The girl and the village

by

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This is to certify that the master's thesis of

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has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

______________________________
Major Professor

______________________________
For the Major Program
For Dinho, Lu, Tó, and Luiza, my nephews and nieces. May you rejoice in the memory of Dona Carmélia.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A House Full of Women</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What You Wish For</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ash Wednesday</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Secrets</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work for Women</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flesh and Blood</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breathe</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A House Full of Women

Grandma Amelia was so afraid of loneliness that after her wedding, when my Grandfather took her away to their honeymoon, she waited two days and then she got pregnant for the first time. She used to say that it was easier to raise girls than boys, so she prayed and prayed that God give her a daughter. Nine months later, at age twenty-one, Grandma Amelia gave birth to my Aunt Clara, a tiny baby with dark skin and curly hair. She dressed the baby in long, white, silk dresses and covered her hair with white and yellow lace ribbons, so the neighbors could see how proud Grandma was to have a baby girl.

But like all babies, Tia Clara grew up too fast, and when she turned three, my Grandma became scared of loneliness once again. So for the next ten years, every other year Grandma Amelia gave birth to another girl. By the time she was convinced that she would never be alone again, my Grandma had given birth to six daughters, each two years older or younger than the next one in line.

My Grandmother had filled her house with women.

I know about women.

That is something I have always known.

Panties, bras, nightgowns forever hanging on the clotheslines crisscrossed around the house where I grew up remind me that most of what I know I learned
from my aunts and grandmother. There was always one of them telling me how to squeeze orange halves just enough to extract the best juice, how to pull back my hair in the summer, how to spread my bed sheets and tuck in the corners, so that I would not need to make my bed every day.

They taught me to have patience, humility, and strength.

I grew up in a house full of women who challenged the notion that they needed men to be happy. For as long as I can remember, my aunts have worked and maintained the house where they have now lived for over thirty years. They have shared the responsibility of caring for a home, even if that means one of them has to clean the gutters, another must understand the electrical connections in the house, someone else has to know carpentry. My aunts have never allowed anyone to suggest that they are not fit for physical work, and they have passed their strength and self-reliance on to the younger generation of women in my family.

Throughout my childhood, as I paced the yard waiting for one of my aunts to come home from work, my own identity was shaped by the desire to be like each and all of them. Grandma taught me to tell stories, Tia Delia showed me how to push my way into the world, Tia Vera shared how to hold a grudge and never back down, Tia Elise taught me about affection, and my mother taught me about faith.

This is my tribute to the women in my family, who made it clear to me that sometimes it takes a village.
What You Wish For

My mother believed in promises. Promises that got our Church's seal of approval, God's very own signature. Promises for my father to return. Promises on behalf of my sister, who needed to pass Math in fifth grade. Promises on behalf of my aunt who lost her job. Promises on my behalf after our last visit to Dr. Lopez's office.

My mother and I left the orthopedics clinic and walked straight to St. George's Cathedral, on Recife's busiest street. She stormed through the black gates convinced she could appease my pain. She climbed the thirteen marble steps in front of the cathedral with a confident stride in her medium heeled black shoes. Her face displayed the detached tenderness of duty, the crystal clear expression of someone who lived solely for her children. I was six years old, and I already knew that my daisy patterned summer dress didn't match the black, corrective boots I had been forced to wear since I was three.

I lagged behind and stared at the newspaper stand at the corner. Dozens of candy boxes cluttered a shelf behind the vendor. Beyond the stand, I saw palm trees and a passenger ship at the dock. Shirtless children played soccer at the public square. Close to the top of the cathedral was a blue and white stained-glass window depicting the battle of St. George and the Dragon; the golden crucifix at the very top
reflected the mid-afternoon sun. I spread my arms open, watched the clouds shift above, and spun around. I felt like the church was going to fall over me.

"Venha," my mother said when she noticed I was lagging. She grabbed my hand, and I followed. The crystal beads of her rosary wrapped around her fingers hurt my hand. "We're gonna get you new legs today. Don't you want them?"

I stared at the children in the square and nodded.

We walked through the garden located on the right side of the cathedral, past the rose bushes, sunflowers, and gardenias. The path led to the church's office. Through the green wooden door I could see a chubby nun sitting at a small table with a pile of papers at the center, and a plaque that said Sister Maria. She had pink cheeks, and glasses that were too big for her face. She looked up, and received us warmly. "Who is this pretty girl?"

"Her name is Lily," my mother said, "and we're here about a prayer intention."

The nun gazed at my boots and smiled with pity. "Why don't you have a seat? I'll be right back." She stood up, walked toward a tall file cabinet that stood behind her desk, and began shuffling through several drawers. I sat at a pew that served as waiting area, arranged against the wall.

My mother pulled a plastic chair close to the desk and played with the strap of her purse. My legs dangled from the seat, their movement intensified by the weight of my boots. I followed the path of the flowers embroidered on my very
white socks. The nun returned after a few moments, carrying a black, hard-bound book. *The Book of Intentions.* As soon as she sat down my mother leaned against the table and whispered, "She was born with her right leg almost an inch shorter than the left one. She has to wear these horrible boots, and I don't know what else I can do." My mother's eyes filled up with tears as the nun stared at me blankly.

Sister Maria took some notes in the book, got up, and said, "Why don't you come with me?" She led us through a door on the side of the office, into a long wide room with four open doors on each side. *The Room of Promises.* A statue of St. George stood on a pedestal in the center of the room, and around it were votive candles and short notes written to the *Santo* on all kinds of paper.

The afternoon light filled the room, and I stared at the walls and the ceiling, mesmerized by the fake, wax limbs hanging from both. Arms, hands, fingers, feet, legs, and random solitary body parts of various sizes, whose names I didn't know, hanging by nylon strings, lazily dangling overhead with the afternoon breeze. Most of them moved in an invisible merry-go-round. Their candle-like opaqueness reminded me of horror films I could never watch to the end. I opened my mouth in surprise, tugged at my mother's skirt. "Mama, is this where I get new legs?"

"Yes, dear," my mother said, tying her black hair up in a ponytail. "See, all these legs and arms and everything are for people who need new ones." She knelt down next to me and placed her hands around my waist. "They bring these wax ones here, make a promise, and in a short while they get what they want."
I thought I would be given a brand new pair of legs, because mine had been bad since my birth. I was born with Clubfoot -- my heel and toes were twisted inward; my right calf and leg were one inch shorter than normal -- and it had never been cured because my mother could not afford the surgery. Now we just had to buy a set of wax legs, sold in the church itself for forty-five cruzeiros. They would hang on a string from the ceiling for as long as it took for a miracle to happen. They would tenderly remind Saint George of my malady. I dreamt of running outside with the other kids in the neighborhood without having to worry about the cracking of my ankles. Without the constant presence of my handicap, which made me seem more fragile than I felt.

My mother paid the fee. **Querido Santo, please fix my daughter's leg. I promise these wax legs will hang in this church until the day when a miracle happens. And when it happens, my daughter and I will pray a rosary together and offer it to your grace.**

I smiled as Sister Maria hung a pair of child-sized wax legs for me next to someone else's wax ankles. My own wax legs. My mother's promise on my behalf. The nun wet her thumb in oil and traced an invisible cross on my forehead. **Em nome do Pai, do Filho, do Espírito Santo. Amén.** Then she dipped her hand in a bowl of holy water that stood next to the entrance and flicked her fingers on my face. A couple drops fell into my eyes, and one slid down my cheek into my mouth. The water tasted like tears.
My mother held my hand as we left the church and crossed the street to catch the bus. Next to the bus stop was a barefoot man selling pineapples: three for one cruzeiro. He sat there watching people passing by. His hands were crossed on his knees; his dark skin contrasted his white shorts, and a half-empty bottle of wine stood on the ground next to his chair. He was drunk and sang the words to an unfamiliar song, "Hasn't yet! Hasn't yet! Jesus' blood has never failed me yet!"

My mother crossed herself.

On the ride home, we sat in the front of the bus, next to a wrinkled old lady carrying a canvas bag full of lettuce. Across from us was a large woman with puffy hair and blue eye shadow. On her lap, a little boy stared inquisitively at my boots. His own feet— in flip-flops— were filthy. I tried to ignore him by looking at the floor.

My mother raised my chin and said, "Querida, let's take these boots off. You don't need to wear them so much anymore."

"But I didn't bring my sandals," I said.

"It's ok. You can walk barefoot! Don't you want that?"

I nodded and smiled, because I hardly ever walked barefoot. There were four more stops to Rua da Piedade, where my grandmother lived. I swung my legs from the seat, and stretched my wrinkled toes. It felt like freedom.

We passed by a restaurant and I said, "I'm hungry, Mami."

"What do you want to eat?" she said. "You can ask for anything."
"I want Feijoada." Black beans, pork, and bacon cooked together; black beans and rice like only my grandmother can make.

"But today isn't Sunday, querida," my mother held my hand. "Don't you want something else?"

"No." I looked down at my hands. "I want Feijoada."

My mother held my hand a little tighter and said, "Well, maybe your grandmother can make some just for you." She looked out the window as we approached the house. "We'll ask her when we get there, ok?"

In those days, we lived in my grandmother's house, because we had no home of our own. My father had left us for another woman when I was one and my mother had to raise me and my sister with Grandma's help. We were brought up with too much heart and not enough habit. My mother believed in God above all else; there was nothing He could not fix. My father was not very religious, so I guess my parents' marriage had been rotten from the beginning.

I have only seen my father twice after he moved out, but I have no clear image of him in my mind. My mother pointed him out at the beach on a Saturday morning when I was three, but all I saw was a stranger in white trunks passing us in the distance. She told me not to go to him. I have always imagined him as one of those tall, fit, brown skinned men who wear a lazy smile and have a way of talking to women. I imagine him in his big house with brand new kids and a brand new
wife, who laughs at his jokes and asks no questions. But all I can truly remember of him is nothing.

My mother and I got off the bus and crossed the street to my grandmother's house. It was a red brick house with two barred windows in the living room and a carefully groomed front yard. My grandmother spent hours tending her roses. A stray dog napped next to the gate and my sister was sitting cross-legged on the short, whitewashed wall surrounding the house.

My sister Marisa always teased me when I walked without wearing my boots. My right leg would stump on the ground even when I tried my best to hide it. My mother used to say that if I sat down or just stood quietly, it was hard to tell my legs were not perfect. Marisa used to say I looked like a pirate with no leg but a wooden stick in its place. Sometimes she would place a handkerchief over one side of her glasses and we would pretend we were the crew of a pirate ship. Marisa waved at us and yelled, "A capenga chegou!" The Clubfoot is home.

My grandmother was waiting for us on her rocking chair, doing crossword puzzles. She looked up and pushed her thick-framed glasses up the bridge of her nose. Her hair was white-almost-yellow and she wore her usual cotton dress. "How was it?" She asked even before we reached the gate. She really took care of everyone.

