking audacity to say, But Nana—this is all in Spanish? I'm so proud? But we're gonna have to burn it. It has too many details. I thought you were protecting my secrets in English!

I don't get it, dude. Why? Why can't you tell anyone?

I didn't think that anyone would believe me...And then it just became too difficult. To ever tell. So it stopped mattering. After many years. And I decided to move on with my life.

But it does matter? If you're sitting here now, telling me?

Yes. It seems we have found where I pushed it down. The tumor has me good, doesn't it?

Fuck that! You're supposed to live out the rest of your life in peace. With me!

No, Nana. Don't get upset. I didn't tell you any of this so you could feel bad for me. I told you this so you can understand. Why I'm going to want what I want.

And then she pulled me in really tight, and whispered: People only care about what you look like in this world. And I want all of it—the whole planet—to be yours. So please, when I go, promise me that you'll keep my makeup?

Omg.

It's important to love how you look, Luciana! No one else is going to do that for you. So don't just stop with the hair! Keep going. Play around, and have fun with your clothes. Try on some bright green eye shadow. Or glitter with a smoky eye. Paint your eyebrows pink for all I care! But don't just reject feeling beautiful because of your mom...She means well. She just has different tastes. And they're not my favorite either, but we just have to let her.

Um...that's not my only problem with her. But okay. For you, I will try.

Like...what was I even supposed to say after that?

Sure? I'll learn how to wing my eyeliner?

While I'm sitting here with my fucking heart in my hands?!

Tell me, Mari.

How was I supposed to just WALTZ OFF to the mall with Nico? After hearing all that?

And I thought that calling you...would make me feel better...But hearing everything again is just making it worse.

Because!

How is it fair that a person goes through all that—and STILL ends up in the emergency room?

What's even the point of trying to be 'good' or do the right thing anymore? When everyone else just gets to SUCK and BE FINE!

Cuz it's clear now, that around here, your good-girl points won't protect you.

No.

Bitches just get asked to live their life for others.

Bitches just get shoved down into the basement instead.

I don't think talking about this feels good anymore, Abue.

It's okay, Nana. If you see me differently now.

You? I like you even better. It's me and the rest of this place I have to figure out."



Siéntate bien

“Mari?

Hello?

Wow...What's up?

No, I'm not having another anxiety attack.

I'm just in shock that you're not ignoring me for one of your little skanks again.

Friends, sisters, whatever. Same thing.

And I know that you're probably spray-tanning your legs right now for spring break or something, but this is important.

So I'm gonna need you to listen.

Yes.

And it's about me for once!

So stop scrolling on your fucking Instagram! I can hear you playing videos while we talk from here.

Thank you...God.

That habit of yours is so RUDE.

But enough. Let's just get into it.

I contacted the medium that Luisa told me about—and shit was ICONIC.

No, I'm serious, lol. She gave me absolutely lifesaving advice.

Especially on how to move forward here.

With all of Abue's past, present, and future drama.

And this lady was legit, dude...

She had the crystals, the books, and the prayers and everything. Plus, she's Colombian and does it all right from her house.

Which should have been a red flag for me, yes. Personally.

But I saw that she had a Beyoncé poster in her background. So I felt safe enough to proceed. *Nice. No baby Jesus sculptures. Maybe not all Colombians are out to torture me...*

Um, I don't know what she was wearing, Mari? We were FaceTiming.

She just looked like your typical Miami suburbs soccer mom.

With the blown-out hair and the blond highlights. And probably the skinny jeans and sneaker heels too.

Omg, I don't know what brand! Will you stop worrying about her outfit and let me tell you?!

Jesus...You're worse than Abue.

Oh, and now you can only talk for like ten minutes? Cool.

Can't believe they haven't taught you that time is a construct at Georgetown.

I'm kidding, lol. Relax. I know you go to GW. It's just so easy to annoy you.

But anyways, don't worry. This will be quick.

I'm just trying out this new thing here called 'having agency,' okay?

And I know that might be a little new for you, with me, but I'm here to answer all of your questions.

Because guess what, Mari?

The medium told me that most 'physical' problems...could be traced back to something 'emotional'...deep down and unexpressed.

And since I'm already anemic and aging—I decided that I need to get a lot off my chest before I melt away.

Yes. And while we'll certainly get there...to the confessional part, I wanted to tell you a few things first that the medium said.

Because once she explained her process to me, saying that she'd ask me some questions and then talk to my 'guides,' she made me completely question everything by saying: 'And I already know why you're here, Luciana. But why do YOU think you called?'

Whoa...what?

Of course I was terrified!

But then I leaned into it.

Because the thought of someone actually being able to objectively tell me what to do felt like a fucking relief...

Okay, fine. But it's a bit layered.

And so I told the medium that I had recently learned some new things about my grandmother...and I was wondering if she was going to be okay.

She's sick. And she's processing a lot. I can't tell if it's good or bad for her. And right now, there's no one else's opinion I can trust.

But that really—I was also wondering if I was going to be okay.

If anything ever happened to Abue.

Because I could prepare and brace for it all I wanted, but I wasn't sure how I was going to feel when the actual moment came.

I'm scared. Of what it would feel like without her. But she won't discuss the chemo or treatment with her doctors. And I haven't let myself think about what comes next.

So the medium then sat with my questions, and then she closed her eyes and said, 'Is this stress Luciana's? Or is it something that has been placed on her?'

Wait, are you talking to me?

No.

Obviously in my head I was like, Um...that wasn't the question, lol, but okay.

But then she started explaining that my 'spirit guides' were all saying that it had been 'placed on me.' And that 'it' was never meant for me to 'carry.'

It should have been resolved and dealt with a long time ago.

So I was like, Classic. Eye roll. Everyone's just projecting shit from their past. Blah blah blah. Nothing new. I know the drill.

But then the medium was like, 'NO, Luciana—Shhh. This is serious with your body.'

And that with a few steps, course could be corrected, and I was going to be okay.

What am I gonna have to do now? Slay a dragon or something?

Just listen.

SO THEN—and this is where things get a little loosey-goosey, so stay with me—the medium started freaking 'cleansing me.' With her mind through my cracked-ass iPhone screen. Because she said that she could feel...it was all affecting me on a 'cellular level.'

And then things escalated pretty quickly.

The stress of everything that's happened, and is still going on. It's flaring up more than just your cramps.

Omg...I didn't tell you I was having cramps.

You're not feeling the brunt of it all, my dear, because your body is taking it for you. But if you don't help it—and remove the grasp some of these things have on you now—your body is going to receive major damage.

Wait. Is this about my IBS?

Pay attention. This is how people end up with pain and illnesses. They go through difficult things, and then they don't find a place to put those feelings. So their bodies take it all for them. And I can see that you are so blocked, with fear and stress in your insides, that your cells are not regenerating properly. They are dying much faster than they should, Luciana. But you were born with such beautiful gifts...Why have you put those chains around your feet?

Me?! That was everyone else!

