

*Reconocida*

“*Me a estado olvidando cosas,*” my mother says over the phone. She says it like it’s incidental, like it’s weather.

I frankly can’t think of what she has to forget. The longer I’ve been away from home, the quainter it’s become in my mind. With one less person around, things must be simpler. Keeping house must be easier. Wake up, pack lunch, cook dinner, serve, sleep, repeat. What’s there to forget? What kind of weather?

She responds: “*Como cuando sales del trabajo o empiezan tus clases, el número de tu tía, o lo que comí.*”

She needs to know these things to know when to call. She calls when I wake up, in the afternoon after I get out of class, during dinner, and once more before I go to sleep. If I wake up early to take a shower, I make sure to let her know, so she doesn’t call when I can’t answer.

Back in my first year of college, I was the one who called. Curled into myself on the top bunk, her voice in my ear, telling me what time she’d woken up, what dish she’d prepared for Dad and Teddy, or what route she’d walked around town that day. I always knew when, what, and where before she’d rattle them off.

I’d close my eyes and imagine myself back in our room at home. I could pretend the phone wasn’t even there. I was small again.

Sophomore year, now I’ve grown some backbone, moved into my first apartment, and she’s memorized exactly when to call.

Operating the register, I overhear students just like me who have no shame in walking around with Mommy in their ear, narrating their lives and listening to someone else’s. Telling makes it real. Someone else in the world with a record of what jacket you’d chosen that day or

what you're nervous to ask your boss about confirms you're alive to make those choices and feel those fears.

Once I'm out of uniform, back to being one of the students clinging to voices through their speakers, I realize she's right. Three missed calls during my shift. Missed at uneven intervals. Like she's guessing.

"*Mis clases siempre cambian,*" I reassure her. She doesn't need to know everything. If she forgets, I'll just remind her. "*No te preocupes. ¿Se te ha olvidado algo más?*"

She lets out a long sigh on the other end of the line. She believes me. The sound of her breath hums and tickles the inside of my ear.

"*No, nada más. Nada importante.*"

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"*Plas-ti-lina.*"

My lips stretched around my teeth to make room for every letter and syllable. "*Mas-ti-car. Masti-car. Masticar, masticar, masticar.*"

As a seven year-old, I used to love playing with Spanish, words like marbles in my mouth. If I said a word enough times, in different configurations, I could turn Spanish into complete gibberish. Then I'd go silent for a moment, come back to the word, find it reverted to its original tongue, pick a new word, and squish that one apart.

"*Martha, que dices?*"

We had the house to ourselves, and it was lunchtime. Mami washed the dishes. Her hands in the sink were wrinkled and spotted with moles. I have no memory of them ever not being wrinkled. "*Que dices?*" she repeated.

"*Nose.*"

“ ‘Nose?’ ”

“*Si. ‘No se.’* Nose.”

I caught her grin when I wouldn’t stop giggling. I knew my joke was funny.

English was like a secret, a level I unlocked she couldn’t. I could slip into a secret reserve of words she didn’t understand and confess my cache of secrets out loud. I once chanted “I cheated, I cheated,” in front of her, having looked over at my neighbor’s times tables in class that day. She didn’t yell at me, but she *tsk*’ed like she could hear the bad in what I’d done.

Mami shut off the water, and in the middle of a new round of “*Canica, ca-ni-ca, canicacanica*—” she whistled at me.

“*¿Quieres una paleta?*” she asked. She opened the freezer and pulled out two strawberry coconut popsicles.

Eagerly, I said, “*Si, si, si*—”

I cupped my hand over my mouth, stopping myself before *Si* didn’t mean *Si* anymore.

After we stained our lips and tongue red, Mami jumped on the phone with my *tía* and started working the house. I worked the house in my own way. I didn’t sweep or wipe the dust off the shelves. I traced my fingers along the grout tiles in the bathroom. I took Papi’s shirts out of his dresser and refolded them, crisper than I found them. Every line and shirt logged.

Anything to pass the time. To memorize where I was.

I knew Teddy's room the least. Privacy had not yet been taught to me, so I wandered in and went to work. I counted the hats on his shelf. I smelled the cologne samples he'd cut from magazines on his desk. They tickled my nose and reminded me of rubbing alcohol. I opened his dresser's top drawer and found a square picture of a girl with straight, auburn hair, smiling, posed in front of a blue background. I didn't recognize her and returned the picture where I found it.

I never stopped to listen whether Mami was coming upstairs. I was not afraid to be caught. Afternoons were all downstairs: vacuum, sit on the couch, watch shows, wipe down kitchen. If Teddy had known I was there, maybe he would have been upset, but afternoons meant he and Papi were at work. If anyone had told me to stop, I would have been confused. I loved my brother. I couldn't love him if I didn't know where he kept his shirts or what his handwriting looked like.

That night, after Mami and I ate dinner, we laid in bed waiting for Papi and Teddy to come home. It had been a successful day of collection. Mami knew exactly what needed to be thrown out, cooked, or who needed to be called. I knew the amount of steps it took to walk from one end of the living room rug to the other. I knew how many spare reading glasses Papi kept in the second bottom drawer on his desk in case he ever asked me to fetch him a pair.