"I'll tell you in a minute," my mother said. "Lily, go change."
I limped my way up the five concrete steps in front of the house, and went inside. I put on cotton shorts and a sleeveless white shirt, and remained barefoot. From the window in my room, I saw Marisa running around, through the white linens and towels hanging on the clotheslines to dry. She was ten years old but not much taller than me, and she had to extend her arms to reach the towels, which hung from a wire stretched between the coconut and star fruit trees in our backyard. Her long black hair reached over her shoulders; she liked to wear it down even when she was running through the clothes. I decided to join her.

On my way out I became suddenly aware of the fading picture of Jesus and his sacred heart, which had always hung from the wall in the living room. The blond Jesus wore a blue robe against a green background, arms open to enclose everything. His green eyes seemed to glare through and follow everyone around. Dust gathered on the borders and the streetlights shimmered off the golden picture frame. I got scared. *Jesus' blood never failed me yet...*

When I got back outside, my mother was sitting on the third step of the house, next to my boots, holding her head in her hands. My grandma was fluttering her hands in the air, yelling, “*Enrolação!* The whole thing is a SCAM. Can’t you see that?” She got up and threw her crossword puzzles on the floor. "What this poor child needs is surgery, not silly spells that won't come true, anyway!"

"But mother, I believe..."
"I believe you've just wasted too much money on a pretty stupid thing," my grandmother concluded. She took off her glasses and rubbed her eyes.

My grandmother had lost her faith about twenty years earlier, when my grandfather passed away during the procession on St. John's Day. He was one of the four men carrying St. John’s statue through the streets downtown. As the procession reached the courtyard in front of the church, he tumbled and fell on his knees, and died of a heart attack before anyone could help. St. John's statue crumbled to pieces as it hit the pavement. My grandmother locked herself in her room and cried for three days straight. When she finally came out, she broke the golden necklace with a crucifix she had always worn and threw it in the yard.

Grandma thought my mother's faith was a waste of time. She would always snicker at the other old ladies from my village, as they walked by our house on Sunday mornings on their way to church. She would sometimes wait until they had passed our house, then stand up from her chair, place her crossword puzzle booklet over her head and mock the old women's hunched gait, and the black prayer shawls worn over their heads even in the hottest days. My sister and I would laugh with her as we waited for my mother to finish getting ready to go to church. Grandma never went to Mass with us. She would wake up earlier than everyone and begin preparing the traditional Sunday lunch: Feijoada. She would stand in the kitchen for hours on end, chopping garlic cloves and onions, frying slices of bacon and sausage
in olive oil, mixing everything together with a cup of black beans, watching, waiting, and waiting. She couldn't afford to leave the beans unattended.

Now my sister started giggling, so Grandma put her glasses back on and noticed Marisa running through the clotheslines. She ran after her, yelling, "Hey you! Keep those dirty hands off the clean laundry!"

My mother saw me standing by the door, and her eyes were bright red. I sat next to her on the steps, and she said in a half whisper, "Here. Put these back on." She wiped a tear from her cheek and continued in a louder voice, "We don’t want you to get worms, now do we?"

"No," I replied. I put my boots back on.

"Now, go play with your sister."

I threw my arms around her shoulders and whispered in her ear, "Maybe Saint George wasn’t listening, Mami."

My mother’s promises did not have to work right away. My legs were not miraculously fixed because of her prayers, but I believe part of the reason why they were eventually fixed is that my mother wanted it so badly. Perhaps her faith gave her the courage to contact my father and ask him for the money that paid for my surgery.
A week after we had gone to the Cathedral, Marisa and I watched from the window as my mother spoke to a stranger at the gate. She did not let him in. She did not let us go to him. He wore a dark suit and a hat that covered his face. That was the last time I saw my father.
Ash Wednesday

For most of my childhood I lay awake waiting for her to come back. I prayed and prayed for God to send her home, but He probably wasn’t listening. I wrote stories about a little girl and her mother; the mother always did nice things for her daughter. She took her little girl for walks on the park and to movie matinees on Saturday afternoons. She bought pretty dresses for her daughter and she played with the little girl’s long black hair. The mother in my stories took care of her little girl.

Those were stories I only told myself.

On my eighth birthday I woke up to the sound of my grandmother’s voice outside the window of my room; my Grandmother spoke in long pauses, as if she were constantly picking out just the right words to say. “When she’s ready,” she said, waiting for the rest of the sentence to arrive. “She’ll return.”

I rubbed my eyes and pulled the curtains: it was a bright morning, the sky blue with no clouds in sight. Grandma was leaning against our star fruit tree, left arm crossed on her chest, right hand covering her mouth. My Aunt Vera stood across from Grandma but I could not see her face.

I slid down the bunk bed ladder, glanced into the mirror, and laughed at my messy hair. I ran down the hallway, through the dining room, and headed for the
kitchen where Tia Clara was poised at the counter breaking eggs into a bowl full of flour. She wore an apron, but because she was short and chubby, Tia Clara had to clasp the strap in half with a clothespin that seemed to come out of the back of her neck, and tie the waist strings in a tiny, tight knot on the small of her back. The apron wouldn’t have stayed on otherwise. She read instructions from a cookbook, but I was sure by then she baked the best cake in the neighborhood.

I tiptoed past her, out the kitchen door because if she saw me she would have made me change into play clothes and eat breakfast. I liked how the dark soil in my grandmother’s yard felt soft and cool against my feet; it left black lines of dirt between my toes and around my toenails.

When I reached the backyard I heard Tia Vera say, “She’ll be back, I’m sure.” Her face was serious, but Tia Vera hardly ever smiled. I thought that was what a strong woman must look like. But that day, when she noticed me approaching her face lit up. “Hey, look who’s awake!” She pointed. “Happy birthday, Lily.”

“Happy birthday, dear,” my grandmother said and knelt down to hug me. She picked me up in her arms even though she was not supposed to lift anything heavy. She held me for a few minutes, then put me down.

“Where’s everyone else?” I asked.

I wanted everyone to wish me happy birthday.

“Tia Ana and Tia Elise went downtown to celebrate Carnaval,” My grandmother said. “And Delia had some things to resolve.” She looked at Tia Vera
and continued, "I told them not to wake you up when they left. They'll be back for your party."

"Did Marisa go too?" I asked. "I thought kids were not supposed to go!"

"No, silly, she's playing. I'll go get her," Grandma said and walked towards the wall separating our house from the neighbor's. She climbed onto a large rock resting against the wall, extended her neck and looked into the yard next doors. "Marisa, come here a minute. Your sister is up," Grandma said then came back to where Aunt Vera and I were standing.

My sister came running through the entrance gate and picked me up by the waist. Marisa was twelve but she was skinnier than I was, so she lost her balance and we both fell on the ground.

"One of you will break a leg!" my Grandmother warned.

But Marisa and I were laughing when we got back on our feet. Marisa hugged me and said, "Happy birthday," then she kissed my forehead. "I'm kicking you out of our room now that you're eight. You're old enough to sleep on the couch now."

My sister was wearing white shorts that had become brown from her shuffling in the dirt, a green and blue striped T-shirt, and her long black hair was really messy. She had chocolate smudges in the corner of her mouth and all over her cheeks.

"Is Mami back yet?" I asked.
“Not yet. Maybe she will meet your other aunts downtown and they’ll all come home together,” Grandma said. My mother had been gone for two weeks on a spiritual retreat. She had promised me she would be back for my birthday. It wasn’t a Church retreat or Tia Clara would have gone too, but the day Mami left I heard her telling Grandma she needed to focus on her spiritual life. I thought she looked sad that day, but she told me she was just tired and needed a rest.

“Hey, let’s go inside and watch Carnaval on TV! Maybe we’ll see Tia Ana and Tia Elise,” Marisa said.

She held my hand as we got inside.

We passed by the kitchen and Tia Clara hugged me and said, “Happy birthday, darling. Do you want some milk?”

“We’re busy, Tia Clara,” my sister said and pulled me by the arm. Marisa knew how much I hated breakfast.

Sweets wrappers, cupcake holders, and a mound of paper sacks full of candy covered the dining room table. Plastic bags filled with red and blue balloons cluttered three chairs that stood around the table. Along the walls were various masks and ribbons for Carnaval, and several paper bags filled with confetti stood on the floor, waiting their turn to be thrown everywhere. My costume hung from the window frame.

I had been anxiously waiting that birthday because Grandma had made me a costume for the party. I was born in February, right around Carnaval, so every year I
dressed up as something different. That year I was going to dress up as a clown. Better yet, I was going to wear the costume my grandmother had made me, instead of buying one already made.

Grandma had started working on my costume right after New Year’s. Every afternoon she would sit at the sewing machine in her bedroom, and she even let me help sometimes, cutting loose thread from the shirt hems or fetching buttons from her sewing box that sat on a shelf, across the room. I thought it was magical how my Grandma could create real clothes out of the fabrics she bought whenever she went downtown.

Marisa and I sat on the couch and watched carefully as a sea of people flooded the streets downtown. Most of them were wearing colorful garments and strange costumes. A group of women dressed as schoolgirls waved to the camera and I asked, “Is that Mami and the others?”

“No,” Marisa said. “You’re silly. Tia Ana was the only one wearing a costume when they left.”

“What was she dressed like?”

“Unless Tia Delia was wearing a costume too,” Marisa’s voice trailed off. “I didn’t see her today.”

“What was Tia Ana wearing?” I tugged at her shirt.
"But I don’t think Mami would have wanted to go to Carnaval.” Marisa turned and looked out the window. “She always says ‘Carnaval é coisa do Diabo’. She would have come home, I’m sure.” Marisa seemed to be solving a Math problem in her head. I remained silent for a while, waiting for her reply. My sister finally turned to me and said, “Tia Ana was dressed as a butterfly.”

I smiled but my sister didn’t smile back.

Marisa turned off the TV and said, “Come on, let’s blow up some balloons for your party.” She pulled me off the couch and we sat on the cool marble floor, next to where the other party accessories were. She handed me some red balloons and concentrated on blue ones.

Grandma went back to the kitchen to help Tia Clara bake for later, and Tia Vera began arranging the rest of the party decorations. She hung a banner that said Happy Birthday Lily on the dining room, and said, “Meninas, come help me with the tables outside.”

We had borrowed five tables from the ice cream parlor around the corner; the tables were sprawled around the space on the side of the house. My sister and I were responsible for wiping their surfaces and making sure there were four chairs to each table.

Tia Vera turned on the radio and set one of the speakers on the ledge of the living room window; she liked to have music around her even when she was
working. Because it was Carnaval, all the radio stations played Carnaval music: a blend of African drums, Timbais, Tarois, Agogos, Congas, and Latin rhythms, making it impossible for anyone to sit still.

Marisa grabbed a broom and started sweeping the floor, while I stood to the side covering my face because I was allergic to dust. I watched Tia Vera preparing the table ornaments. She would patiently pull out the thorns of five red, pink, or white wild roses, then tie the stems together, forming small bouquets that would go on tiny glass vases. She wrapped each one with a red ribbon and pinned a pink bow to the center. Tia Vera had always known how to make things prettier; she loved adding colors to everything. Small beads of sweat formed on her forehead and right above her lips -- February was the warmest month in the Brazilian Summer.