They hurt you, dear. Yes. But you're letting them decide things for you too. You're giving up your agency much too quickly. I know you're mad, but

you have more options than you think. Everything you need is already here, with you. Your peace will come from knowing that.

Okay, I'm sorry, but I'm very confused.

I think you know what I'm talking about.

I asked you about my grandmother!

And I'm telling you about yourself.

Ugh, fine! But if my grandmother is sick, I can't just come out to the rest of the world! That's too much for me at once.

Luciana, my dear. Sit up. Roll your shoulders back. Try seeing what that feels like. Letting things slide off you for once. If you don't, your soul and spine will continue to bend.

I do have scoliosis...

You are on the verge of irreversible damage. What are you going to change?

Omg. Are all your sessions this overwhelming?

Yes. We only get fifteen minutes. Now let's talk about your grandmother.

So I just decided to open up and tell the medium everything.

About Abue's health. And life story.

And about all the other ancient freaks in our lineage, from far away.

Especially how they almost destroyed her.

And then each other.

Pointing their fingers at everything and everyone except themselves. Just to eventually succumb under the weight of external pressures...like sad little mice in a lab.

Ending it all with me—in this moment.

I see...It's likely that your grandmother's tumor then formed after her father's murder.

Seriously?! Why is the universe obsessed with men?!

I want you to learn from it, Luciana Domínguez. Most humans spend their whole lives focused on other people. But your grandmother had this burden forced on her from an early age. And no one ever created the space for her to get rid of it. So her tumor is from that pain...The union of sadness and anger that she never got to face. And if you keep resenting your mother

or your sister, and using them as an excuse to not live your life, you're heading down that path too.

Um...well, she pretty much just said that sadly, Abue's illness stems from her unreleased pain.

And the injustice of everything that happened to her.

Because the cancer is certainly hers...

But it's been nursed by others for decades.

And honestly, dude, at this point—I fucking believe it.

Why not, Mari?!

It makes way more sense than anything else I've heard!

Just think about it...Why would karma, or God, or whatever freaking unknown power that governs this universe decide to give Abue a rare and aggressive cancer—AFTER everything that she went through?

She was just a child!

Who got bullied by adults!

That were supposed to be PROTECTING her.

Aren't the good guys meant to fucking win in the end?!

Only if the good guys...get rid of what the bad guys gave them.

Ugh. That's so unfair!

Growing our souls is hard work. But it's okay. Your grandmother has an idea.

And...by the way...I also believe the medium because Abue's been saying that she sees her dad in our closet. Lol.

What do you mean? Like his ghost? In the room we share?!

Yes. Surprise.

Nope. I have no idea how.

She just said that he sits there, and just stares at her. *So I told him to leave if he wasn't going to say anything.*

I was like, Okay! But how about we don't ASK him to say anything? *I'd like to not see or hear him too...*

Why are you afraid of spirits, Luciana? Have you not met the fools on this earth?

Not the point! Why is he here?

I don't know. Maybe he thinks that I'm getting closer to coming.

That's not true! Don't say that. We don't know.

Abue then ended our convo about her ghost-dad with: 'I think I'm depressed.'

Obviously. You have told me a ton of 'depressing' things.

See? This is why I don't do it!

No, it's okay. Feeling drained just means that you finally faced something. It's the first step to feeling anything better at all.

So I told the medium that it was ironic, that Abue's tumor—allegedly made from her unexpressed emotions—is inspiring her to talk about her feelings now.

But she was like: Of course! That's what happens! When we ignore ourselves for long enough, our bodies find a way to make us listen.

Fuck...

So now she has me sitting here...

Contemplating telling everybody, FUCK YOU! I'm gonna be fat, gay, and selfish now. All because I don't want to deal with this ten years down the line!

Since unlike Abue—I actually DO have the space to voice my emotions.

And hopefully shed some of these things before it's too late.

Because even if no one will give it to me—I can just CREATE my own fucking space!

And does it make me want to die?!

To even just CONSIDER being 'vulnerable' with our family? Yes.

But apparently, I'm also going to die if I don't. So fuck it...Here I go.

Yes. Are you ready?

I need to do it now, while I have the adrenaline.

Cool. Okay.

So—I wanted to say that—I'm over your total fucking lack of interest in whatever happens to this family.

Especially Abue.

And even if she doesn't care, I take full offense on her behalf.

Because I expected more from you.

My sister.

Who I loved and admired my whole life.

But this year, everything has just been heartbreak after heartbreak—and you were never there to help me back up.

So I can respect your decisions.

Sure.

But I won't lie and say that they don't piss me off.

Because you've really hurt me this year, Mari...

And I know that you're on your own 'journey' or whatever, doing the new things that you like, but I've had a lot going on too. And I ALWAYS found a way to include you.

I wasn't just always calling for fucking advice!

I was calling because I LOVE YOU, DUDE.

And I missed my sister!

And I DESPERATELY wanted to make you feel like you were still a part of this family...No matter how scary or difficult it was, whatever we had going on.

But you—you chose to just create more distance instead.

And I'm tired of letting that decision kill me.

Luciana, will you allow me to say one more thing?

Ugh. Am I gonna be able to handle it?

You're too concerned about others—what they do or do not know. Don't give away any more of your time, dear. Focus on you! What you want to do with your day, or the rest of your life. Get rid of all those problems from all those people inside your head. The way they see the world is not yours to hold.

But they live with me? And they control me!

No, they're living in you. And you need to pull them out. Or you're going to end up just like your grandmother. You asked me earlier who governs this universe—the answer is you.

Oh, great. Now you sound like my mom.

You told me yourself! She asked you to do something beautiful with your life. Something that you truly like. And I think a part of her knows what that

means. So she's encouraging you—to take the permission. To do whatever it is you want, even if she might not understand.

No. There's no way.

You don't have to change her. Just let her be who she is. It's what you're asking from her too.

That's not fucking fair! I'm asking her to let people live! She's asking me to suffer. And conform.

She is afraid...You can pity her. And though you don't have to accept any harm, you can at least give her time. But if you want her acceptance, you'll need to stop cowering in that corner too. Show her that you love yourself just as much.

But I'm the one more afraid here! Hello? I'm the freaking child!

Exactly. And look at how far you've come! You are so much stronger than a child now, Luciana. Stop cutting off your legs. Go show the world and your mother that you are not afraid. She had to do the same thing too, right? When she left her family to come to the States? Both your mother and grandmother know that just because you are born into a group of people, doesn't mean that you have to give up your life for them. And it's something they're both trying to teach you. Each in their own way.

Well, it's been a tough fucking lesson...

Just hang on. You're almost there. Your grandmother—she is going to confide in you again in some way. And you're not going to like it. But it's what she wants.

Oh, god. When?

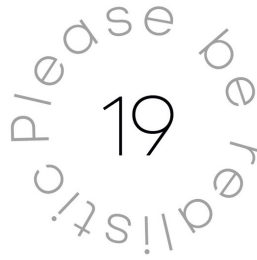
It's about her trip. When she tells you, you'll know.