I practiced knowing like she did by folding shirts or counting her earrings, but it was something else entirely to understand someone's secret even if they said it in another language. She knew how to call someone on the phone out of the blue and talk for an hour. I knew five phone numbers by heart.

Papi and Teddy's arrival would signal dinner for the second time. Mami would serve, then we'd sneak back to bed while the boys ate and dripped sweat after a long day's work. By nine o'clock, Papi's footsteps coming upstairs would mark time for Mama to go downstairs one last time to wash second dishes and second clean the kitchen. Papi would crawl into the bed next to me and fall asleep right away. I'd kiss his cheek while he slept and hope he would feel it. Teddy might pop in to blow a raspberry on my neck, and I wouldn't see him until second dinner the next day.

I would try my hardest to stay awake for her, but sometimes I just couldn't crack it. When her work would be finished and she'd find me still awake, she'd *tsk* and hug me until morning.

In a few years, Papi would get better-paying clients. The three of us would stop sharing a bed, we'd all get to have dinner together, and Teddy would get to watch me grow up.

Until all this came to pass, Mami and I laid in bed with our eyes closed, waiting.

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For years, the best thing I could've brought home to my family was a degree. That changes on Thanksgiving of my junior year when I bring home Peter. Aunts, uncles, cousins, and second cousins eye him and poke my ribs, raising their brows.

*"Oh, tu guerito es cute,"* Mom says.

Peter does stick out, but less so for his complexion and more for his willingness to personally greet everyone in the house, which I can't even do.

"What are the chances I get invited back next year and you don't?" he jokes.

"High."

When I asked Dad if Peter could stay at the house for Thanksgiving, he said it was unacceptable. Then I told him I had already bought our tickets.

Dad puts on the overeager air of a host who suddenly has a lot to prove. I hold his hand when he asks Peter about his major, I pinch it when he asks whether he's ever gone to church.

Family members I haven't seen in years are packed to the brim in our living room. Folding tables are crammed in front of couches and the stairs. There's no getting upstairs to use the bathroom without announcing to half the cousins you need to go and hope they have mercy on you.

One by one as folks walks in, they shake Peter's hand, kiss me, but some take extra time with my mom, thanking her for her hospitality and embracing her. Knees knock against each other under the tables no one can get up from without everyone else rising to make room for you, but no one clicks their tongue or grumbles at the lack of space in her home.

There are a little too many people in the house than I'm comfortable with. More people know more than I'd like them to.

On the phone call with my Dad about Peter, he had said "Your mom. We're keeping an eye on her but leaving her a little room. They'd all want as much time as possible too."

"What does she want?" I had asked.

"Just enough room."

Neither of us had waited for permission. I hadn't been brave or dumb enough to come up with an explanation for why I felt I was even entitled to give it, and instead try to understand. Knowing is loving, after all.

I give my seat up to Mom and sit on Peter's lap, whispering English translations of my family's conversations into his ear. I close my eyes to the overlap of voices and translate whatever hits my ears first.

*She never brings anything, and the one time I ask her to, it's store bought. I could've done that.*

*Tell him to move the car so Tina can get in.*

*When we were kids, Tia made pink tamales. Why's no one asked her to make those again?*

*Paty, tell your daughter she's eating her boyfriend's ear.*

Everyone laughs, and I blush. I'm too cowardly to face their jabs and instead hide in Peter's shoulder. Peter isn't, though, and laughs at me along with them. I don't mind. I feel my mom's hand pat mine reassuringly.

*"Pues si lo quiere,"* she says in my defense.

My mom usually mans the kitchen with the *tías*, serving plates, wrapping leftovers, and eating last themselves, proud of their handiwork. This year, Dad takes her place. I had watched my mom prepare and serve my dad's plate at every meal, holiday, or family birthday my whole life. It's sweet and satisfying to witness the tables turn.

Dad's good at knowing things too. He knows she wants a double portion of salad, no meat, and three tortillas. Her plate is quickly cleaned.

*"Ma, dame el plato,"* I say. *"Te lo tiro."*

She waves my hand away.

*"Yo puedo,"* she insists.

“*Es okay,*” I insist right back. She stands with the plate, proving she can get her own seconds.

Peter’s doing a good job with the family. They certainly aren’t making it difficult for him when a cousin or cousin’s wife is on their way for seconds, offering him another drink or to take his trash. Peter doesn’t have to want for anything, and neither does my mom. My dad’s sisters are all in the kitchen, packed like hens, talking smack about their husbands, and she’s next to me, being waited on and complimented on what a comfortable home she’s made for a party. So many hands reaching out, they take up any and all space she might have used to extend her hand to us.

“*Te agarro mas,*” I offer again.

“*Martha!*”

I don’t know how long she’s been sitting or the last time she’s been asked for something. But it must be long enough that she’s starting to notice the family holding her just a bit too delicately. Or maybe it’s just me. We’ve all come to see her but not to ask anything of her. Kind, but not honest. The house doesn’t go quiet, just the table. Not uncomfortable, just ready. It isn’t a yell. It isn’t angry.