We heard a commotion at the entrance gate, and my sister and I ran to the front of the house. Tia Ana and Tia Elise were back from Carnaval, and they came in through the gate skipping and singing. They grabbed Tia Clara, who was still wearing her apron, and the three of them bundled together in a group hug. They sang along with the radio and occasionally paused to laugh out loud. Grandma stood by the front door, arms crossed, kitchen towel hanging from her left shoulder. Her face was calm, but strands from her formerly tight bun stuck out in the air. She looked at us and said, "I gave birth to a bunch of lunatics."

Tia Vera smiled, and Marisa burst out laughing. I went inside to try on my costume for later, and through the window I could still hear my aunts dancing and
singing outside. I put on the red and white striped pants, the green buttoned polyester shirt, and clipped the black suspenders on the front and back of my outfit. I placed the blue curly wig on my head and thought how fun it would be to sing and dance in the yard, with my aunts.

Then I decided to try on the clown make-up. I had always enjoyed drawing clown faces on my school notebooks: a large circle with a red round nose, a large, pink mouth in the shape of a bean, and a black cross over each eye. All I needed to add was the white face paint Tia Ana had bought especially for my birthday. I smeared the paint all over my face, then drew the crosses over my eyes. I grabbed a pink lipstick and tried to draw my mouth, but it ended up looking terribly crooked. The bean looked bigger on the left side of my face because I accidentally painted half of my cheek. But I didn’t have time to fix it. I just grabbed the plastic nose Grandma had bought and clipped it over my real nose. Then I ran outside with a smile on my face, imagining how surprised and pleased my aunts and Grandma would be to see their little clown.

When I reached the terrace, before anyone could see me, Tia Delia stormed through the gate carrying a paper bag. Her face was serious; she placed the bag on the terrace, and crossed her arms. “I did what I could, Mother.” Tia Delia shook her head and pointed to the bag. “Gloria sent those clothes back. She said she won’t need them anymore.”

Grandma crossed her arms, frowned, and clenched her jaw.
“Where’s Mami?” I asked.

My aunts stopped laughing and looked at one another, and Tia Vera went inside to turn down the volume on the radio. The others wandered off, Tia Ana and Tia Elise to the backyard, and Tia Clara back to the kitchen. I stayed on the terrace, still waiting for an answer, and Marisa stood behind me. My grandmother slowly walked to the edge of the terrace and extended her arms to us.

“Come here a second, girls.” Grandma sat on her rocking chair and pulled me onto her lap. Marisa sat on the floor, across from us. Grandma played with the curls on my wig, gently rocking back and forth. The chair only rocked half the way because it was too close to the wall. I cringed every time the metal edge slammed against the cement wall.

I turned to face Grandma and she said, “Girls, sometimes people make bad decisions in life.” I watched the muscles on her cheeks extend, as I heard her sucking her teeth. “Your mother wasn’t very happy with her life, you know?” Grandma lifted my chin with the palm of her right hand and she continued, “She wasn’t happy living with us.” She paused for a second and looked me in the eye. “She moved.”

“Where to?” Marisa asked.

“Where did she go, Grandma?” I asked. “Can I go too?”
“No, dear.” Grandma held both my hands. “You belong here with your sister, your aunts, and me.”

“But why did she leave?” I felt tears sliding down my face.

“She’s the only person who can tell you that, dear.”

“What about us?” Marisa asked. “Is she coming to get us?”

“No, Marisa. You two will stay here with me.”

“But where is she then?” Marisa asked.

“Listen, I know this sounds really strange to you, but trust me. Everything will be fine.”

“But she can’t just leave us. Can she?” Marisa asked.

Grandma took a deep breath. She extended her arm to Marisa, who then sat next to me on Grandma’s lap.

“I guess your mother didn’t like living here very much. But you two have me and your aunts, and we’re not going anywhere.” Grandma patted me on the head. “You know that, right?”

I looked at Marisa and we both nodded.

“Can’t you go and find Mami?” I asked.

“No, Lily. We need to let her be,” Grandma said.
"Are we bad daughters?" I continued, wondering if Marisa and I had done something to upset my mother.

"Listen, why don't we do this: we'll give your mom a chance to think about it some more. Maybe she'll come back to us. What do you think?"

I didn't want Grandma to think I didn't believe her. My Grandma knew everything. So I said, "OK, Grandma." Then I stood up from her lap, placed my hands on my hips and said, "What about my party?"

Marisa also got up from Grandma's lap and stood next to me. "Come, I'll help you fix that make-up."

Starting that night and every night for a month I lay awake waiting. I told myself stories about mothers and daughters, stories where mothers took care of their daughters, stories where mothers loved their daughters. Those were stories I told myself, but my real story was much different. In my story my mother didn't come back, she didn't take care of me or my sister, and I've always wondered if she really loved me. And in the same way that my Grandmother Amelia took care of everyone in her house, she cared for my sister and me. Though I often wanted to ask her about my mother, something inside me always said that my Grandmother knew what was best for Marisa and me.
From that day on, my aunts never mentioned my mother either. Maybe they thought that by not talking about it my sister and I would forget my mother had even existed. It was the same way my grandmother never spoke of my grandfather, or anyone else who was dead in our family. So, right after my eighth birthday, my mother became a ghost.

And eventually I began telling myself different stories about mothers and daughters.
Family Secrets

On Saturday nights, Tia Ana would stand three feet away from the hallway mirror, and paint her lips bright red. She would lean toward her reflection and make short, smacking noises with her mouth. I stood in front of her in my pajamas, on the tips of my toes, and all I could see of myself was my head on the hanging mirror. Tia Ana would stick an index finger in her mouth, suck it, and slide it out between her lips, so that if she bit her lips later, the red paint wouldn't stain her teeth. She would kiss the air and I would do the same.

Tia Ana was thirty-one when I was nine, and she was the only one of my aunts who had a boyfriend. She went out every weekend. I thought she was the prettiest woman in the world, and I wanted to be just like her when I grew up. She had straight, dark brown hair that reached down to her shoulders, soft hands with long, painted fingernails, and tanned, toned legs. Sometimes, when Tia Ana wasn't in a hurry, she would bend down and paint my lips, even though my Grandma had told her not to do it. She had said makeup was bad for little girls' faces. Tia Ana probably agreed a little with Grandma, because she had told my sister never to touch her eye shadow, base, or mascara.

My other aunts never went out. They would watch TV until early in the morning. They were too old and tired, they would say. But sometimes I thought Tia Vera wanted to go out too. She would lean on the doorsill of the bedroom she
shared with Tia Ana, which was at the end of the hall and across from the mirror,
and she would stare at Tia Ana and me.

One day, when Tia Ana was getting ready to go out, Tia Vera walked up to
her and said, "I wanna go to that party with you tonight, Ana."

Tia Ana glanced sideways, and still holding her eye liner, she threw her head
back and laughed out loud. "You want to go out with me?" she said.

"Yes, why not?" Tia Vera replied.

Tia Ana continued outlining her left eye. "First of all, tonight is a special
night for Nestor and me," she said, referring to her boyfriend. "Second of all, look at
you, Vera!"

I thought Tia Vera was pretty too, even though she never dressed up like Tia
Ana. She never wore make up either. Tia Vera was my second youngest aunt, but it
seemed to me like she was much older. She had long, light brown hair that was
always kept in a bun, and her face was so skinny it made her eyes look bigger than
they actually were. Her face made her look like a skeleton. Maybe some make up
would make Tia Vera's face look happier.

"What's wrong with the way I look?" Tia Vera said, looking at her arms and
legs.

"You can't go out looking like that," Tia Ana said, pointing at Tia Vera's
clothes. She was wearing jeans that had started to fade, and a blue T-shirt with the
year 1987 written on the front. "And there's no time for you to get ready. Nestor
will be here in five minutes. Maybe next time." Tia Ana stepped even closer to the mirror, inspected her face by turning her head to the left and right, then let out a final smack at her reflection.

Tia Vera went into her room and shut the door. I felt bad for her because I thought sisters were supposed to do things together. That is what my Grandma would say to my sister whenever she wanted to go to the neighbor's house and not take me with her. Sometimes Marisa would be mad at me, but she would take me with her anyway. Even if she made me hang out with kids who were much younger than me, like some five or six-year-olds. I knew she wanted to be a good sister, since I was her only sister.

"Why is it a special night for you and Nestor?" I asked.

Tia Ana replaced the cap on her eyeliner and said, "It's a secret."

"I promise I won't tell anyone, not even Marisa!" I said.

Tia Ana seemed unsure. She twirled the eyeliner between her fingers. "No, but it's a secret. I'm going to tell Nestor a secret."

*What is it,* I wanted to say, but I didn't want to seem nosy.

"You have a secret about a secret?" I asked. "That's confusing, Tia Ana." I said, hoping she would tell me what it was.

Tia Ana sighed. She looked at herself in the mirror, and whispered, "A secret about a secret. Don't tell anyone, ok?"
I pouted and tugged at her dress, which worked sometimes when I wanted something.

Tia Ana chuckled, and then patted my head. "You're silly," she said. She grabbed her lipstick again, and then painted my lips. "Don't tell Grandma about this."

I felt very special. I stared at myself in the mirror, and I didn't even notice when Tia Ana left. When I turned around she was gone, so I went to my room because I didn't want my other aunts or my Grandma to see my red lips.

Next morning after breakfast, I was playing cards with my Grandma on the terrace, when Tia Ana stepped in through the gate. I didn't hear the engine of Nestor's car, so Tia Ana must have taken the bus home from the party. She was still wearing the same dress as the previous night, but her hair was all messy. Her eyes were puffy, and she carried her shoes next to her purse. While Grandma shuffled the cards, I looked up and smiled, but Tia Ana didn't even say "good morning." She just stomped in the house, and a few seconds later we heard a door slam. Grandma looked at me but continued to shuffle in silence.

I became worried about my aunt. What if Nestor hadn't liked Tia Ana's secret? I told Grandma I had to pee, then I went into the house. Tia Clara was doing the breakfast dishes, so she didn't see me pass the kitchen, heading down towards the end of the hall. From the corridor I saw that Tia Ana's door was closed, so I
went into my room, which was right next to hers. I thought I might hear what was happening in Tia Ana's room. My sister was still sleeping, so I lay in my bed very slowly, and crawled up next to the cement wall separating my room from Tia Ana's. I stuck my left ear against the cold barrier between my aunt and me, and I thought I heard Tia Ana crying.

A few minutes later, I heard Tia Vera singing down the hall, and the sound of flip-flops smacking the bare soles of her feet. I sat up on my bed and pretended to play with a stuffed bear, then I saw Tia Vera pass by, on her way to the bedroom next door. I heard the click of the knob as she turned it, and she must have left the door open, because I didn't need to listen through the wall anymore.

"What happened to you?" Tia Vera asked. "You look really messed up." She didn't seem to care that Tia Ana was crying.

Tia Ana didn't say anything.

"The special night with Nestor wasn't so special?"

I got angry at Tia Vera. I wanted to go into her room and tell her not to talk to Tia Ana like that. I wanted to tell Tia Vera that people shouldn't be mean to their sisters if they didn't know their secrets, or when their sisters were crying. But Grandma had always said that children should stay out of adults' conversations.