Ugh.

And I have one more message for you. From her father. If you're willing to listen. It's short, but he waited for us to finish to stop by.

WHAT?!

He just wants to say thank you. For doing what he never could."



Por favor ubícate

“Mari...hi.

Thanks for picking up.

We have to table everything though.

I’m not calling you to fight this time.

Are—are you in your room?

Yes? Okay.

Mom wanted me to be the one to tell you this.

But I’m sorry for what I have to say.

Because, um...we went to the doctor with Abue this morning...trying to see if she could get clearance to travel. For her Cocora trip.

And her blood work came back all messed up...

Worse than it’s ever been actually.

So they ran an MRI. To find out why.

And...I’m sorry, but they discovered that her tumor has started to spread.

Yes.

It—um, it means that there is too much bile now. In her blood.

And that the tumor is probably causing more leaks.

Which is...not good.

Because, um, well, they told us the truth.

That without immediate or aggressive intervention...Abue would likely not survive.

I know.

I'm so sorry.

I—I can't even say it.

But listen to me, Mari. Listen. We can cry about this another time.

Because for now, I just need you to do as I say—just for this once. You need to PROMISE me that you won't ask Abue to change her mind about the chemo, okay? Because there is going to be no treatment.

Or any other kind of emergency intervention.

Abue does not want it.

And I can't let you make things worse for her right now by asking her for it.

Yes, Mari...This was really hard for her to accept.

For all of us.

But we're doing it for her.

So please. Just push your feelings aside and respect her decision. Even if you disagree.

I know this is a lot to take in. I'm sorry. But we don't have much time. Abue's still moving forward with her plans.

No. There's no discussing it.

Do you really want her last months filled with fighting?!

She deserves so much more than that...

Are you sure, Abue?

Yes.

Because I—

Yes.

You know we could—

Luciana. I'm sure.

IT'S TOO LATE NOW, MARI!

You should have called six months ago!

But you didn't. And now this is happening.

So you need to be able to live with it.

Go ahead, dude...Scream all you want.

I'm holding firm. And Abue's not going to care.

The pope himself could call and ask why she's getting on a plane, with only six months to live...but she still is not going to listen.

So stop putting other ideas into my head!

This was hard enough to accept without you.

Abue's going to go on her trip—and then she's going to rest.

End of discussion.

The first thing she even said to me this morning, when we left the doctor's office, was: Luciana, you need a tan. It's embarrassing to say you're Colombian.

I was like, Um...did you hear what the doctors just said? You need a new LIVER!

I don't want anyone's dirty liver!

Fine—but why do you still have to go on this trip? Traveling could be dangerous now, Abue. What if you don't make it back? What if something happens to you? What if we then have to go looking for your body in a sea of strangers at Miami freaking International Airport?!

It wouldn't be the worst place my body has been!

And I swear that she's turning yellow again.

But won't admit it.

Because she didn't need the doctors or the MRI today to confirm what she already knew—that she's been getting sicker this whole time. And not saying anything.

Are you fucking kidding me, Abue? What do you mean, 'you knew'? Why didn't you tell us?! That you've been feeling worse?!

Because it wouldn't have mattered! You would have all acted crazy and stopped thinking. Just like you are now! There's no use...I will never do the chemo, Luciana. Do you hear me? I don't care how badly I'm sick. I'm not letting any other poison destroy me.

But you'll inject SILICONE?

It's different!

HOW?

That was helping me live.

But don't get too worked up about her hiding it, Mari...

I already went down that path.

And just like the chemo—arguing about whether or not she knew is pointless.

Because it still won't change the facts we have today.

And the stats to begin with were crazy anyway, Mari.

These kinds of tumors rarely ever get removed...

Even the 'survivor stories' at the hospital were like, 'Hi. I'm Catherine. And over the past two years, I've had three surgeries, twenty rounds of radiation, four hundred MRIs, seventy-plus rounds of chemo, and one THOUSAND side effects. But I'm STILL fighting.' Winky face.

What kind of diabolical dimension do you want Abue to live in?!

Where a poor human has to do all THAT just to get a SHOT at life?

Yes. Abue was a relentless, exquisite fighter—you are right.

But she wants to rest now.

She doesn't want to spend the rest of her life worried about turning yellow, with a bag of bile acid attached to her waist.

Mari. I know it's difficult...

But imagine having to sleep next to the possibility of that visual for the past six months.

Your feelings are not my priority here.

So can we fight about this another day? I want to go be with her now.

Yes. She's waiting upstairs.

She made me promise that we'd 'study together' tonight for my final exams...So that I could 'at least graduate' and get that off her chest.

I know.

It was adorable.

I'm obviously now going to fail.

Kidding...ha.

But when Mom's opportunist ass heard that, she woke up from her depression coma and said, Oh, and what about prom? Will you do that too?

No, Mom, what the fuck?

Language, Luciana. Please. We're all fragile now. But why not? I got you a dress.

Because my grandmother is dying. And I don't want to go with a boy.

So go alone! Or with Nico! But don't just keep missing out on all the important things of your life...Learn from what's happening around you... Take advantage of the things you can and live. Mari loved prom! She went to three!

Well, Mari was a slut, Mom.

LUCIANA.

I gotta go. Nico's here. We're gonna go do drugs.

What the hell has gotten into you?! Do not step foot outside this house! We need to talk about your grandmother! I need help—I don't know what to do here.

How about you follow MY lead for once—and just let HER be the one to decide.

But you've seen her! She's not well. She can't be trusted to make these kinds of decisions.

Mom. I love you. And I'm sorry. But I think she already has.

Look—Abue's already got a foot in each world. Okay? You're too late.

Um, 'how do I know that'? Because I spend every freaking day with her.

That's how.

Luciana, I think I know where I'd like to go. To try this all again.

And...with her mind made up now about this Cocora Valley trip...She's the most determined and at peace that I've ever seen her.

Isn't it gorgeous, Nana? The valley? With all that green? They even named it after a Quimbaya princess, you know. Did I tell you that? Her name meant water star, like starfish. I read it in a book when I was young. But it's true! Because when you're down there, it feels like you're walking underwater. With all the mist and fog. And if you lie down on the ground, and look up, the palm trees look like seaweed reaching for the sun.

That sounds beautiful? I wanna go.

No. Starfish are reminders to heal yourself...To pause and regrow your own body parts first. When you have to. The nuns at school always told us that.

So? Why can't I come and be a starfish?

Ay, Luciana. My girl. You already are.

And she also said something about—going to rest and recover.

Yup.

From the tumor.

And 'everything else.'

I want to sit alone by the mountains, Nana. And let things go. You know I hate people. Especially the ones I know.

But we don't know anyone in Cocora! What if you need help?

I won't. Can I tell you my secret?

Oh yeah...I'd say she's definitely feeling 'good' about her decision.

She even told me that she's been seeing her friend Nela lately, lol.

As a little bird.

Fluttering around by the windows.

That they've been peeking at each other through the glass in the mornings—and singing.