“*Peter, quieres algo?*” she asks. “*Otro chocolate?*”

I clear my throat and translate for him.

“Yes, one more, thank you,” he responds.

She understands and leaves, victorious. I find my dad, tell him to switch places, and let her work the kitchen.

“More room,” I tell him.

Teddy and Peter try establishing a sort of bond over some sport’s team, movie franchise, or piece of technology they can agree or disagree on. Peter doesn’t play soccer, Teddy doesn’t

watch a lot of thrillers, and neither of them really care about what cell phone or laptop the other owns. They've both seen *Star Wars* and start from there. I grip Peter's hand, letting him know I appreciate him for trying.

Teddy pokes me in the back which means it's my turn to spend time with his Val. I've seen Val come around for the holidays for the past two years. Her hair's black, not auburn. I find her by the doorway between kitchen and party, hands behind her back, ready and eager to step into the kitchen with the women if they need her. They don't seem to yet. I catch her up on school, and she catches me up on what I've missed around the house. Last time I spoke to Val was in the summer, when she and Teddy were planning on moving into her apartment. She had practically been bouncing on her feet with excitement when she told me her plans. Now, Teddy still hasn't moved out and her feet are firmly on the ground.

Val's from the Bay. She likes to hear how I've acclimated to the weather since I started school there and what bus routes I'd gotten lost on. She asks if I've visited Tiberon or taken Peter to dinner at Lena's. I haven't, and I don't recognize the streets she asks me about, so once it's clear I can't bring home back for her the way she'd like, she drops the subject.

"Teddy and I were talking about looking for our own place." This perks her up.

"Nearby?" I ask.

"Maybe. Doesn't have to be."

Teddy thanks me when I run into him at another table.

"She gets shy," he says. "Thinks people don't want to talk to her."

"You're moving out?"

"No. Why?"

"She brought it up."

“We talked about it. But, I mean, *now* I’m not.”

“Right.”

Teddy’s not going anywhere, and suddenly I question my round-trip plane ticket. There hadn’t been a second of hesitation when I bought it. It was time to visit home, not return. “Do you think they like Peter?”

Teddy scoffs.

“Yeah, *he’s* not shy.”

After every guest makes a point to thank my mom personally and hug and kiss her goodbye, the house goes to bed. I kiss Peter goodnight, apologize for the air mattress, and go upstairs.

My mom agrees to sleep on the side of our bed pressed against the wall. Dad’s snores from the futon next to us don’t keep her from falling asleep, but I’ve lost the ear for it. and I’m wide awake. I feel her put her hand under my shirt and scratch my back. She scratches just long enough until she can sneakily pick at the bumps on my back, thinking I won’t notice. She scratches tiny pimples off my skin one by one, feeling just by touch, until the sting of her fingernails makes me flinch. I hold out as long as I can for her, but the stings and the snores nag at me so much, I weakly protest.

“Ma!”

It’s not a yell, not angry. I flip face to face with her, both our eyes closed.

“Peter *te gusta*?” I ask.

She hums. I hear her head nod.

“*Habla mucho.*”

My dad grunts for us to be quiet, half asleep the second he'd dropped into bed. I laugh.

*“Si, si le gusta hablar. Más que yo.”*

Sometimes Peter talks more than I want to. He can be so charming to everyone, it makes you wonder what's for everyone and what's just for you. But he's in my house, sleeping on an inflatable mattress 2,700 miles from his own Thanksgiving in Paterson, and he let my family laugh at him.

When I wake up in the middle of the night, I kiss my mom on the cheek and go to the bathroom. I tiptoe downstairs and fall asleep with him. My mom, the first one to wake up every morning, says when she came downstairs, my hand was underneath his shirt against his back.

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The dial tone in my ear has been ringing so long, I think no one will pick up. Peter and our friends are back at the table calculating a tip for the meal. There's a tiny chocolate cake made more of frosting than pastry in the center of the table. The waiters delivered it, lit ablaze, singing a rapid tempo “Happy Birthday” for me—them and me wishing for it to pass quickly. The candles I blew out are still in it. A 22, written in red icing, has a chunk of its second 2 gouged out of it. There's only enough cake for one, but I can't eat more.

The tone cuts.

“Martha?”

“Val! Is my mom there?” I know she is, because I can hear the TV playing in the living room—whistles and male commentators. Sports are on instead of Spanish talk shows. Sundays mean Dad and Teddy are home, and Teddy watches his game downstairs. He's waiting for lunch to be served. “She's cooking?”

“Yeah,” Val responds. I still got it. “We are, together. Happy birthday.” I lock eyes with Peter. He’s still smiling. He doesn’t say “Hurry” but part of me wants to hurry just for him not rushing me.

“Thanks. Can I talk to her?” A heavy door slides shut over the phone, and the TV goes silent.

“We’re about to serve. Maybe after. Where you at?” Val’s in the backyard. She left her alone.

“I’m having brunch with Peter. He invited all our friends, and they surprised me with a little get together for my birthday.”

If I call Mom there’s a chance she’ll set her phone down, step away for a moment, and not return for hours, so I’ve just started calling Val.

“That’s nice of him,” Val says.