"Close that door, Vera," Tia Ana finally said. When I heard the soft click of the knob, I placed my ear against the wall once again. I couldn't hear them very well, but once in a while I heard bits of the conversation, words like long time, or
bastard. But after a while Tia Vera started speaking so loud I thought even Marisa would wake up.

"Are you out of your mind?" she said. "Can't you see that there's no place for children in this house?"

Tia Ana must have said something back, but I couldn't hear her voice.

"Not to mention what Mom will think of all this. Are you trying to kill her, Ana?"

I heard the shuffle of Grandma's slippers on the hall, and I remembered telling her I had to go pee. I jumped out of bed, and headed back towards the kitchen, but Grandma was already too close to my room. I looked up at her, worried that she would find out I had lied, but she didn't seem mad. She handed me the deck of cards and said, "Here, go back outside. I'll be there in a minute."

I nodded and watched as she knocked on Tia Ana and Tia Vera's door.

Once outside I started thinking about what I had heard through the wall. Maybe Tia Ana had told Tia Vera about her secret, or maybe Tia Vera was jealous because she didn't have a boyfriend. But what was that part about no place for children? The only children living there were Marisa and I, and we even had our own room. Unless Tia Vera was planning on throwing us out. She must have thought that girls whose parents had left didn't deserve to have their own room. She must have thought that sending us to an orphanage would mean she wouldn't have to share a bedroom with Tia Ana anymore, because she would take over our
I realized that all the time Marisa and I had lived at my Grandma's house had been a test to see if we were good enough for them. And now for some reason, Tia Vera was going to kick us out.

I got really angry, and tears started sliding down my face. I thought it wasn't fair that now even our aunts were plotting against Marisa and me. I threw down the cards and watched as some of them tumbled down the terrace steps, onto the black dirt beneath. If my aunts were going to send Marisa and me to an orphanage, we would have to run away first.

I stepped inside and went to my room. As I entered, Marisa was stretching her arms with a sleepy moan. She yawned and said hi, but I didn't answer. I opened the closet and pulled out a neatly folded bed sheet from the shelf. I spread it over my bed, then I walked to the dresser and opened the top drawer. I threw in both my hands and pulled out a pile of panties and socks, then carried it toward my bed. I moved back and forth until the drawer was empty, then I opened the next one down.

"What the hell are you doing?" Marisa asked. "Hey, I'm talking to you," she said when I didn't reply.

I started crying harder.

Marisa got up from her bed and came close to me. She placed her hands on my shoulder and turned me around to face her. Then she made me sit on my bed. "Look at me, Lily. Why are you crying? What's wrong?"
"Tia Vera wants to kick us out," I finally said. I wiped my eyes, but I couldn't stop sobbing.

Marisa looked surprised, then she smiled. "Are you crazy, where did you hear that?"

"I heard it! I heard it! Tia Vera said it herself. She said there's no place for children!"

Marisa sat next to me. She ran her fingers through my hair, and leaned closer. "Did you hear her say she would actually kick us out?"

I took a deep breath. "No. She said there's no place for children."

"And was she talking to you or to someone else?"

I didn't want Marisa to know I had been listening through the wall, but I couldn't lie to her now. "No, she was talking to Tia Ana. I heard it through the wall, but I swear I wasn't trying to listen. I just did," I said, hoping Marisa would believe me.

She laughed out loud. "Well, I'm sure they were talking about something else. Grandma would never kick us out of her house."

I wiped my face and looked up at Marisa. "She wouldn't?" I asked.

"She'd probably kick Tia Vera out first," Marisa whispered, and we both laughed. "Now, let's get those back where they belong."

She helped me put away the pile of panties and socks. I always listened to my sister.
That night we had bean soup for dinner. It was my favorite, so I started humming a happy song. Grandma told me to stop it. She said the dinner table was no place for singing. She seemed upset about something, like maybe she had a headache. I didn't want to make it worse, but it was probably too late. I sat up straight, and spread my napkin on my lap, so that she would see I was being good about my table manners. I grabbed a slice of French bread, and instead of breaking it into pieces and adding them to my bowl like I always did, I placed it on the small bread plate to my left. Then with each spoonful of soup I would carefully tear out a small part of the bread, and place it on the spoon.

Everyone was quieter than ever at the table. Usually, my aunts would tell each other about their busy day, but for some reason nobody was speaking. When I realized Tia Ana hadn't joined us, I asked, "Where's Tia Ana?"

My aunts looked at each other, then at my Grandma, who said, "She's not hungry."

Tia Vera dropped her spoon, and the noise of metal against the china made my other aunts look in her direction.

"Eat your food, Lily," Marisa said.

I nodded and continued to eat, though I didn't know why everyone was being so mysterious. I kept looking at Marisa, but she avoided looking at me. Tia Ana must have told them about her secret. It wasn't fair that she hadn't told me
anything. Marisa probably knew about it too. I hated being nine and not being told about many things that happened in that house. I broke the rest of my bread, threw it in my bowl, then stirred the bread and soup together with my spoon.

Monday after school, I was playing under our palm tree, which was on the corner of the yard, when I heard two neighborhood kids through the wall surrounding Grandma's house.

"Check out her thighs," Guto said to his brother Tito as they passed our house. "She's got the devil in her hips, that's for sure."

"I heard she's good in bed," Tito said and both boys giggled.

I ran to the gate to see who they were talking about. Guto and Tito were about the same age as my teenage sister, and they lived three houses down the street from us.

Tia Ana was outside, standing against the wall, waiting for something. She kept looking at her watch, and shifting her weight every ten seconds. I watched the two teenagers nod silently as they walked by my aunt. She was wearing a white tank top, tight jeans shorts that emphasized her legs, and sandals that showed her ankles. Her long, dark hair was pulled back, and she slowly blew out the smoke from a cigarette.

I sat on the entrance step, right at the gate, and Tia Ana walked over to join me. She placed her arm around my shoulder and I said, "Where are you going?"
“Nestor and I are going downtown, dear.”

“Can I go too?”

She paused for a second and said, “I wish you could, Lily. But you’d be the only kid there.”

I stared at my hands and didn’t reply because we both knew I didn’t mind being the only kid among adults. She pulled me closer, gave me a hug, and kissed my forehead. “Where’s your sister?”

“I don't know. At her friend’s house, I think.”

“Oh,” she said. “You know, I’m the youngest too,” she pinched my cheek. “You just have to find things to keep you busy.”

“Yeah,” I got up and said, “I’ll take Iago for a walk. I think he has to pee.” I went in the yard and got my dog, who was a white Pekinese with brown spots. When I got back outside, Nestor’s car was parked in front of the house. Tia Ana sat on the passenger’s seat and I could almost hear them talking. He kept pointing his index finger at her and shaking his head. He seemed mad at Tia Ana.

Iago and I walked past and I waved, but Tia Ana and Nestor didn't see us.

Early that evening, my grandmother and I sat on the terrace listening to the radio. The sun was setting and I could smell Grandma’s corn cake baking, the coconut milk that would go on top simmering, and her famous stew boiling on the
It would be another fifteen minutes before she had to go back to the kitchen and check on the food.

We heard the engine of Nestor’s car as he halted to a stop in front of the house, and I ran to the gate to say hello. I unlocked the padlock, while Nestor got out of the car and opened the passenger door. Tia Ana didn’t move, so Nestor picked her up and helped her stand. I turned around and Grandma was running to the gate, with worry in her eyes. “What happened?” she said.

I stepped to the side.

Nestor carried my aunt’s limp body into the house, without saying a word. Grandma followed them and I stayed outside, not knowing if I should close the gate. I left it half open and sat back on the terrace.

A few moments later, Grandma stomped outside, and sat on her rocking chair. Nestor stepped down the terrace, turned back and leaned against the side of the house. Grandma crossed her arms, and made the clicking noise she always made when she was really angry.

Nestor stared at his feet, shuffled them on the dirt, and lit a cigarette. “I am really sorry about all this, Amelia.”

Grandma remained silent, looking straight ahead as if Nestor wasn’t there. “I mean, Ana should have been more careful, I told her.”
“Mind what you say, Nestor.” She turned to him with red eyes and a frown. Then she got up from her chair. “Are you trying to tell me this is my daughter’s fault?”

“Oh, no, I was just...”

“Well, mind what you say, then.” She looked straight ahead again, “I didn’t raise six daughters to have some man tell me rubbish about what they should or shouldn’t do.”

“Well, it’s just that I told Ana she should have been more careful.”

Grandma shook her head, looked at her wedding ring and said, “You know, you shouldn’t feed illusions to my daughter.” She crossed her hands on her belly and looked at Nestor. “She thinks you’re going to marry her.”

“But I am! I want to!” Nestor pleaded. "I'm just wasn't ready for this."

“No, you won’t. You and I know that, Nestor. We both know you'll never be ready.” Grandma spat on the dirt beneath the terrace and said, “I think you better leave now. I have to finish making dinner.” Then she walked towards the entrance door. "You're not welcome in my house anymore."

Nestor stood there for a few minutes, and I wanted to ask what was wrong with Tia Ana, if she had eaten something rotten, and why Grandma was so upset.

But I didn’t. I waited for him to leave, then locked the gate, and went in the house. I saw Tia Ana run to the bathroom and she didn’t even have time to close the door. She threw up, and I could hear her sobbing. I sat at the table, where I could
see my Grandma’s back as she stood next to the stove, and I heard Tia Ana dragging her feet slowly towards her room. I ran to her, held her hand, and helped her to bed. Her face was pale and covered in sweat, but she was shivering. She closed her eyes, and I said softly, “What’s wrong?”

“No place for children,” she whispered without opening her eyes. Then she fell asleep.
Work for Women

“You’re too heavy, Tia Delia,” I said to my aunt who was about to climb to the roof. She had woken up convinced to rake the leaves that had gathered along the gutters for months, making it impossible for the rainwater to drain.

“Trust me,” she nodded, “just push the ladder against the wall like this.” She thrust both arms forward into the air. “Can you do it?”

I looked into her eyes and because I knew there was no arguing with her, I grabbed the wooden ladder perched against the side of the house. Tia Delia began climbing the steps as I leaned forward with my entire body, praying that she was right, that the ladder wouldn’t move.

One thing I had always known about Tia Delia was that no one could win an argument against her. When she set her mind on something, there was nothing anyone could do to prevent her from getting it. I admired that in her, and sometimes I wondered if I would ever be like her when I grew up.

My aunt made it to the top, turned around and sat on the roof, legs dangling next to the ladder. “See? What did I tell you?” She grinned at me, then pointed at the rake, which rested next to the garbage can.
I climbed the first, then second steps of the ladder, and handed Tia Delia the rake. I felt tempted to keep going, to see what our neighborhood looked like from above, but I let go of the ladder when I heard my grandmother approaching. The sticks and dry leaves under her feet warned me she was coming.

“Get down from there!” Grandma yelled.

I turned to face her and knew she would lose her temper: arms crossed behind her back, tongue pressed between her teeth, gray eyes raging.