Because apparently, Abue said that we're supposed to linger before we pass.

Taking care of loose ends.

That we float around, and around, visiting others. And when we're ready, we ascend.

So it's been bringing her some peace to think that Nela is near.

Because if she was, then maybe she was waiting for her. To take Abue's hand. And cross over to the other side. Ready to start their next lives again together.

'Somewhere new.'

I've been thinking about what you said, Nana. About reincarnation. And it's helped me come to terms with my decision...But you are the only person

not afraid of death in this house. So you can't tell anyone what I'm about to say. Because in Cocora, Luciana—I am going to go. It's what I want.

Go where?!

I want to start over again. Somewhere new.

To live?

No. Somewhere not in this life, my girl. I can't ask this body for anything else...Look at me. I need relief. This thing is going to eat me from the inside out. And with me—you and your mother. But you deserve more. You should have the choice for better. Not sitting around here and losing your life.

I'm not losing my life?

You are. I know what it looks like.

Hold on...First, you tell me that you want to be a starfish in an empty valley. Then, you tell me that you think your friend is a bird. And now—you're telling me that you want to die?! What the hell is going on here?! Is this because I've backed off about the treatment? I was just trying to give you some space!

Nana. I've heard the doctors, and I've seen the scans. I know it's not going to be pretty.

But we'll help you! I'll be right there with you the whole time!

That's what I don't want...Because I would stay for you—I would. You have to know that. But I can't fight this thing on my own like I used to. And I won't pass on that fight to you. So I will go...and then we'll try this all again.

No! What if you have more time?

I don't want it, Nana. Not like this. No, no, here. Don't cry. Grab my hand. It's like you told me...I will come back, and we will find each other. You just have to look for me.

Abue. Please.

And you have to promise me. With your entire being. That no matter what, when, or where, that you will find me. And you will help me remember you."



No me mires así

“Yo...

Sorry I haven't called today.

Things got a little busy.

Nico and I were pulled over this morning trying to take Abue to the wig store.

Yeah.

She said that it was an emergency, and that she needed brand new wigs for her trip.

We need to get to the mall, Luciana. Immediately. Please tell me you know where that is.

Naturally, though, we got delayed.

Since Florida state troopers are fucking obsessed with me...

Even though I still don't understand how ONE police force can give me so many tickets the same year!

But alas, here we are.

I'm their golden egg.

Well, um, the scene was not good.

Nico and I were visibly exhausted. Blasting Simple Plan. Wearing plastic crowns and kicking empty iced-coffee cups all over the minivan.

And Abue too. She looked crazy.

She was still in her pink satin pajama set because she said that she didn't feel good enough to change out of it this morning.

Could you at least take the curlers out of your hair? Please? It looks like we're busting you out of the old people home.

No. Drive faster. My hair is all over the floor, Luciana. You can't let me die like this!

Shhh! Nico is here...

So? He can't understand me.

And everything would have been fine—if I hadn't done a 'rolling stop' through one of the stop signs on Sheridan.

Which I couldn't even fucking see!

So how is it MY fault the county has no money for signs?!

You'd think with all the parking tickets I've paid there'd be something...

And what's worse, is that when the cop explained what a 'rolling stop' was to me, I couldn't even believe that was a rule! *Is this a joke?*

I was like—Are you serious, dude? LOOK at my grandmother! She is CLINICALLY ILL. Why are you bothering us with this shit?!

I'm sorry, Officer. We're just in a little bit of a rush. My grandmother needs new outfits...She's not well.

But the cop didn't care.

He was just like, Great, anyways, children walk on these streets. So you have to be more careful. Can I see your license and registration?

Sir, I am one of those children.

And Abue was just smiling and waving the whole time too.

Making everything I said look like total bullshit.

As if she hadn't just woken me and Nico up a few hours earlier—hauling ass—demanding that we assist her on this crucial mission.

Wake up! You—boy! Take us to the stores.

Um, Abue, why don't we do this later? I think that me and you should go alone...

No, there's no time. I need to shop.

Well then you're gonna have to censor yourself around Nico. Because I haven't told him anything. And I don't even know if you're being serious yet! I'm so lost!

And then the second the cop walked away, of course Abue started screaming at me saying: I ToLd YoU tO StOp SpEeDiNG, LuCIaNa!

I know! That's what I said.

But I didn't get pulled over for speeding?

You were driving this minivan like a race car.

I was at a stop sign?

Do you even have a license? I remember that I had to take you to that test at least TWICE because you couldn't pass the first time!

Omg. That's because YOU TOOK ME LATE.

So Nico was like, Um, should I give you two a minute? Why is there so much tension in the car this morning, lol?

But we didn't need the intermission.

Because when the cop walked back, he very kindly gave me a one-hundred-and-fifty-dollar ticket. So obviously, I forgot how to freaking breathe.

It's okay, Nana! Don't panic. I can ask my mom for money for the ticket or something.

And I could already feel the hot tears forming behind my eyes...

Ugh. Thanks, Nico. But it's not that.

And you know once I start crying, I really don't know how to stop.

Your grandma is right here. She's safe...We're all fine.

Which sucked.

Because the second we got to the mall, Abue wanted to go inside every department store.

Wipe your tears, Luciana. We have business to do.

I just still don't understand...Is this for real? Are you seriously going to do this? Why can't you wait! Until you get sicker?

No. I have to go now. I don't want to be here when it's time for your birthday.

My birthday? I don't give a shit about my birthday! That's like in two months.

You see? That's the problem! Look at what I've done to you...You can't see anything else. And I want you to be able to grow, Nana. Outside of this horrible tunnel. So I'll be just a phone call away, for a while.

But—like, what are even the logistics here? With reincarnating?! How will I know that it's you?

I've read more about it...And unfortunately, most people begin again as children.

Oh, great. So now I'm gonna have to look for you in the face of every three-year-old?

No, my girl. You'll just know. And it'll give you more time...to figure out who you are. But I'll leave you my hoops—just in case. You can lure me out with those when you're ready. And who knows? Maybe you'll even start wearing them!

This isn't a joke to me, Abue. You're about to change my life.

I know. Should we get your ears pierced to celebrate?

Stop it! This is real to me.

For me too. You've gone way too long without earrings. That's another thing I need to check off my list.

And when we finally got to the wig store, instead of browsing—like she had cried all morning that she needed to do—Abue spent twenty minutes harassing Nico about how we should have been more 'confident' with the cop.

She was like, Of COURSE that guy gave you a ticket! You two look like you slash tires! And now he knows that you are nobodies because you didn't even try to bribe him—what's up with that?

Just focus on the wigs, please. I've had enough from you for one day.

No! Tell Nico to listen to me! I won't be around forever, and you two should be taking notes. Because I know things. I was the fourth top student of my ninth-grade class. I was about to be the choir captain when they shot my dad!

Nana, she knows that I can't understand her, right?

Yes. Just nod your head.