“It’s okay, I guess.” Why did I say it like that? “No, it’s nice.” Val doesn’t respond. We don’t talk about where she and Teddy go or how they spend their time, but I don’t really talk to her about Peter either. I think we both know this is just another one of those conversations held in the “in-between.”

I don’t doubt Teddy’s a good partner. I just don’t have any reason to confirm he is either. Up and working by 6 AM. Back home by 8 PM, at the earliest. But we all make efforts no one sees.

“I just wanted to say hi,” I say. “I have to go soon, but can I talk to her?”

“Can you call after? She’s in her steps. As soon as she’s done, and we’re all eating. That’s prime time.” I’m interrupting. This is what happens when I call.

“What ‘steps’?”

“On Sundays? Lately it’s been steps are alarm, then stretches—no, it’s packing breakfast, umm, Bible, we go walking, nap, and right now lunch. Later, we go shopping. Sometimes even I forget the order, but she’s good about it. Except the walking. We’re just supposed to walk to that park on Polk and back, but sometimes she wants to walk as far as—”

“Glenora, yeah, I know.”

“But we all eat and talk for a little while at the table, so you can call then, and that would work.”

Some of our friends at the table get up to leave. Peter thanks them for coming on our behalf. I wave and try to put all my “Thank you’s” and “I love you’s” and “I’m sorry’s” into one smile as they walk out the door. Now that some have left and I’m not moving, it’s only a matter of time before they all leave without me. Peter would stay and wait for me. I’m pretty sure.

“You left her alone just now?” I ask. Another pause. I don’t feel like putting in the work to convince myself it’s not uncomfortable.

“Teddy’s in the living room.”

“Well, if she’s used to you being there, I’ll let you go so you can get back to her.”

“We’re not being strict. Just consistent.”

“Okay. Tell her I called, and I’ll try again later.”

“Have fun being out with your friends.”

“Wait. Who’s going to be home when I show up tomorrow?”

“I will,” Val says. The TV sounds nearby again. “I’m always here.” And she hangs up.

Peter does stay.

“Do you want to pack this up to go?”

The red happy icing is too bright. The candle's too big for the tiny cake. It's all too harsh. I say no and run to catch our friends outside the restaurant to thank them for coming.

"I could tell you didn't like the party," Peter says later that night.

I call out for blouses, and he tosses options to me from our closet. My trip home is just for a weekend. When I was still in school, I went home for ever school break, never missed one. I lived by finish lines, and couldn't wait to go home. Home and sleeping in our bed was everything I wanted. Even when things got more noticeable and Mom didn't call me as much anymore, the logic was, "Martha's at school. She'll make time when she can." But school's over, and now I have no excuse.

"No, I did not."

Peter is great at throwing parties. It's how we met. He likes to scare people by telling them our relationship is built on lies. I had been dragged to my first college party at "someone chill's" house. Another friend of a friend. Or a housemate of a friend. Who hosted it wasn't important. The parties themselves were known to be boozy but not blasted. There was room to meet someone and enough room to lose them if you changed your mind.

He didn't attract a crowd or speak louder than someone should, so when he found me, alone, against a wall having less than a good time, nothing screamed "host."

"Who'd you come with?" I had asked.

"I came with the house when it was built. There was a university nearby, so I figured I should apply."

I didn't love him yet, so I didn't pretend to laugh.

"You look like you're having fun," he said.

“I am.”

“No, you’re not. You and me, let’s avoid lying to each other.”

“I don’t think you’d like that,” I said.

“Try me. Ask me something. Anything.”

A crash in the kitchen made me jump. Someone was on the floor with a chair overturned next to them. The guy giggled on his back. Others around him laughed too, which he had not anticipated and his drunk tears of laughter turned into unnecessary sobs.

“I think that’s my TA,” I said.

Someone helped him up.

“Come on, pal. No one’s laughing at you. You’re fine. You’re fine!” they said.

“I’m not drunk. I swear.”

“We know. Don’t worry.”

The guy carrying my drunk TA looked at me. “Peter! Don’t worry, man, I got this. He’ll be laughing again in no time.”

The boy in front of me—Peter—responded: “Thanks.”

I looked at Peter and instantly thought, *I can’t be a party host’s wife. That’s not me.* But he was standing at a respectful distance from me, and I found that attractive. Like blood cells covering a wound, the party filled itself with more smiling, more music.

“Are you going to check on that?” I asked.

“There’s a bigger emergency to attend to.” I was his emergency. “That doesn’t usually happen, but even he looked like he was having a better time than you.”

“Is no one allowed to have a bad time at one of your parties?”

“No one,” he replied.

“Show me, then.”

Not lying in the first hours of meeting someone can move things along pretty quickly. We were twenty, his hair was curly, his hands were soft, and I was giggling.

I throw back a green jumper for him to hang in our closet. Realistically, we’ve been forced to break our promise to never lie to each other since then. I’d ask if he remembered to buy me tampons on his way home from work. He’d say “Yes,” then pick up his keys and say “I’ll be right back.” He’d ask if I’ve ever seen this movie and I’d say “No,” because I know he wants to watch it. I’d give myself away when he wonders who wrote it and I answer correctly. The pact is now never to trick each other.