“Hell, you don’t ever listen to me, Delia!” She looked up and walked faster, “That’s no work for women!”

“Why not?” Tia Delia opened her arms, palms facing the sky. “I made it this far, didn’t I?”

“The handyman will clean it next week.”

“Mother, I am not waiting until next week if I can do this myself.” Tia Delia stood up and pulled out a blue garbage bag tucked in her back pocket. “I’m sick of this mess.” She shook the bag open and started pacing the roof. “I wish you could see the puddle up here. If it doesn’t get drained then we’ll soon get a leak right in the middle of the dining room.” She stopped and looked down at my grandmother. “Is that what you want?”

My grandmother sighed heavily, bit her lower lip, and shook her head: she knew something bad was about to happen.

But just not yet.
Grandma turned her back to us and said matter-of-factly, “Don’t say I didn’t warn you.” She looked at me and said, “I’ll be cooking lunch in case she falls off and breaks her neck.” Before walking back into the house, she pulled her portable radio from one of the pockets on her dress and brought it to her left ear.

That day, my favorite soccer team was playing against its worst rival in the National Soccer Championship final. My grandmother and I rooted for the same team, but no one else in the house seemed to enjoy soccer as much as I did. At that point Flamengo and Vasco had scored one goal each, and the game would be over in ten minutes.

“See how it is?” Tia Delia said, “I’m doing something good to fix the house, and your grandmother won’t let me work in peace.” She paused. “She should win a national medal for nagging.”

Tia Delia rolled her eyes and we both giggled.

I sat on the slab of wood tied to a rope hanging from our cashew tree, my own improvised swing, and as I moved back and forth, I watched my aunt raking the leaves. She was wearing a blue cotton tank top that revealed the muscles on her arms, and her shorts failed to cover the bulging blue veins on her thighs. She was no stranger to physical labor. I knew she had taken a carpentry workshop and sometimes she worked on projects around the house, like fixing the kitchen sink when it got clogged, or building shelves in my room, so I could have more space for my books. Her hair had always been short, but that day she was wearing a cap. I
watched her repetitive work: gather the leaves, pick up the stash, and shove it into the bag.

She didn’t seem to mind.

My grandmother opened the living room window that faced the cashew tree and whispered, “Is she still up there?”

“Yes,” I said. “She hasn’t fallen off yet.”

My grandmother grunted and said, “Well, just wait and see.” She placed the radio on the windowsill. “Come on, come on, Bebeto, one more goal is all we need.” She raised the antenna and turned the SEEK dial as if that would have helped the players on the field. Grandma leaned against the window frame, enjoying the cool shade of the tree. By that time the beans were set to boil, two cups of rice had been washed, and my grandmother had marinated the steaks that would go on the grill as soon as the beans were done. She stood by the window watching me halt to a stop on the swing so I could concentrate on the game.

I was wearing the official Flamengo jersey, white Adidas shorts, long white socks that I had stolen from my sister’s drawer, and sneakers, because I didn’t have soccer shoes. I didn’t have soccer shoes because women weren’t supposed to play soccer back then, so the shoe companies didn’t make women’s soccer shoes.

“Vasco is gonna win,” my aunt said from the roof.

“You shut up, woman,” my grandma yelled with rage. “You know zip about soccer.”
Tia Delia grinned and continued, “I know plenty. *Flamengo* doesn’t have a chance in hell of winning.”

“Oh, you just shut up, now. We don’t need your negative thoughts today.”

Tia Delia didn’t root for *Vasco*, but as long as *Flamengo* lost, she didn’t care who won. “How much you wanna bet YOUR team is gonna lose?”

“I wanna bet that you’re gonna fall off that roof, and tomorrow I’ll wear my *Flamengo* jersey when I come visit you at the hospital, and a BIG smile on my face. The smile of champions,” Grandma said and winked at me. She raised the volume on the radio:

... *ZÉ CARLOS* IN THE MIDFIELD DODGES ALEX, THEN PASSES THE BALL TO JORGINHO ON THE LEFT SIDE. HE CARRIES IT TO THE BOX, AND KICKS IT HIGH IN THE MIDDLE. BEBETO STOPS THE BALL WITH HIS CHEST, IT BOUNCES ON HIS KNEE, HE SHOOTS AND GOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOAAALLL!!!

My grandmother yelled with the radio announcer, and run outside shaking both hands; I ran to her and joined in screaming GOAL at the top of my lungs. Two more minutes and our jerseys would display an extra star above the team logo.

“There’s still time,” Tia Delia said, disappointed. “And that ref was bribed, for sure.”

Grandma and I ignored her as we followed the last moments of the game. The referee ended it right on time, and throughout the neighborhood other *Flamengo* fans set off firecrackers to celebrate. My grandmother did a little dance as the radio played *Flamengo*’s team anthem and even Tia Delia couldn’t stop from laughing. We
jumped around a bit more, and then Grandma walked into the house to check the beans.

Tia Delia continued to fill up the garbage bag on the roof.

I was too excited to sit still, so I grabbed a soccer ball hidden behind a plant on the terrace and kicked it around the yard. I bounced it on my knees; my record was thirty hits without letting it fall on the ground. Then I kicked the ball against the brick wall that surrounded the house, controlling my foot so I wouldn't kick the ball over the wall, into the neighbor's yard.

I imagined myself in the middle of a soccer field, playing for Flamengo, even if that meant I had to pretend I was a boy. I felt the rush of blood on my face as my breathing sped up, and the kicks got harder. I could almost hear the radio announcer saying, *Lily dodges three adversaries and penetrates the box, then slides the ball between the goalie's legs. GOOOALL!*  

I dodged three imaginary players, then stopped the ball and kicked it with the tip of my foot, which meant I had no control over where the ball would go, but it was a hell of a kick. I watched as the ball flew out in the opposite direction, towards my grandmother's plants, and I heard a dull thud when it hit the corner of the PVC water supply line against the wall; it instantly burst and a jet of water gushed onto the dirt. The pressure was so strong that it destroyed three of Grandma's favorite mother-in-law plants.

"Uh-oh," Tia Delia said.
My grandmother stomped out of the house, grabbed me by the arm and yelled, “You’re not a boy, you know that?” She shook me and I was too shocked to respond. She turned around and pointed at Tia Delia, who was climbing down from the roof. Grandma said, “I am sick and tired of you behaving like a man in this house. It’s your fault, Delia! You let her get away with everything!”

“Let her go, mother. I’ll fix the pipe later.” Tia Delia walked to the main register and shut off the water supply to the garden.

“NO, you won’t!” Grandma let go of my arm. “That’s exactly what I am talking about. You go around pretending like you can do all the work that’s not meant for women.”

“Hey, I don’t pretend anything.” My aunt raised her voice. “Will you just take a look around this house? Who took the initiative to fix the terrace lights? And who was on the roof just now picking up leaves?” She removed her cap and wiped a line of sweat from her forehead. “You need to learn that we don’t have to spend money on handymen when we can do the work ourselves!”

“I should have known,” Grandma said, then looked up at the sky. “Ever since you were little you always acted like a boy.” She brought her hands together as if she were going to say a prayer. “And now this one,” she said, pointing at me. “She will probably turn out ‘like that’.”

Tia Delia’s face turned red with rage and she yelled, “Like what?” She set her hands on her hips and stared at Grandma.
“I should have known, you never had a boyfriend or anything,” Grandma went on as if I were not there. “Now this one is only nine but she already acts like you do. Dear Lord, another one, that’s all we need.”

“Another what, Grandma?” I said, my voice shaking.

“You got her into soccer, didn’t you?” Tia Delia said with a sneer.

“But you were the one who bought her a soccer ball. Watching the games or rooting for a team is one thing...”

I started biting my nails. I knew that whatever Grandma and Tia Delia were talking about went beyond my busting the pipe. Whenever the women of my family argued, no matter how small or silly the argument was, it felt as if a hurricane had swept the house. They would bring up other things that weren’t directly related to the argument, as if they needed to justify being angry with each other. This time I had the feeling my Grandma and Tia Delia weren’t just talking about me.

“I never had boyfriends because I don’t need men in my life,” my aunt concluded. “Didn’t you teach us that yourself? Didn’t you tell all your daughters that men aren’t good for anything?”

“I never said that, Delia.”

“Well, might as well have. When we were younger, we were all terrified of bringing our boyfriends home because of what you would say. You would never accept any of them because they might take us away from you.”
Grandma didn’t reply.

Tia Delia brushed her hands against her shorts, then said, “I guess you’ll just have to settle for what you can get.” She turned around and climbed back up to the roof.

My grandmother sighed, then went inside the house.

I put away my soccer ball. Then I went back to my swing.

*How come you never had a boyfriend, Tia Delia?*
Flesh and Blood

I was late for my First Communion rehearsal. I should have taken it as a sign. As I tiptoed into the classroom, Tia Clara, who was also the Catechism teacher, took me by the hand with an unfriendly grip and showed me where to sit. The rehearsal was a three hour long version of the ceremony, replete with last minute reminders and burning stares from my aunt. There were thirty-nine other fifth graders who would receive communion for the first time two days later. Since the girls were to sit on the right side of the church and the boys on the left, the classroom had been arranged to reflect the pews in the cathedral: two rows of chairs had been placed on each side of the room.

Father Maurice, our tiny priest, stood behind a desk in front of the room, almost squished into the blackboard. Instead of the black robe he always wore for Mass, Father Maurice was dressed in non-church clothes: a light, buttoned-down shirt tugged into dark, checkered pants, and brown shoes with chewed shoelaces. His gray hair was parted down the middle, and I could see dandruff in the thin rows of combed back hair.

"Do not to wave at your relatives as you walk into the church," the priest said. His voice was loud and somber. "God will be watching you especially on this day, so you'll have to concentrate."
Tia Clara, who stood a bit to the side, nodded and stared at each of us. Her face would turn red whenever she was mad at the Catechism students. I had the impression that she would personally throw lightning bolts at whoever did something wrong during the ceremony. Though I didn’t much care for religion, I felt my heart beat faster. Just pay attention.

My sister and I secretly called Tia Clara God’s Secretary, because she was constantly trying to recruit people to the Charismatic Catholic Group she had started. She had taken us to one of their meetings, and Marisa and I laughed quietly the whole time. We sat in back and watched as the twelve people led by Tia Clara raised their hands in the air and clapped as they sang church songs. My aunt was a short, gray haired, round woman standing on a chair in the center of the room, waving her hands in the air as though she were conducting a symphony. Once she jumped off the chair with such urgency that her skirt floated up, and we could see her underwear. Marisa covered her mouth with one hand, and mine with the other.

The veins on Tia Clara’s neck looked about ready to pop when she sang. I think she really wanted God to hear her voice over everyone else’s. But everyone in her group seemed scared of her. Occasionally, one of them would start talking to the ceiling, as though God himself were there. It was unlike anything Marisa and I had ever seen.

My First Communion had been Tia Clara’s idea. Ever since my mother left, Tia Clara had taken it upon herself to save my soul. Because I went to Catholic
School, most other kids in my class were having First Communion. I didn’t really care about it. But on registration day, Tia Clara sent me off to school with a check in my pocket. Grandma told me to just hand over the money and listen to the rules.