Oh. And then she explicitly told us that we couldn't try on any of the blond wigs, because it was her ex-husband's lover's hair color, and she was too weak to be reminded of him right now. *And it's not Luciana's color either. Don't be ridiculous.*

But once Abue bought like six different black wigs, we ended up having to leave the wig store anyway. Because she couldn't stop grabbing the blond ones out of people's hands at the register and screaming, No! You can't buy this! This isn't your cut! *Here, give it to my granddaughter. She knows what to do. Luciana—quick, go throw it in the trash.*

So we had to leave before security detained her.

Which would have been our second run-in with law enforcement today.

Abue, for the love of God. Just stop talking to people.

You're so grumpy today. Why won't you enjoy this with me? I'm happy!

Because this is hard! And you have to accept that. This isn't going to be easy for me...It feels like I'm just giving up. Like nothing matters anymore.

Ay, Luciana. Everything matters now, my girl. You have your whole life ahead of you!

I love you. I do. But I hate that you want to do this.

It's because I love you—and myself, that I have to. Whatever comes will come. I'm not afraid to find out.

But what if I am? What if I'm the one who's scared?

Nana. Look at my body. I'm in so much pain...that I've been losing a pound a week. You don't want me to stay like this. I know it. It would torture us both.

UGH. I don't know. But even if I decide to believe you—I'm not getting a piercing at Claire's!

After the wig store, Abue then made us stop at Ross, Dillard's, AND JCPenney.

Which was just horrific.

Because there were even MORE Colombians running around and screaming everywhere. With hordes of clothes piled all the way up to the ceiling from the floor.

So I reasonably tried proposing Kohl's—the freaking Switzerland of department stores—but Abue shot me down by saying, What the heck am I supposed to buy there? Everything is cozy and full-length.

I want a sexy outfit for my funeral, Luciana. Not recycled denim.

Omg. That's it. I'm done with today.

Please! It's important! I need to be dressed in all white. When they see my body. I want new white linen pants and a sheer white see-through shirt. With my favorite white fedora, and feathered boa. Dangling all the way down from my neck to my toes.

How am I supposed to get the casket closed with all that?!

You're right...We'll need to get it custom-made. Write that down. And promise me that everyone will look beautiful, Luciana? Yes? You'll at least get your hair and makeup done? And tell your mother to wear that yellow dress that I love. But Mari, hmm—I think she'll look great in this backless one I'm going to leave. Give her that. And you, you can wear whatever you want. Just no holes or rips please. That's all I ask. Oh! And we'll need flowers everywhere...Of all kinds! I want them hanging from the ceiling, and climbing up the walls. Maybe even sitting down in seats. To replace the guests. And a whole trail of rose petals—extending from my casket to the door.

I think I'm going to faint.

Well, don't. We still need to stop by GUESS on the second floor.

No! How will we even get your body, Abue? If you're up in the mountains?

I'll call you. You'll know.

And...

I'm sorry...

Because I know that it's bad luck to talk about this.

But if Abue ever had a funeral, I think that it would look like a Pitbull music video.

Yeah. Being shot at an all-white party during Miami Yacht Week.

Fake ass, titties, and all.

In fact—I just know!

Oh, nothing...Just a hunch.

One sec, though. My phone just vibrated.

And I told Abue to text me when her physical therapy was done.

Wait...

OH MY GOD.

MARI—

OH MY FUCKING GOD.

YESSI FROM LADIES' NIGHT JUST DM'ED ME.

Omg, I can't breathe.

Should I open it?! What do I do?

YES, ON INSTAGRAM. WHAT DO I DO?

Um...I think all it says is, 'Nice haircut'?

But holy fuck, still.

That means the world to me.

I didn't even think she knew I existed...

Well, yes, we follow each other. But she follows everyone from the bar. She's a flirty bartender! Just like you.

Wait. This means that Hot Bartender Yessi knows the name 'Luciana Domínguez'? I'm going to stress-puke.

Omg. I almost even just forgot that Abue was dying for a second!

Love is a crazy drug...

Okay. I think I need to go pass out now. And inject Yessi's DM into my veins.

Fuck no—I'm not going to respond. I'm gonna have to think about this first for WEEKS.

I need a clear head, Mari! Or I'll ruin my shot.

Right now, there are way too many vultures circling above...

And I mean that literally.

Because I'm lying down on the grass outside.

Yes, lol. I think I just got pooped on.

Did you know that vultures are actually a sign of strength, though? In the face of death?

Yeah. They don't actually mean that you're going to die. *Just that something must end.*

The medium told me that when I kept calling you guys fucking vultures, lol.

But you know what?

At the wig store earlier...When Abue had a cap on her head to hold down her hair...and with how bony and skinny she's been looking lately... she kind of looked like a manicured vulture.

Yeah.

Like a really really scary, but glamorous one.

Her boobs still somehow haven't dropped an inch though.

Those still look like they're ready to fight.

And in their own way, I guess, contribute to her vulture aesthetic.

But science has never really worked on her, huh? Maybe she is an alien...

Or maybe—the medium is right.

Maybe Abue is just my personal vulture, and she's here to peck peck peck at me until I bleed.

Cuz it sure feels like I'm losing every limb.

What?

Oh, no. I'm fine, lol. Sorry.

Didn't mean to cause concern.

Well, I'm not 'fine' at all actually. But you know what I mean.

I'm just sitting in the backyard.

Trying to remember how to breathe.

Abue. Look at me. Are you sure that you want to do this?

Yes. I finally have my freedom. And I'm facing the truth.

But why won't you do it? Why won't you even just THINK about getting the chemo? Don't you want more time? To continue doing the things you love? Everything that you finally got the chance to do?! If you don't fight now—all those fuckers will have taken most of your life. Why are you letting them?

Because I don't want to fight, Nana. That's the whole point. You want me to push and get sicker, just to spite other people? What kind of living is that? You heard the doctors. My odds are not good.

But you can't just GO and let yourself DIE! That's not how this works.

I am going to let myself live.

NO—it's not right.

My sweet girl...Will you be happy for me? Can you get your big heart and strength to do that? I want to think of you smiling. When I go."



Todo bien?

“Hey. What are you up to?”

Oh. Wow.

You’re booking your flights home for this summer already?

Why?

Don’t you have like one month left of school or something?

I thought you were doing that internship at the White House?

Gotcha, okay. You’re coming here first.

Well, that’s cool...

And different.

But look—I know that we haven’t really talked much. Ever since I aired out my grievances and cursed you out. But I wanted to tell you about my college essay, if you have a few minutes...

No, no, Mari. It’s okay. You don’t have to apologize.

There’s been so much going on, and I haven’t really been wanting to talk about it either.

So it’s all good. We can just talk once you’re here.

Oh...okay. Well, thank you for saying that. That, um, that means a lot.

And I’m sorry too—by the way. If I was too harsh.

I'm still trying to work on my delivery.

Yes, I know you know, lol.

But okay, cool...Thanks.

And now enough with this feelings-fest!

I'm getting hives.

We have the REST of our lives for that.