“Did *you* have a good time, at least?” I ask.

“Yes, because I threw a very good brunch.”

“Takeout, proposals, and surprise parties. All of them need approval beforehand.”

“I thought you could use some fun.”

“Now?”

“It’s not going like things are going to get better.” He tosses my denim jacket, but I don’t catch it. It lands on my suitcase of folded socks and three pairs of jeans. I’ve overpacked, as usual. The trip will hopefully be dull. At least at home, Dad and Teddy know better to leave all our birthdays alone for a while.

“Look,” I say. “I don’t have to like the party, but at least I wasn’t a dick about it.”

“What about right now?”

“I can’t be a dick in the privacy of our own home?”

The clock reads 12:35 A.M. Peter shuts the closet and gets into bed instead of arguing further. He knows me well enough to do that. I join him.

“Did you think of what to write about your mom?”

Peter’s mother is a nurse. A friend of hers in psychiatry told her that journaling was a healthy way to deal with loss, even in prolonged cases like mine. It helps to write about loved ones in ways that makes them more permanent. Happy memories, hypothetical conversations you might have, descriptions of what they looked like at different times in your life. Take the focus off of you and your grief. Don’t hold your own hand throughout the process, his mother advised. You’ll never let anyone else hold it again. If you get stumped, she said to me, start by asking: “What’s my favorite thing about her?”

“No,” I say. “I didn’t like the question.”

I can’t condense her like that. She’s too big. Peter’s the one who speaks in favorites. His favorite fruit is blackberries. He likes to eat them over buttered bread he’s baked. His favorite time of day is 11 A.M., preferably sunny. His favorite car seat is the middle seat in the back row but only in a full car. The middle seat will let you sit next to everyone.

“Start with what you like about her,” he offers.

I try humming myself to sleep and think.

“I like her hair. It’s light, coppery. Not red, but she dyes it, and sometimes it’ll come out redder than she wants. I like her eyelids. They’re very wrinkly and darker than the rest of her face. She either doesn’t laugh or laughs so hard she cries. There’s not a lot of in between there. She can really yell, but she’s so small. Not weak, but she carries so much I think she must feel pretty small by now.”

“That’s one of your favorite things about her?”

“No. I think I just started talking about her.”

I still don’t know what my favorite thing about Peter is. He listens, which I like.

“Are you tired?” he asks.

“I love her more than anyone.”

I don’t think I listen very well. I try thanking him for the party before he turns around for good, but he won’t let me. I fall asleep staring at his back. I still can’t trick him.

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The next day, my plane lands on time. I Uber to the house. Dad and Teddy never pick me up when I visit. They’re always on call, but Val’s at the house. It’s never explicitly stated she’s the one keeping an eye on my mom, but it conveniently works out that way.

Our home is exactly the type of home my parents always wanted: their own. They bounced Southern California before I was born and when Teddy was ten, they finally settled into a peach-colored house in Corona. A house with not so much a backyard but a walled plot of concrete behind the kitchen. And neighbors’ houses so close on each side that my parents were paranoid they could hear us through the walls. Only because they were the ones peeking through blinds and listening for any raised voices or arguments from next door.

I let myself in. The living room and kitchen are empty, but there’s noise upstairs for me to follow. Teddy’s door is closed. I hear a TV playing behind his door. Val must be in there, silently claiming her privacy now that I’m here and my time, not hers, belongs to Mom’s now. I knock on our bedroom door.

“Ma?”

“*Mm, ayudame.*”

I enter and close the door. She’s in the middle of something. She’s got her arms up, trying to reach behind her head. Her back is to me. It’s not a welcome. Welcomes are when you’ve been gone a while. But either I was gone and she didn’t notice or—and I take note of the freshly

laundered comforter, the empty bookshelf next to the bed for my belongings and the slippers left at the foot of the bed I know she doesn't wear—she's been waiting for me to come back. Skip the welcome. We try to forget I was ever away.

I rest my chin on her shoulder, gripping them both with my hands. I hum a one-two-three beat and tiptoe my feet to the rhythm, moving her to do the same.

“Hm, hm, hm. Huh, hm, hm, ha.”

Back and forth, moving just enough to call it dancing.

“*Andele pues,*” she says. She points at her back and waits.

I pull up her dress' zipper, hook the clasp at the top. She had put on her own belt. I twist it in the back so it's straight all the way around.

“*Me veo bien?*” she asks.

“*Si.*”

She doesn't need me to put on her sneakers. She's ready for a walk. Sneakers, a dress with a belt, and a hoodie. None of this is strange. I've zipped her dress, straightened her belt, and danced in place with her for years.

As a kid, our walks had only ever been to and from the store. I never liked going on a walk just to walk. If we weren't headed to the grocery store, back home from school, or visiting the dentist, it felt like a waste of time. Those sorts of walks for the pleasure of being outside were just for her—her time alone. Away from everyone, even me.

None of us ever used to be scared when she stepped out alone. She would get excited to find a route just long enough and quiet enough to make her feel like she really got to move. She would wait for sunset right when there were no shadows and always made it home just before dark.