As a tomboy, I cringed at the thought of having to dress in white frills with patent leather shoes just to receive the body of Christ. Tia Clara loved it. She had given me the “you’re a young lady now, and I expect you to behave like one” speech. She tried to cheer me about the white dress I would wear, with plastic flowers hanging from my tiara. There would also be a veil on my head. All I could think about was the fake smile on my face as I would enter the church, hands brought together in prayer.

“Remember to kneel and make the sign of the cross before you enter the row where you’re sitting,” Father Maurice continued, crossing himself and kneeling down as if he were about to sit on a pew.

“But be careful not to run into the flower arrangements that will be placed right next to the pews,” Tia Clara added with authority.

One of the younger nuns rushed into the room and whispered in Tia Clara’s ear. She carried a large, plastic bag full of Communion wafers, which she placed on the desk in front.

“Yes, very good,” Tia Clara said out loud. “The wafers are here, boys and girls.” She smiled at us. “Let’s practice the entrance again.”
We stood up and filed out of the room. In the hallway, Tia Clara inspected the double lines we had formed, making sure we still knew our position. Then she moved to the front.

“Ok, let’s begin.” She motioned to the first kids in line. “When your hear the music, count to ten, then start walking. And those of you close to the back, make sure you pay attention to those in front of you.”

We entered the room. We took our seats. We waited.

We said the prayers out loud, our voices in unison, and when it was time for Communion, Tia Clara stood in front of the room once again, next to the priest.

“This is the most important part,” she said. “When Father Maurice raises the chalice, the bread and wine will become God’s flesh and blood.”

“During transubstantiation,” Father Maurice interrupted, “God’s spirit will be more present than ever, boys and girls.” His voice was softer than before. He nodded at Tia Clara, who then moved to the side of the room. Because it was only rehearsal, the priest was not allowed to perform the entire ritual of transubstantiation. He simply grabbed the plastic bag, rolled down its edges, and stood in front of the desk. “Song four, page two hundred,” he said in a louder voice.

As soon as the song started, the kids on the first row stood up and slowly filed out, forming a line in the center. The rest of us followed. We cradled our hands on our bellies, and counted to three before taking each step. Tia Clara was the
first one to start singing the communion hymn. She emphasized the last syllables of every word she sang, leaning her head sideways.

When I reached Father Maurice, I raised my cupped hands to receive the host. The priest said, "The Body of Christ."

I said, "Amen."

He placed the thin wafer on my hand. I held it carefully by the tip, and set it on my tongue. It tasted salty, the texture like recycled paper. Walking back to my seat, I pressed the host against the roof of my mouth, and for the next five minutes, kneeling down, I tried to scoop it back down to my tongue, carefully. But it was stuck. Eventually I was able to break it in half, which must have been a sin of some kind. I wet both pieces of the host with saliva, and swallowed.

By the time the Communion song was over, all the kids had already gone through the line, and even finished their individual prayers. Tia Clara, who continued to sing with her eyes shut, finally came out of her trance, and looked around to see what part of the ceremony was taking place.

She was too busy singing to inspect us during the actual Communion rehearsal.

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When Tia Clara and I got home from rehearsal, my sister was sitting outside, and Grandma was kneeling on the black dirt beneath the terrace, tending her roses. I sat next to Marisa and Tia Clara sat next to me.
“So, how come we’re not supposed to chew it?” I asked.

“Meu Deus, because it’s the body of Christ!” Tia Clara looked terrified. She was my oldest aunt.

“But it’s not really the body of Christ, Tia Clara,” my sister provoked. Two weeks earlier, Marisa had announced to the family that she had become an atheist. My Grandmother laughed out loud at the dinner table, commenting that Marisa was a precocious fifteen year old. Tia Clara hadn’t spoken directly to my sister ever since.

“Yes, it is,” my aunt continued without looking at Marisa.

My sister shook her head. “You Catholics and your weird rituals.”

Tia Clara slouched forward in her chair and grabbed my hands. “Don’t listen to faithless people. God is good and he’s watching us.” She squeezed my hands a little harder. “Your First Communion will be the happiest day of your life.”

My sister kept shaking her head. “I wish I had known the truth when I was your age, Lily.”

“That’s enough,” my Grandma said. She stood up and brushed her dusty hands on her skirt. “Don’t you have a test tomorrow?” She pointed at my sister.

Marisa didn’t answer, but she got up and went into the house.

“And you,” Grandma continued, looking at Tia Clara, “leave that child alone. She’s already got enough to think about without you feeding her this religious stuff.”
My Grandma lingered there for a second, and then moved on to care for the other plants. Tia Clara let go of my hands and pointed towards the house. I walked slowly and I heard her biting her nails and spitting them out on the terrace.

I went into the bedroom Marisa and I shared, and saw her lying on her stomach, staring down at a math book. She rested her chin on the palms of her hands, looking extremely bored. "Did God's Secretary finally decide leave you alone?"

I smiled. "Grandma told her to stop," I said.

***

Next day at five in the afternoon, I had to go to Confession for the first time. I wasn't sure what sins to tell the priest. So what if I had stolen four stickers from Marisa? In any case, Confession was mandatory. The forty of us stood outside the school chapel, waiting our turn. Tia Clara would fetch the next person as soon as the priest was ready, being careful to cross out our names on her clipboard. I stood in line trying to think of something bad to confess.

When my turn came, I walked behind Tia Clara, with my arms crossed. I tried to think of something better to say, but I felt like I was going to get sick. My palms were sweating, and I kept wiping them on my shirt, afraid that Tia Clara would turn around and notice it. I looked up at the large, wooden crucifix hanging from the ceiling right above the altar; an undernourished Jesus gazed at me with indifference. He seemed more concerned with the various cuts and nails in his
body. At the confessional, Tia Clara told me to kneel on a small, red pillow, and before she left she said she’d pray that I had a good Confession.

The priest opened his little door. “In the name of the Father, the Son, and Holy Ghost. How can I help you, my child?”

“I stole some stickers from my sister,” I said, the words almost running over each other.

“Wait, what do you say before that, though?”

I thought about Tia Clara’s lightening bolts. “Um, forgive me father, for I have sinned?”

“Go ahead.” The priest said softly.

“I stole some stickers from my sister.”

The priest mumbled something, then became very quiet.

I didn’t know what else to say.

“How many stickers?”

“Two,” I said. Lightening bolts. “I mean, four.” I rested my forehead against the criss-crossed pattern of the wooden cage separating me from Father Maurice.

“Anything else, my child?” His voice was very soothing. “What is bothering you?”

“That’s it, I think.” I scratched my forehead.

“You think? You can tell me anything, my child.”
“Yes, that’s it,” I said, then stuck my index finger through one of the small holes in Father Maurice’s cage.

“Please don’t do that,” Father Maurice sounded irritated. “Are you sorry you stole from your sister?”

“Yes, Father.”

“Do you promise you’ll give them back?”

I had already traded the stickers. "Yes, Father."

“May God forgive you, my child. Now go and…”

“Wait, Father?”

“What is it my child?” he sounded annoyed.

“I have a question.”

“Can’t you wait until I’m done blessing you?”

“No, it’s part of my confession. It’s my real confession.”

“The one with the stickers was fake?” Father Maurice giggled. “What is it then?”

I paused for a second. My nose was itching. “You know how we had to memorize the Ten Commandments in Catechism?” I said.

“Yes, but eventually you’ll know them simply because they’re God’s will for us.”

“You know the fifth one?”

“Honor thy father and thy mother,” Father Maurice bragged.
“Yes. Can I ask you a question about that one?”

“Of course, my child.”

“How am I supposed to honor my father and my mother if they’re not there?”

“What do you mean they’re not there?” he said. I could hear him tapping his foot on the wooden floor.

“They’re not there. My father left when I was one, and my mother left when I was eight. I live with my Grandmother.”

“Well, I’m sure there’s...” the priest didn’t finish his comment. He sounded confused.

I crossed my arms and waited for an answer. Then I said, “You see, I don’t believe in the fifth Commandment.”

The priest cleared his throat. “My child, God works in mysterious ways. He has a plan for each one of us. It’s not your place to question His ways.”

“But Tia Clara said a true Catholic has to live by the Ten Commandments. Maybe I shouldn’t be having my First Communion. I can’t be a true Christian.”

“She said that?”

“Yes.”

“Well, she didn’t mean it. Listen,” Father Maurice said and took a deep breath. “What Clara meant is that a person should understand the Commandments
and apply them to their own life. So, you should honor your Grandmother because she’s responsible for you.”

“But my Grandmother isn’t religious.”

“That’s ok, my child. As long as you are.”

“I don’t think I want to be, though. My sister is an atheist.”

At this point, the priest must have lost his temper. His voice became loud, and the tapping got faster.

“Child, you’re having your First Communion tomorrow. You’ve made it this far, and I’m sure you’re ready for it. Don’t tell anyone about this. Just believe me: you are a good Catholic. Now, let me give you your penance. I’m already running late.”

“Ok.” I shook my head but I didn’t think Father Maurice could see me.

“May God forgive you, my child. Now go and say three Our Fathers and five Hail Marys. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.”

I crossed myself.

“Go in peace,” he said.

“Thank you, Father.”

I stood up and walked to a pew where no one else was sitting. Five other kids knelt close to the front, so I chose a place in the back. I crouched down and repented for my sins, saying my prayers with Catholic speed, the method Marisa
and I practiced every night when we prayed:

*Our Father Who Art In Hallowed Be Daily Bread Into Temptation Deliver Us From Evil Amen.*

I wondered what penance the priest had imposed on the other kids. How did he know how much each sin cost? I imagined the worst case scenario involved several

*The Apostle’s Creed or Hail, Holy Queen.*

As I left the cathedral, Tia Clara said, “I think you’ll have a swell day tomorrow.” She held my hand. “And don’t forget to fast. You’ll have to eat all you can tonight.”

“Ok.” I thought about how much I would eat that evening.

My Grandmother had planned a party to celebrate my First Communion. She thought it might be best to have it the day before, instead of the same day as the ceremony. Even though she didn’t believe in religion, Grandma never missed the chance to throw parties. She had spent the afternoon frying Portuguese codfish cakes and cheese balls. She had also bought a two-layer cake with wheat sprigs and grapes on top of the icing.

When I got back from Confession, I could smell rosemary, olive oil, and crushed garlic. My aunts and four of our neighbors sat outside, drinking. Several cables hung between the house and the trees; the small lights hanging over the yard made it seem like a completely different place. Though several conversations were taking place, I could hear Tia Clara’s voice over everyone else’s. She was laughing.
Marisa walked up to me and placed an arm around my shoulders. “Did you have a good Confession?” she asked, imitating Tia Clara's voice.

“Yes,” I said, increasing my pace towards the house to avoid more questions.

My grandmother was finishing up the cheese balls, and when I passed by on my way to my room, she called me into the kitchen. “How was it, Lily?”