Let's talk about the next Great American Novel instead: my college essay.

Yes. I finally finished it.

Despite, literally, fucking everything.

And I don't want to jinx myself—but I actually think that it's pretty good!

You're three weeks late, Luciana.

I know, Ms. Daniels. I'm so sorry. But it took me some time to find the arc here.

No, we're only doing Broward College right now. Because it doesn't require test scores.

But I can apply to Palm Beach as late as July, and then Miami Dade soon too, if I take the SAT once the school year finishes.

And given the recent news—Mom and Dad were okay with that.

My college counselor was the only one who wanted me to broaden my horizons.

Just try, Luciana! For FIU. Or New College and Valencia. Why not?

Because Broward practically has a one hundred percent acceptance rate...And no standardized test requirement. It was basically constructed for me? And have you seen my transcripts? I'm already barely making the cut at Dade!

That's fine, you can focus on Broward. But it's okay to have other options too. Don't limit yourself! You're a great storyteller! You never know where this essay and these supplements could land you. FIU has great programs in psychology and criminal justice. And New College in communications and social work too...All great things I can see you

excelling in. You can always take some time off and then apply to those schools for the spring.

Ms. Daniels—SOCIAL WORK?

You're compassionate and good at listening to others! What's so wrong with that?

No, I'm not?

Luciana. Have you read your essay?

But um, before I officially tell you the topic, promise me that you won't get mad?

Okay, good. Cuz you're kind of like the villain in the story, lol.

No, don't freak out! Just listen.

And I'm only even telling you because I know that Mom's gonna wanna frame it and say, AW, MARI! LOOK. YOUR SISTER IS OBSESSED WITH YOU.

So I'm here to tell you that I'm not.

Because I love you, but that's not why I wrote it.

I wrote it because I want to be obsessed with ME for once! And you're the one who helped me realize it.

Yeah. Since you're like...a REALLY good example of only thinking about yourself.

No offense.

But it's fine! Because instead of being mad—I can now finally just be inspired by it!

Isn't that great?

Exactly. Glad you agree.

And...so, for that precise reason, I wrote about having to step it up this year. Into the big-sister role.

Because the first year you left sucked.

Since it made me an only child.

But then this second year, things got even harder. Because we suddenly had Abue to take care of.

I had to figure out how to protect her, Ms. Daniels. Like an older sister would.

Which was really hard...

But it pushed me to step outside of myself. And see things differently for the first time.

I had to start getting comfortable with taking the lead. Even if it pissed people off. Especially when my grandmother couldn't do it for herself.

And turns out—sticking up for somebody else is way easier! And doing it enough times, helped me get those muscles warmed up.

Because seeing Abue go through her struggle, showed me the things that I was losing too.

I realized that I didn't have to keep rejecting the future anymore. Just because I was scared of not fitting in as who I was. That the future could actually be exciting! If I just let myself create the right one.

And so, if my favorite person wasn't going to live—and I mean literally, physically live—just to please others, then I was going to stop that too.

Because I was finally capable of more.

I know it sounds stupid, Ms. Daniels. But it felt like I could actually do something for myself...For the first time. And like I could actually DO what my mom had wanted, and make something meaningful out of my life. Because I didn't have to keep hiding who I was or what I wanted anymore. And my grandmother—she was using her life to show me I could live.

So, um, does that make sense?

Yes. It's not stupid, Luciana. It's perfect. Write it down.

Thanks, lol. I'm glad you like it.

I was so nervous about what you were going to say.

Because, Mari! You're still my big sister!

I'm still going to care about what you THINK!

And you're an incredible writer...Which is so unfair. Because I should have cursed you out AFTER getting your help on this essay.

But whatever.

Oh. Hmm.

Yeah, maybe you're right.

Maybe if you had helped, it wouldn't have turned out the same.

Which I guess...isn't such a bad thing anymore.

Since—yes, Mari. I get to have my ‘own voice now.’ Thank you for reminding me of what your therapist said.

Even though you bitches gave it to me by force!

Did your therapist also cover that?!

Kidding, kidding...I’m not trying to fight.

I just can’t believe that I’m a graduating senior. That part is still crazy.

I know. It feels so strange to me.

I remember being scared just to start high school!

Yes—because all my friends had dropped me on the last day of middle school, lol. When they found out I had kissed Catalina goodbye in the parking lot. Before her parents shipped her off to a new school. *Sorry, Luciana. We just don’t want to get in trouble.*

And then one of their nosy-ass parents called Mom. *Have you heard? Your daughter is kissing girls behind the dumpster.* And I hadn’t even come out to her yet, so she was inconsolable for weeks.

They really almost ruined my life, those people...

It’s sad...

I didn’t deserve that.

They made me think that I had killed my own mother, Mari! In the eighth grade!

And now what? Just because those girls saw *Pretty Little Liars*, and they thought that Shay Mitchell was hot, being gay is okay now?

No. I will not forget. Their previous middle school hate crimes.

Even though I’m a Gemini! And sometimes I really do!

But I will forgive...

Because I’m tired.

And I’ve learned from the rage of my grandmother.

Plus, I’m trying to be free and unencumbered now. For maximum life longevity.

And I already let myself be mad about it one more time again anyway... Reminiscing on all the more ‘defining’ moments of my life.

Trying to figure out which one to pick for my college essay.

Ms. Daniels was so scared, lol.

She was like, Luciana! No! Colleges don't want to hear about how you punched a girl at debate camp!

Yeah. Remember that? The summer after my sophomore year?

When Mom sent me to debate camp because I had an attitude the size of Florida?

And poor thing. She thought it would make me a good debater.

But instead, it just made me great at saying 'Fuck you' to everyone at debate camp.

I don't want to go, Mom!

Why not? Mari did it! And it helped her with college. It's free for all kids in the school district—you're going.

All I did for those four weeks anyway was just skip camp and smoke stolen cigarettes on top of the minivan in the parking lot.

Like some fucking cliché.

As if there was a freaking photographer walking around, waiting to take my picture.

Ready to memorialize my 'coolness' and pain forever.

What did I think? That a random girl was going to come up to me and say, Wow—are you ALSO sad and gay? Should we stop everything and KISS right now?

Pathetic, lol.

I can't believe that was only two years ago. Somebody should sue me.

And it was so hot that summer too...

I had no business being in baggy jeans and sweatshirts.

But all I could think about was setting myself, or the car, on fire.

Because everything sucked back then.

Mom was newly obsessed with the Whole30 diet, and I was still recovering from attempting to come out.

But you were no help.

Because you were only focused on getting ready to leave for college, and Abue was on a cruise with one of her boyfriends from far away.

Plus, I hadn't even been put on birth control yet. To manage my endometriosis. So my body was in so much pain that I'd get into a hot bath

each night trying to burn off my cramps and the IBS.

And now you wanna send me to DEBATE CAMP?

I was an angel—is what I was.

But the poor girl I punched didn't know any of it. She was just collateral damage.

However, she WAS a total bitch.

So it's not like she didn't eventually have it coming...