Now, Dad, Teddy or I—and now Val, I suppose—go with her.

She doesn't move any slower than usual, but I've always been faster than her. I still walk like I'm headed somewhere. I have to remind myself to slow down.

*“Háblame de algo,”* I ask. I want to make up for the time I've lost. I could ask, “What's happened since I was gone?” and talk until the conversation catches up to my arrival. Here, I have to work backwards. Not “What have you done?” just “What did you do *today?*”

*“Como que?”*

*“¿Qué hicistes hoy?”*

*“Lo de siempre.”*

*“Como que?”*

*“No vine para hablar.”*

It's true. She didn't come to talk about what she'd done that day. We don't need to. I only ask her to talk on walks when I need the distraction. But she's used to walking in silence without me now. If I want to create a new normal for her, I have to change mine and hold her arm without saying a thing.

She pulls at corners, hesitates at crosswalks. She isn't protesting, but she isn't sure either.

I grip her forearm tighter. She reaches with her other hand and lightly pats my fingers. One, two, three. One, two, three. She eventually creates her own little rhythm as I listen to someone else's through earbuds.

The sky goes from orange to pink which means it's time to go home.

“Ready?” I ask.

She nods.

I've thought about asking Peter to go on one of these "just to walk" walks. He'd agree. We would talk, and never run out of things to say. I think if I were to ask him to walk with me, silently, he might think something was wrong at first. He prefers to talk with words.

The tune on my hands changes. There's no rhythm to the pats anymore. Fragments of a beat repeat themselves only to pause or stop altogether and she has to start over from the beginning.

She sets my hands free, so I can unlock our gate. It's just starting to get cold.

Quietly, in English, I ask: "You can't remember everything you did today, can you?"

I hold the gate open for her, letting her believe I'm speaking to myself to make up for her not wanting to. She doesn't understand or respond, and I don't need her to.

At home, she asks me to cut her nails for her. She's had mild arthritis in her fingers for years, but now she needs help with the clippers.

They don't shake, they just hurt, she explains. I clip her nails gently. I can't grab her fingers. I might clench and make her flinch. I lay my palm flat and angle up and down for better leverage, each snap from the clippers a victory.

"*Que mas?*" she asks.

What else of what? *Que mas* of work? Peter? Anything. Now is the time for talking. I can say anything I want.

"*Cocine tus tortas para Peter.*"

"*Y?*"

"*Le gusto.*" He did. He wants more next week. I'm happy to cook him something I'm good at, so I will. The recipe isn't her own. She'd written it for me from a magazine she read in a clinic's waiting room.

Peter had asked if the tortas tasted the way they did when I was a kid. I had to admit where the recipe came from. They were tasty, but not nostalgic. I've never cooked him a dish directly from my childhood. I was a particularly bratty child who'd say she was sick of the same dishes every week. Once I finally began appreciating her green chiles, lentils, and *caldo*, she had begun to forget how to make them.

I'd still like to try making those dishes. Doing so would require a lot of trial and error based purely on memory, but I don't think Peter would mind tasting my failures until I got them right.

"*Como hicistes tu menudo?*" I ask. The *menudo* would be a good place to start. Hard to mess up a soup. Whenever she made it, the day felt special. A tasty stew that didn't require too many vegetables to soak and would eventually become soggy in my bowl as I ate around them.

"*A ti no te gusta mi menudo.*"

"*Como que no?*"

"*No te gusto.*"

"*Lo quiero ser pora—para Peter.*"

I ask about beans, and she reminds me they're called *granos*. I ask "*como to chop*" the onions. She says to prepare them with "*pasos menuditos*".

"*Menuditos para menudo.*"

My word game still make her laugh. I ask about...whatever that little cube is called. It's neatly wrapped. A forbidden treat I always wanted to eat as a child. That little box of flavor you toss into the pot to make the *menudo* taste like chicken and salt. The word is on the tip of my tongue and it feels elegant. It must be a long word. A lot of marbles in this one. But the word does not appear. "*Era, era...el cubo.*" Spanish isn't working either. "*El little quadro,*" I say. "The

cube. The—” She stares at me blankly. She doesn’t ask or push me to remember. None of my languages work. I know that I know, but it’s like the memory was never there.

She and I look at each other and neither of us can speak. My mouth is mute, my eyes feel blind, both ears deaf. I can only touch her hand, but there’s nothing inside either of us.

“*Olvídale.*” Forget it. I change the subject and speak to her using words I do know.

• • •

That day when Mami and I laid in our bed and waited for Papi and Teddy to come home from work, the day of the marbles rattling in my mouth at the dining table, two strawberry coconut popsicles, I looked up from curling against Mami’s ribs in our bed and stared at her.

“*Te amo,*” I said.

“Mm,” she hummed, eyes still closed, a wistful smile on her face, relishing in the precious quiet time she had left before there were more tasks to do. “Me too.”

I was shocked. She puckered her lips at the “oo” in “too” like she was making fun of the sound. She spoke English like it was a toy. She seemed to say, “Look what I can do. It’s not perfect but listen.” I didn’t know she could do that.