“It was ok.” I grabbed a slice of pineapple Grandma had arranged on a tray. “It was really boring, I thought.”

My grandmother burst out laughing, and said, “Oh really? What did you expect, dear?”

“Well, I didn’t really know what to say.” I chewed the pineapple, letting the juice drip down my chin. “I mean, I don’t think I had any sins to confess.”

“What did you tell the priest, then?”

“Nothing important.” I took another slice of pineapple. “It doesn’t matter.”

Grandma grinned and gave me a hug.

Marisa came into the kitchen holding several empty glasses, and said, “Tia Clara is asking for another beer, but I don’t think she should drink anymore, Grandma.”

“What?” Grandma turned around and wiped her hands on her apron, “Why not?”

Marisa looked solemnly at both of us. “I think she’s drunk.”
“She’s not drunk, she’s just happy,” Grandma said. “And she can handle her liquor.”

Marisa shrugged. She opened the fridge and grabbed a bottle, then touched my shoulder with her other hand. “Hey, why don’t you come outside? Your friends are here already. They’re asking about you.”

I grabbed two more slices of pineapple, then walked out with my sister.

Once outside, I saw Carol and Andrea, my two best friends, waiting next to the gate. They were both ten like me, but they went to public school. That meant they weren’t having their First Communion until the following year, along with other public school students. Carol was taller than I was, and Andrea was really chubby. Grandmother had told me not to talk about it, even though Andrea could hardly keep up with Carol and me when we played outside. We moved to the side of the house, where we could run around without bothering the adults. Even though it was my party, there was an unspoken rule about how Marisa and I should behave when we had visitors. It was common knowledge that the two of us would take the blame if someone fell and broke an arm or leg, or if one of my Grandma’s plants suddenly displayed broken stems or slaughtered leaves.

We were getting ready to jump rope when I heard my Grandma calling us to the front of the house.

“Time for cake,” she said.
My friends and I ran to the front of the house. Grandma was standing by the wooden table where the cake had been placed, and with a swift motion of her right hand, she directed us to the garden hose. Carol went first, and then Andrea. One by one we washed our hands and ran back to the cake. I was the last one in line, and by the time I got back to the front of the house, everyone had gathered around the table.

Tia Clara stood on a chair placed right in front of the cake, which is where I was supposed to be. She held a half-empty bottle of beer and swung her other hand in the air. "Lily, come here," she said.

I moved towards her slowly, hoping she would change her mind.

She grabbed my shoulders and made me face the cake. She looked around and said, "Can I have your attention, please?" Her voice was loud and the words stuck to each other.

Everyone quieted down. I looked around for my sister, and found her standing against the gate, with her hands on her cheeks. She shook her head with a terrified look on her face. Grandma stepped down from the terrace and walked to the edge of the table, where she could see things better.

"I just want to say that I am very happy you could come and celebrate Lily’s First Communion." She looked around to make sure everyone was listening. "I can feel God’s presence right here today," she continued, taking a swig from the bottle. She set it down on the table. "And he’s telling me we must sing in his Glory!"
I looked at Marisa. She had a smirk on her face.

Tia Clara held her hands in the air for a few seconds, her index fingers pointing forward, as if she were waiting for the next set of instructions from God. She took a loud, deep breath and traced two invisible 'U's with each of her hands. Then she began, "Derrama Senhor."

The smirk on Marisa's face disappeared. She moved toward me. Everyone remained silent.

"Derrama Senhor."

Grandma slowly walked to the table, and quietly said, "Clara, that's enough."

My Aunt refused to stop, giving Grandma a lightening bolt look. She closed her eyes and waved harder. "Derrama sobre nós o seu amor." She started clapping. I could see the veins in her neck dilating.

"How come you're not singing?" she said to everyone.

Carol and Elise started giggling.

"Derrama Senhor," she started over.

At this point my Grandma lost her patience and stomped towards my aunt, her gray eyes raging. "I said that's enough, Clara!" She reached up to grab my aunt's hand, but Tia Clara noticed, and quickly pulled it away. With that she lost her balance and leaped forward, onto the table, her face landing sideways on the cake. The chair where she stood flung back, falling on my right foot. The round,
metal bar jabbed my big toe; a squiggly trace of blood dripped down to my flip-flop. I let out a cry, but it was muffled by the noise of my Aunt falling on the cake.

Marisa was standing behind me, so she grabbed my hand. She said everything would be ok. Grandma and one of my other aunts helped Tia Clara off the pile of wood and cake, and the four neighbors stood around in a small group, not knowing what to do.

"Party is over, people," Grandma said. Her face grew serious. "Time to go home."

Tia Clara wailed loudly as Grandma took her inside.

I sat on the edge of the terrace and watched my guests step through the gate, one by one. Marisa went inside the house, so when everyone had left, I started crying softly. I looked down at my bloody toe and wondered if I would still have to wear the horrid white, leather shoes to my First Communion. I remembered telling Tia Clara they didn’t fit me very well, but she promised I would never have to wear them on another occasion. I wished I didn't have to go to First Communion at all.

Marisa returned with a wad of cotton, gauze and tape, and a small bottle of antiseptic. She sat next to me and placed an arm around my shoulder. "Let’s see that cut," she said.

I lifted my leg and rested the heel of my foot on my sister’s lap. "Where's Tia Clara?" I asked.
"Grandma is having a talk with her, I think. They're in Grandma's room and the door is closed." Marisa wiped my toe, being careful not to cause me any more pain. Then she wrapped it with gauze, using tape to keep the bandage in place. When she finished, she reached over and kissed my forehead. "There, your toe is good as new." She held my hand and we stood up. "Come on, you have a big day tomorrow."

***

On the day of my First Communion, I woke up convinced it would be a glorious day. I was impressed at how fast everything happened. I got dressed and left for the church with Grandma and Tia Clara; they didn't say a word to each other. I joined the other kids in the parochial house next to the church, and we formed a line as rehearsed. When we started moving towards the Chapel entrance, I heard my stomach growling.

I stood in line waiting my turn. I was wearing an overpriced white dress made especially for the occasion, and the veil over my head was mandatory. The small, plastic cross on my rosary dangled from my left thumb, and I kept my hands cupped to show obedience to God's words. The smell of incense and burning wax was overwhelming. Looking around at my peers I remembered Tia Clara telling me this would be the happiest day of my life. She stood on the altar, deep into the hymn, swaying softly in her black dress. Even though her eyes were closed, I could
tell they were swollen from crying. Or maybe she was hungover. I couldn't really tell.

The lace cord tied around my chin to keep the veil from flying away made my face itch.

I was still not sure I believed everything they had taught me until that moment, in the traditional, private, and upper class Catholic School I attended my whole life. I was having my First Communion because Tia Clara said I had to. But I hoped by then I would have understood what it meant. I didn't. Maybe I should have told Father Maurice I couldn't go through with it. But it was too late. It was time for Communion.

I counted to three before taking each step, and every time I lifted my right foot off the ground, my toe throbbed with pain. It felt as if someone were hammering a nail right through my foot.

I watched the first few students walking back to their seats with their heads bowed in humility for receiving the body of Christ for the first time. I concentrated. One, two, three, step, throb. I moved closer to the altar where Father Maurice reverently held a golden chalice filled with red wine. Two altar boys stood motionless on either side of the priest: one held a smaller chalice full of Communion wafers, the other supported a small, golden plate and a white towel.

When it was my turn, I watched as Father Maurice took a host by the tip, dipped it in wine, and said, "The body of Christ."
I said "Amen," counted to three and took a step forward, but my foot tripped on the red mound of carpet that had been accumulating at the edge of the altar. My foot throbbed and I reached to Father Maurice's hands to steady myself. The drenched wafer flew off to the side, and the altar boy tried to catch it in the small golden plate. Father Maurice looked on in horror. The boy, knowing how sacred that host was, grabbed it with his other hand and shoved it in his own mouth. He thought he'd saved the day, but when I looked to the side I saw Tia Clara with her hands on her hips, her face redder than I'd ever seen. I squared my shoulders waiting for her lightening bolts.

Father Maurice waved me to the side, so I started walking back to my seat with nothing in my mouth, my head bowed in shame. I knelt down and pretended to be praying, but all I could think about was the tantrum Tia Clara would throw, and the lecture she would give me for ruining my First Communion. I wondered what would happen to the altar boy.

After the ceremony, people gathered outside the school chapel and took pictures. The school principal shook hands with other kids' parents. I didn't appear in the Communion group picture.

Grandma told me not to worry about it, but I was afraid of Tia Clara's reaction. When she was done with the pictures she walked towards Grandma and me, then she placed both hands on my shoulders. She didn't seem mad at me about
the whole thing. She lifted my head and said, “It’s not as bad as it seems, Lily. You can have your First Communion next year, if you want.”

“Will I have to repeat Catechism?” I asked.

“No, dear. You’ve already learned everything. You were my best student.”

Tia Clara smiled and kissed me on the cheek. “Do you want to do it again next year?”

“I’ll think about it,” I said.

“Great. Now let’s go home,” Grandma said.

I held Tia Clara’s hand and grabbed Grandma’s hand too.

Later I told Tia Clara I didn’t want to have my First Communion.
I was thirteen the first time I saw death. Even though I didn’t attend my Grandmother’s funeral, on the day she passed away I recognized how much my hands resembled my Grandmother’s. Except for the wrinkles and thick blue veins that bulged on the top of hers, and her thick, yellow fingernails, our hands looked exactly the same. Our fingers were similarly shaped, thick at the bottom and skinny at the top, and we were both double-jointed.

***

Grandma Amelia steps with bare feet on the coral reef steps extending from the beach into the ocean. She lifts the dress draping her ankles, and increases her pace, as though she is late for an appointment she can’t afford to miss. Her white-almost-yellow hair, which she usually keeps in a bun, is unrestrained and it wavers with the breeze; the sun is setting behind my grandmother and the horizon in front of her is orange and pink, with spread out clouds forming patches on the canvas of the sky. I stand on the sand and call her name, but she doesn’t look back, dancing as she moves farther from me, further into the water on the trail of reef that reaches as far as my eyes can see.

I call her name.

She keeps on walking.

I woke up suddenly, my heart beating fast, ready to escape through my mouth. I took a deep breath and sat up on my bed, then looked at the clock on the
seven fifteen A.M. Even though the curtains were still drawn, patches of light came in through the gaps in the corners, forming a glowing frame around the window. I leaned over the edge of my bed to check if Marisa was still asleep, but her bed was empty.

It was strange for my sister to already be up since she usually slept late on weekends. I jumped down from my bed and put on my flip-flops, then opened the bedroom door. The smell of coffee came in from the kitchen, but I heard no voices in the dining room. The radio, which my aunts always kept on, was silent. I thought everyone must have been outside. I headed down the hall toward the kitchen, but before I got there I saw Tia Clara and Tia Vera flush out of my Grandmother’s bedroom, which was at the end of the hallway, both blank-faced and biting their nails.

“Good morning,” I said and passed the kitchen, but no one replied.

Two seconds later Tia Delia appeared on the doorframe. She was wearing jeans and a T-shirt, her hair was messy, and sweat trickled down her forehead. She carried my grandmother’s tiny body like a baby. Grandma’s head rested against Tia Delia’s chest and her eyes were closed.