She used to always love to come over to me and say, *Why are you wearing another T-shirt again to one of our debate tournaments? You're supposed to be in a suit. Can you not afford one?* And what's up with the eyeliner? You look like Marilyn Manson.

I DIDN'T WANT TO BE HERE.

And then one day, she just caught me in the wrong fucking mood.

Because Mom and I had gotten in a huge fight that morning, over me not being allowed to eat more than one banana. *Only one per day, Luciana. Give it back. You'll get too many grams of sugar otherwise.* And my aux cord had just broken, so I was stuck listening to my Go Radio CDs. Which were way more emo than anything else on my Spotify.

So vested with the power of Warped Tour 2011, that morning, when that debate girl cornered me in the hallway, I made a small fist and aimed it right at her face.

What the hell! Did you just?

Yes, oh my god. I'm so sorry. You can punch me right back.

And you would have cried laughing, Mari...

Because that girl blocked my punch, and then she threw it right back.

Security was on us like a second later—but she was definitely about to kick my ass.

I still have her look of shock ingrained in my head, though...Like she couldn't believe that I had even tried.

God...I was so angry that summer.

It was almost nice.

You know the feeling?

When the worst possible thing has already happened, but you're still alive, so you walk around with fire numbing your pores?

And you're so stupid.

You think that nothing else can hurt you.

In fact, you're begging something to try.

Ugh. Never mind, lol. You probably don't.

ANYWAYS, it's all very embarrassing and alarming looking back.

I don't want to keep doing it.

I want to just shake that version of myself and say, WHAT ARE YOU DOING? Stop hiding in there! Go tell everyone to go fuck themselves!

And—I don't know WHAT I'm gonna do if I ever have a child like me...

Cuz I'd be terrified.

Or worse. What if they're weird?

Or they like Bass Pro Shops or Longchamp or something?

You're right...you're right. It'll be okay.

Because they'll have me. And they'll also have us.

So I'll just tell my weird, Bass Pro Shops-loving child about all the people that came before them. *Their sick religious commitment to appearances. And their exploitation of others. The suffocating lives they lived, from the expectations they placed on themselves.*

And how badly they wanted people to love them.

Because even though they all had choices, they just weren't ready to face the world alone.

Yeah.

I think we should remember them.

Without story or fable.

Just as people who wanted to live.

And of course—I'll tell my child about Abue.

The great pain and love of my life.

I'll tell them about how strong she was, and what it all came down to.

What finally put her body in the ground.

Which will hurt, you know.

Because I really wish that my children could meet her...Just hearing about her won't give them the full effect, lol.

I'm gonna have to be like, Sorry kids! You just had to be there!

But imagine a bull. In the body of a butterfly.

Okay. Let's stop there.

I don't want to cry again.

I promised Abue that I'd be happy for her about her decision...

But I will show my children her pictures.

And I will tell them her stories.

I know she hopes they wear it well."



Y a dónde aprendiste eso?

“Hey—I think this is going to be my last call for a while.

Yeah. Until you get here.

I want to take a break.

To be less on my phone and more in the world.

If you can even believe.

And there’s only a few weeks left of school anyway.

So I want to enjoy it.

I promised Abue that I’d take advantage of my last moments as a kid.

Do you swear, Luciana? You’ll really do it?

Yes.

Good. Have fun then! Scream, and run around. Act like you’re seeing the moon, and the stars, in the sky for the first time...You’ll want to remember it.

Remember what?

The feeling of being let out! Trust me. And I hope that you think of me after. Up in the mountains. Looking down, and smiling at you.

A sentence we never thought I’d say—I know.

But Abue asked me to close this chapter right. So I’m doing it for her.

Have you called her yet, by the way?

All her stuff is packed and ready.

Yeah. Her flight leaves tomorrow first thing in the morning.

Mom and I are gonna take her to the airport, and then Ivan will pick her up and drive her to Cocora when she lands.

Oh, yes...I'd say she's excited.

I can't wait to be in the valley, Nana. In perfect silence.

It's the only reason that I'm not still sobbing.

Because her happiness is just, so, 'present'...That it's hard to not see.

Plus, she's already picked all her outfits.

So she's not backing out.

Is this dress too short, Nana? Or do you think it's too long?

As well as, of course, all one hundred of her hats.

And you're sure this fedora still matches my wig?

Yes. They're both black?

So? Does it?!

She's been running around like a giddy schoolgirl on the night before her first class.

You look beautiful, Abue. Don't worry.

I think she's even got like five fucking suitcases now...

I told her that Customs and Immigration at the airport were going to say: Ma'am, and what exactly is the purpose of your trip? You know that where you're going is rural, right?

Yes. I know it very well.

But this is good—it's okay.

I have to remind myself that this is good.

That Abue wanting to leave this earth by doubling down on herself is romantic...

Like a love letter.

Or one final nod to Bad Bitch Incorporated.

A signature, if you will.

I know I have to accept that she only has one setting—and it's all attitude and jet-black hair.

Nothing else will suffice.

She's probably been up all night thinking, What would Venus do? The Roman goddess of beauty and love? Would she stay? Would Aphrodite?!

Oh—and there she goes now...Our resident mythical queen. Throwing more shoes around the room to see if she can fit them in her suitcase.

Despite already being over the fifty-pound limit, lol.

Hmm. Interesting.

I think I just heard her say the word 'stiletto'?

Good for her.

Well—they're obviously gonna have a blast with her on that plane. I'm so jealous.

And I can already hear her giving everyone hell at the airport too... Making them pass out with her musky-ass perfume spray whenever she walks by.

I mean, she's wearing it now in the other room and I can already barely breathe...

But they won't know how good they have it.

Or just how lucky they are.

To get to witness Abue's one-woman show ravaging through the internationals concourse.

Pain! Beauty! Resilience! *And silicone!* All tightly packed in one.

For this night only, folks! Emilia Molina's Great Vanishing Act!

And it's so weird to think that all those people will get to see her...After we say goodbye.

That she'll then go and exist outside of here.

Alone in the world again, after decades, for the first time.

I'm scared, Abue. To be here without you.

We still have some time, my girl. We don't have to say goodbye just yet.

But it's going to happen. That day is going to come.

Yes, and then I'll come back, and we will find each other. So you better write the good things down. I'll want to hear everything.

I think that Abue's actually a little worried too though...

Because she's leaving me a to-do list while she's gone.

So I don't go completely insane.

And the woman never ceases to amaze me. Because the first item on her list, for whatever reason, is to make sure that I pee every two hours.

Yup. So I don't develop 'bladder disease.'

Because if you keep holding it in, Luciana, you will.

Omg. You've been tracking my pee schedule?

Yes. You need to start listening to your body. Stop ignoring what it needs.

Then the second item, of course, is to keep monitoring who writes on her Facebook wall.

No shocker there.

Why? Would that impact your decision?

No. But it's important to know. Who still cares. And I won't get Wi-Fi up there on the iPad, so you'll have to tell me.