No, she didn’t get it. She didn’t understand what I was saying. I had said it in Spanish. Spanish should have meant more. Papi and Teddy would be home soon, but having them meant losing her. I pressed my cold, tiny fingers around her face. She kept her eyes closed. I had to make her understand.

“*Te amo. Te amo. Te amo, te amo, te amo. Teeam-o.*”

I willed the words to mean more instead of less, but it still didn’t sound right.

• • •

Peter and I walk almost every week now. Sometimes he takes walks by himself.

“Naps make me feel guilty,” he says. “If I walk at least I feel like I’m doing something even when I’m doing nothing.”

The first six months of walking we never run out of things to talk about. I can vent about my deadlines, he can talk about the friends he misses from grade school. Then our silences become longer, we don’t always have a destination in mind for where we stop and turn around. We start bringing headphones. Sometimes we share them just for one song then go back to our own worlds. Silent, but together, and I understand why Mom does it this way.

That is, unless it’s a “talk walk,” like today’s, and we need to get ourselves in order. I’m 25 years old, and Peter wants to come with me. He’s willing to ask for the weekend off and hold my hand on another plane ride to my family’s house if I need him to. Peter’s attentiveness made him a great party host in college. There are less parties these days but he can still build something out of nothing. And he can hold a thing together. If I need company or emotional support on trips to reintroduce myself to my mother over and over again, that’s a problem he can fix.

When I go home, she and I don’t go on walks anymore. She has fewer “steps” in her schedule every day. Val is no longer there to remind her of them, because Val did the right thing and left.

“My dad told me,” I tell Peter. It’s summer. It’s almost 8:00 PM, but it’s still not dark. No jackets, no bags. Just flip flops and bare arms.

“Is Teddy upset?” Peter asks.

“I think my dad’s more upset than he is. He made it seem like Teddy was just frustrated by it. Inconvenienced.”

“Jesus.”

When I was eleven and Teddy was 22, he had a girlfriend named Samantha. Samantha was quiet and shy, like Val, and really tall, not like Val. I only had one friend at school, I wasn't allowed to go to their house or invite anyone to mine so if I went out, it was with Teddy. He took me to the movies on the weekends. If I asked nicely and one of his job sites was nearby, he'd pick me up from school and take me with him to his next job. We'd sit and have lunch on the client's front yard with Dad.

So when he started going out with Samantha on weekends or asked if she could come with us to the movies, I got upset. I would sit in the front seat of the car on our way to pick Samantha up. I'd sit in the front seat again after the movie on our way home.

Teddy started locking his bedroom door, even when he stayed the weekend with Samantha. I couldn't walk in and look around like I used to when he was around. So, on weekends, if I was bored I just shoved a penny in the cheap lock and walked in. I flipped through his issues of GQ and pretended his full sized bed was my own. But I stacked the magazines exactly as I found them and smoothed his comforter to hide any sign I'd entered. Mom warned me to stop going in there, because I was old enough for Teddy to yell at me if he found out.

"That makes Teddy sound like a bad person. Val told him what was wrong, what she needed, and what she was going to do. Teddy didn't say 'No, that's *not* what's wrong. You *don't* need that. You're *not* doing that.' He just said 'Okay.' I think that's better than being a bad person."

"I guess. Did she do a lot?" Peter asks.

How much did Val do for my mom? Given that I can't think of what Val did with her time that *didn't* have to do with my mom, either because I didn't ask, was too jealous to ask, or, like Teddy, too comfortable knowing she was around, I have to assume the answer is...

“Yes. I think in the end Val did quite a lot.” I genuinely hope Val does not come back, but not in the way I used to hope I’d never see Samantha again. If Val got out, shouldn’t Peter? That thought frightens me. Val couldn’t stay, because she was so in it. If you’re with Teddy, that means you’re in it. You can’t escape *her*.

The longer I wasn’t asked for an excuse as to why I wasn’t home, the easier it was to stay away. Being with me means you’re nowhere near it. My selfishness saved me. Saved Peter and I.

“Makes me look kind of bad,” he says.

“To who?”

“To me. I have my own life, but I don’t make any time to get to know her and help out.”

“Val?”

“Your mom,” he clarifies.

“That’s not your job.”

“You just don’t want me to.” If Teddy asks when I’m visiting, I say next month. If Dad asks for how long, I say a week. I’m flying two months later than I said I would and for three days.

“I’m willing to look bad in your place. No one thinks less of you.”

“It makes me feel bad. That you don’t want me there.”

“I don’t know what I’m walking into. That’s already out of my control. I would at the very least rather be in control of how the people I care about remember her. How I want *you* to remember her. I don’t need someone there. Yet. When I do, I promise I’ll tell you.”

“Really?” he asks. I stop walking. I lock eyes with him and honestly say “Yes.” He takes a moment, and then he believes me. I take the problem and tell him he doesn’t need to fix it.

“Okay,” he says, assured. Assured in me. At least for now, he can let the compulsion to please

go. Someone who loves him and cares enough lets him know he can stop. If I can give him anything, if my love can mean anything for him I want it give him permission to stop. That he doesn't need to win me over anymore.