“Get out of the way,” Tia Delia screamed at me, then turned into the kitchen and out the backdoor. Tia Clara and Tia Vera followed.

I felt my heart accelerating as I ran outside towards the gate where Marisa and Tia Ana were standing. Back then it was useless to call an ambulance in case of
an emergency, so my sister had to run out to the avenue that was a block from our house and hail a cab. The red Volkswagen Fox was parked in front of the house, its engine running, the driver standing next to the back door, smoking a cigarette. He put it out when Tia Delia reached the gate, then tried to help her, but she said she didn’t need it. Tia Delia laid my grandmother on the backseat, then sat next to her, placing Grandma’s head on her lap. Tia Ana, who was also wearing jeans and a T-shirt, sat on the passenger’s seat, and the driver ran to his side.

“We’ll call when we know more,” Tia Ana said, trying to reassure the rest of us who stood on the sidewalk; Marisa held my hand, Tia Elise hugged Tia Vera, and Tia Clara started crying.

We went back inside, but nobody spoke to one another. I followed my sister to our bedroom, where we made our beds and changed clothes. Marisa set me on the desk chair and began braiding my hair. I stared down at my hands. “Is she gone?” I asked.

Marisa paused for a second then continued to braid my hair, though slower than before. She took a deep breath. “Tia Ana is supposed to call from the hospital,” she said.

“But she’s already gone, isn’t she?”

My sister didn’t reply. I didn’t ask again. I had to obey my family’s unspoken agreement to leave the dead behind, as we would the past, even though it was painful; a minor discomfort was preferable to ghosts roaming the house. Just
like my aunts had never told us any stories about our grandfather, or never mentioned my mother’s name after she had left us, now we too were supposed to keep the memory of our grandmother to ourselves, and never share it with other people. It was as if speaking my Grandmother’s name would interfere with her fate. Similarly, as was a common custom in Brazil, my family believed that once the spirit had left the body, that body had to be buried on the same day. There was no need to embalm our dead; keeping a person’s body several days after its death might also cause that person’s spirit to linger around those left behind.

I wanted to cry, but the tears would not come.

I stood up and left the bedroom, then moved around the house slowly, watching my aunts convince themselves that Grandma Amelia had passed away, that their mother was gone. Tia Elise had stayed in the kitchen where she made eggs and toast that nobody ate, and then she warmed the milk and poured cup after cup of coffee, which she drank steadily, while staring into the kitchen walls. Tia Vera picked up a broom and swept the hallway, the dining room, the living room, even though none of them needed to be cleaned. Tia Clara sat in the living room, curled up on the couch, weeping. But they didn’t say a word to each other.

Our house was so quiet I thought I could hear everyone else breathing.

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Later that day, my aunts, my sister, and I waited for the doctor in the hospital lounge. My sister, who was seventeen at the time, sat next to Tia Elise and spoke
softly in her ear, trying to console her. She had been crying ever since we had received Tia Ana’s phone call, telling us to go to the hospital. Tia Delia’s eyes were swollen from crying, her face weary, unable to hide her sadness. Even though Tia Clara was two years older, Tia Delia had always been the one in charge of making decisions for the family. So, by the time we had gotten to the hospital, Tia Delia had already contacted a funeral home and arranged for Grandma’s funeral, which meant a hearse would transport the casket from the hospital to the cemetery, where the wake would also take place.

A tall, lanky, gray-haired man wearing a white lab coat came in through the door and nodded at us, surprised to see seven women waiting, but no men. He carried a clipboard, which he checked, and then said, “Are you here for Amelia?”

“Yes,” Tia Delia replied.

“I’m so sorry for your loss.” The doctor paused and gave us a sympathetic look. “As you know, she passed in her sleep after her heart stopped beating, but I guarantee she suffered no pain.”

Tia Elise whimpered, and my sister pulled her closer.

“That isn’t uncommon for people her age,” the doctor continued, “and I’m sure Amelia knew she was loved until the very end.”

“We know,” Tia Delia said in an almost angry tone. “So, what do we do now?” She got up and approached the doctor. “I mean, what’s the procedure?”
The doctor looked around at each of us, and then cleared his throat. “Well, actually, I need to talk to you about that.”

Tia Delia crossed her arms and Tia Vera stood up.

“The body has been taken to the mortuary, following the hospital proceedings. However...” The doctor paused once again. He looked around at each of us, then turned to Tia Delia and said, “It is not our responsibility to prepare the body for burial.”

“What does that mean?” Tia Delia said. She scratched her forehead. “I contacted a funeral home. They are bringing the casket here now.”

“That’s fine. What I meant was,” the doctor looked down at his clipboard, then flipped a page, and said, “one of you will have to dress the body.”

I looked around at my aunts and my sister; all of them faced Tia Delia, who suddenly burst into tears. Her breathing became heavy, and she sat down, covering her face with both hands. Tia Vera rushed to her side and patted her shoulders.

“Can’t a nurse or an orderly do it?” Tia Clara asked, her voice trembling.

“I’m really sorry, that’s not our job,” the doctor replied. He looked at his watch and continued, “I’ll give you some time to figure it out, and when you’ve made a decision, please tell someone over there at nurse station and they’ll tell you what to do next.” He began walking toward the door, where he paused and said, “If you have any further questions, don’t hesitate to give me a call.” Then he pulled a
white business card from his coat pocket and extended his arm to Tia Ana, who was closest to him. She held the card and the doctor left the room.

Everyone remained silent and all I heard was Tia Delia sobbing. Tia Vera still stood next to her, running her hands through Tia Delia’s hair. Tia Elise rested her head on Marisa’s lap, Tia Clara paced the room, and Tia Ana stared at the card the doctor had given her.

I focused on the pale green tiles around the room, trying to count how many of them it took to cover a single wall, but I kept losing count. Then I counted the dark brown chairs that lined the walls and the center of the room; forty chairs total. And finally, I counted the women in my family, five aunts, two girls, seven of us learning to grieve. I wondered what it would be like not to hear my Grandmother’s laughter out on the terrace, or not watching her care for her flowers, or having to play cards with myself, because everyone else was always too busy to talk to me.

I stood up and said, “I’ll do it.” My aunts turned to me, but they didn’t say anything. “I’ll dress Grandma.”

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I followed the nurse in silence, off the elevator, down the long, empty hallway, then turned left into the hospital mortuary. The nurse paused at the wide swing doors and looked through the glass. Then she pushed through. “This way,” she said, and headed towards the center of the room, where a large, dark, plastic bag sat on top of a marble slab, on a tiled concrete counter. The nurse cut the seal at the
edge of the bag then opened it. “Is this your grandmother?” she asked. Then she compared the information on the small rectangular tag hanging from my grandmother’s big toe, and the notes on her clipboard.

“Yes,” I said, recognizing my grandmother’s face, which looked peaceful, as though she were just sleeping. She was wearing a light blue hospital robe, tied by strings on either side of her body, by her waist. “This is my grandmother.” I felt as if my lungs had become disconnected from the rest of my body, and I could no longer breathe. My stomach turned, but I had to continue. I couldn’t let my aunts down.

“I’ll wait for you outside, ok?” The nurse said, then patted my hand and walked out the door.

I stepped closer to the counter, then set the duffel bag that Tia Vera had given me next to my grandmother. My grandmother lay on her back, eyes shut, hair pulled back. Her jaw was clenched, but the muscles on her cheeks seemed relaxed. On her lips was a humble, almost imperceptible smile. I traced the lines on her forehead, below her eyes, down her cheeks and neck. Her skin was warmer than I had expected.

As long as I could remember, my grandmother had been skinny, but at the time of her death she weighed ninety pounds. I had never really looked closely at her arms and legs, but now that she lay completely still, her flesh seemed to drape her bones. She looked so fragile it made me want to cry.
I untied the hospital robe, which was slack and too big for Grandma, then lifted it over her head. All she wore under the robe was her usual white, cotton underwear. I had never seen her body naked, and she looked even smaller. I opened the duffel bag and pulled out a dark blue dress with buttons down the front, the same one Grandma had worn three months before on New Year’s eve, a pair of black leather shoes, and a neatly folded white linen shroud, which would cover her body once it was in the casket.

I looked at my Grandmother’s face once again, though I knew that no matter how much I moved her arms or legs, she wouldn’t wake up. I laid the dress over her body, then touched her face. I tried to move her left arm, but it was so stiff I was afraid it would break. So I passed her left hand through the slit, then pulled the dress toward her body. I thought about rolling her onto her stomach, so I could get the dress to her right side, but the counter wasn’t wide enough. I took a deep breath, held her shoulder blades, and lifted her toward me, so her head would rest on my chest. Her hair smelled like lavender, her favorite perfume. I moved the dress behind her back, over to the right side, then laid my grandmother back down. I passed her right hand through the slit and then pulled both sides of the dress together, making sure the buttons lined up correctly. I started at the collar, then buttoned the dress all the way down to my Grandmother’s knees, where the dress ended. Then I put on her shoes, which slid right on, as though they were too big for her.
I remembered Tia Delia’s instruction to remove all jewelry from my Grandmother's body, even though she never wore anything other than earrings and her wedding ring. I took off her silver earrings and stuck them in my pocket, then slid off the wedding ring from her left finger. She had worn the plain, golden band even after my grandfather had died.

I put my hand down over my grandmother’s, and then I noticed how much her hands resembled mine. They were the older version of mine, but more used, wiser. Though the veins on top of my hands didn’t bulge like the ones on hers did, I could see the blue lines just below my skin. I thought that maybe some day, as I got older and lived more, my veins would also pop out of my hands.

I put my grandmother’s ring on my finger, and then I finally cried.

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When my aunts and sister returned from the burial, I was sitting on my grandmother’s rocking chair, which had never left the terrace. The sun had already set, even though it was only six thirty, and I had left the living room and terrace lights on.

Tia Delia, who was the first one to climb the marble steps on our terrace, said out loud, but seemingly to herself, "What do we do now, Dona Amelia?” Her voice lingered on my grandmother’s name, but she walked into the house. My other aunts followed in silence.
My sister sat on the floor, next to me. She huddled her knees and rocked herself softly, back and forth. “What do we do now, Dona Amelia,” Marisa echoed. Then she looked into my eyes. Tears streaked her face. “What do we do now, Lily?”

I took a deep breath, then folded my hands across my stomach.

“Who will take care of us now that she’s gone?” Marisa continued.

I got up from the rocking chair and sat on the floor, then pulled my sister closer to me. I placed her head on my left shoulder, then ran my hand through her hair. “Hush, Marisa. It’ll be fine.” I suddenly felt responsible for my sister, as though I was the oldest. “Grandma’s work here is done.” I lifted Marisa’s chin with the palm of my hand and smiled. “Look at us. We’re all grown,” I said and nodded, which made Marisa laugh.

“I’m grown,” she said. “But you’re thirteen,” she teased.

We both giggled.

Then we heard the coffeepot whistle: Tia Elise had probably started preparing dinner.
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