And she said that if anyone from her 'preapproved list' posts something, then I am allowed and encouraged to respond. But only with one of the many 'template messages' that she is going to leave.

And then what if they reply to that?

Then don't answer. Or they'll know it's not me. You talk like a gringa.

Ugh.

No, it's okay! I've forgiven you for that.

And last, but certainly not least, the third item on her list is to please make sure I learn how to wing my eyeliner correctly in her absence. Because I am supposed to look like a 'hot sex kitten.'

Not like I worship the devil.

I've told you this one thousand times, Luciana. Let's go. Try again. Pick up the liner and draw.

But I don't want to!

Oh, please. I know your kind. I've seen the trajectory. I know that you're gonna wanna do this down the line.

What are you talking about?!

Your dad is going to sell the car for me, okay? And then he's going to give you the money. Because I know that you want to get out of here. To take a break, and breathe for some time. And like I told you—go have fun out

there! You're beautiful and have a huge heart! Stop making people miss out on that. You think I don't know stuff—but I do.

Um...thank you?

Because I know, Nana. I know. And it's okay. I think it's rather obvious, but I understand why you haven't said something for so long. I know this world can be unforgiving...Just know that I love you. And I'm proud of everything you are. And nothing in this life—or any—could ever change that. Not even the holes in your shirt...Which I've already accepted and moved on.

But you know what popped into my head the other day, Mari?

When I was thinking about saying goodbye?

I was remembering all those times when the three of us would go running into the poison ivy—or whatever that weird mutant version of it was—when Abue first visited the States. Do you remember?

Yeah, when we were stuck at home all day. During summer vacation. And since there was nothing else to do, Abue told us to just make up a game.

Oh! We have an idea! Can we go running through the woods to see who's the fastest? In the trees behind the backyard?

Will your mother let you do that? Is it safe?

Yes. I just have to keep an eye on Luciana!

And I always thought that it was so weird to see Abue run...

Because I had never seen an old person move that fast in my life.

But since it was the secret game we'd play, whenever Mom and Dad were at work, it always just felt like this special hidden world we'd enter. When the three of us would disappear into the backyard.

I can still smell it too...Isn't that crazy?

The scent of us three that summer.

Running through the woods and sweating through our clothes. Surrounded by a bunch of insects and trees...Not knowing when we'd get hit with that final sting, or the burn of exhaustion in our chests.

And the warm feeling of wanting to cry after.

Every time.

But poor Abue didn't know what we were running from that summer. She didn't know that we were so bored—we were willing to get burned. Running through the 'poison ivy' we had discovered one day, just to see who could make it through without a rash.

I see one! Right there, Nana. On your foot! I win!

Damn it! That's not fair. You guys are too fast!

And I'd always just have to watch you and Abue come out victorious and unscathed anyway, because you were an athlete and she was plastic. And the plant oils weren't ever fast or strong enough to penetrate your skins.

But I never learned my lesson, huh?

I still always tried...

And then one time, when you were nine and I was seven, Dad drove us back to that neighborhood to visit our old house. And when we snuck into the yard again to play the game, trying to run back toward the trees, we discovered that the new owner had somehow filled it with chickens.

What the heck?!

But it was too late.

Because we were so fast, and so excited, that when we finally noticed—we were already halfway over the fence. *Oh, shoot. No, no, no.*

So you told me to hurry. To climb quickly and not slow us down.

But I was having trouble moving. Because I had secretly stepped on an ivy plant on the way up. *Ugh. Ouch!* And I was grunting and making noises, accidentally alerting the chickens that we were nearby.

What's wrong with you? Be quiet! Get ready to run.

But then you just jumped off and ran anyway.

Assuming I'd be close behind.

And it hit me then...that my issue was much bigger than any rash. Because if those chickens came after us—I wasn't gonna be able to run.

So I started whisper-screaming at you to stop it, saying that I didn't want to play anymore, and the game was done. *Mari, please. Don't do it.* Except it was useless. Because you had already caught the rooster's eye.

I think that's probably the first time I ever said the word 'fuck,' lol.

Yeah, when you sprinted away from me. Eyes bulging out of your head and screaming: Why? The heck? Are you? Not running? Big Angry Rooster coming?

Luciana, RUN! I don't know what that thing is going to do!

Yet I STILL wouldn't tell you the truth. Like a power-hungry idiot.

Because I had seen a small blister forming at the back of your leg, which meant that for the first time, as far as everyone was concerned—I was winning.

YES.

And I swear an angel must have been watching over me that day.

Because the only reason that stupid decision didn't backfire...is because that rabid rooster somehow ran past me. Eyes dead set on you.

Sparing my tiny, itchy, blistered body. Sprawled in pain all over the ground.

Omg? I'm alive?

I think that I was even still in fetal when I blacked back in, and realized I was just gonna have to get up and run anyway, to make sure the rooster didn't hurt you.

Mari, hold on! I'm coming!

Cuz I remember thinking, Are you serious, Universe? I decide to get my ass beat, and you pump the oxygen back into my lungs?

Like: No. Listen up, bitch. You? You're running.

We're not dying here today.

Okay. One foot in front of the other, Luciana. You got this.

It's a shame no one's ever believed that story though.

It's a good one.

Because, Mari? Why the fuck would there be chickens in a gated community?

Poor things were probably filled with drugs!

Just like everything else around here.

Trapped in small, confused, little malfunctioning bodies. Trying to break free, and get the heck out.

Kind of like Abue...

So how is it going to happen? When you're done?

*Who? Me? I won't have to do anything. When I'm ready to go, I just will.
My body will know that I'm finished.*

But how?

*I just know, Nana. Why I'm hanging on. What's been keeping me here
this whole time.*

The Florida lottery?

No, my girl. With you, I've already won.

*So then you also know that I'm going to call every day, right? And that
I'm going to bother you until the ends of this earth?*

Yes. It's why I'm bringing my phone.

And speak of the devil—here she is.

The liberated chicken-coop queen herself.

*Throwing more shoes at me again to see if I can fit them in her suitcase,
lol.*

Luciana!

I think I gotta go, Mari. I'll talk to you later.

Luciana!

Just promise me that you'll call her today?

Before she gets on that plane?

Cool. Thank you.

And make it long this time, too...If you can.

I think it'll make her happy.

Deja de hablar de mí en tu puto teléfono!

Oh my god. Do you hear this?

Why does she think it's always me?!

Exactly. You call ME and ask!

I'm not just sitting around and reporting on her life for fun!

Oh—and now she heard me. Now I've pissed her off.

Now she's walking away, and looking back at me smiling.

Like we're both listening to the same song and the good part is coming.

*Remember, I'll always be close. When you're ready, you just have to look
for me.*

What if I can't find you, Abue? What if you don't recognize me?

Me and you? Oh, we will.

How are you so sure?

My Nana. We already found each other here once.

Yeah. I think I'm gonna go give her a hug.

Even if she hates it.

Even if the affection makes her think I'm dying.

Maybe a part of me is."

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