I can't let Peter completely give himself away, even to me. I mean what I promise. Until then, I hold his head and reassure him, in between kisses, that it's okay to let me go home alone.

• • •

Every trip to Mom and Dad's, I arrive as a daughter and leave as an intruder. Halfway up the house's staircase, Teddy demands I come back down. I turn to face him, looking up at me from the ground below. If I don't watch myself he might yank his bratty little sister by the arm and drag her onto the lawn.

"You can't go up there," he says.

"I want to see her."

"Today's not a good day. She's irritable. Just about bit Dad's head off. Wake her up, and she'll try to kick us all out of the house."

I have too much faith in myself. Whatever disorientation or disequilibrium she might have felt today can magically be remedied by my presence. Her presence has always remedied mine. Maybe I want to test if it still can, even if it means shattering the glass house Teddy has carefully constructed in my absence.

Dad doesn't have anything to say, so he sulks in the dining room. He hides his eyes and clenches his jaw. Anything he could say would be too harsh, so he grinds his teeth instead. That used to work on me when I was a kid. When I used to swallow chunks of food whole at the dinner table. Or if I ever asked to have a friend over. I used to think I'd made him so angry he'd never speak to me again.

“I flew all the way over here for my time with her. This is the time we agreed on.”

I know Dad isn't ever really mad. He just feels small, and he's stubborn. We both are. Teddy is not.

“Work with me here,” Teddy pleads. “You can come back tomorrow. Early. She'll be calmer by then.”

“Come back? Where do you think I'm staying?”

“Why is seeing her right now so important?”

“Because it's *mine*.” The second floor balcony wraps around my head, and I can see the door to my childhood bedroom. I check my voice, careful not to wake her. The house is small but stretches upward. Two bedrooms on the second floor that heard every dish clink, channel switch, and back and forth uttered within its walls since we've lived here. “This time is mine,” I hiss. “She's mine. I lived here my whole life—”

“Not all of it.”

“—why am I being treated like I'm here for visitor's hours? I'm here. I'm finally here. I slept in that bed with her for eighteen years. This is still my house, and I will see her if I want to.”

Teddy doesn't follow me up the stairs. The bottom of our off-white walls are still streaked in gray grime accumulated over twenty plus years. The pictures on the wall hang crooked in black, plastic frames. Some of them still feature the stock family portraits from when Dad bought them. There aren't enough of us to fill them.

The dryer living in the closet is in the middle of a cycle. Denim jean buttons and jacket zippers smack inside the metal tumbler, issuing a low rumble topped with pops loud enough to keep my mother lulled asleep. I still step lightly just in case.

I brandish my thumbnail and shove the metal groove on the doorknob onto its side, unlocking it. I used to walk in on naps all the time. Dad's naps after church. Mom and Dad when they went to bed early at eight o'clock. Bedtime at any time before ten, I called a nap. I press my head against the door and push it open.

She lays on the bed the same way she has her entire life. Or my life, at least. Slightly curled into herself. Her knees stacked on top of each other. Hands sandwiched underneath her cheek. She actually sleeps like that. She still uses two pillows and sleeps on top of the comforter. Sheets are always too hot. The queen bed is pushed against the corner and she faces the wall with her back to me. Her hair is just recently dyed. The color is closer to red than copper. Either Teddy or Dad are likely guessing at her color and dyeing it for her.

When we shared this room, the bed was big enough that we could spread out and have enough space to stretch our legs. But I would cling to her anyway. When I was nine, I fell asleep that way. At fourteen, I was much too mature. At eighteen, I went back to hugging her but after about five minutes we'd both had enough, turned around, and fell asleep. What would our way be now?

Every night I waited for her to come upstairs no matter how late it got. I wouldn't fall asleep without her. Today, she is not waiting for me. Or perhaps in waiting for me, the reason for doing so faded from her memory, and she fell asleep unburdened. I sit as quietly as I can on the red futon. It takes up the whole second half of the room. Once I got too big, Dad somehow slept on this thing for years. Someone's removed all the pillows, so I lie down with my hands pressed against my face like her. My head faces the foot of the bed, and I watch her. I don't know what she wants anymore. I know what I want and what she used to like. Everything I know, is outdated. I fall asleep trying to convince myself this is close enough.

Teddy wakes me at sunset. Mom is still asleep. He puts a finger to his lips and walks me downstairs. Dad will keep an eye on her while the two of us go for a drive. I don't protest or kiss Dad good-bye. I follow Teddy to his car and let him drive me away.

The café he chooses is empty except for a mother and her son. I'm not hungry. Neither is he, it seems, but we order coffee and muffins. Teddy chugs his cup. I let mine cool in front of me.

After a moment I ask, "Do I look like her at all?"

We only speak Spanish with Mom. Once we had learned enough English, she didn't need to learn. She had the two of us to call doctors' offices and write letters of absence to our teachers. Teddy searches my face, but if the answer isn't "Yes" after looking at it for twenty-five years, the answer is:

"No."

My reflection sticks onto the storefront window behind him on top of the bug stains and hairline scratches on the glass. He's right.

My eyes are Dad's. My brown skin is Dad's. Both our noses are Dad's. Our hair. No, our hair isn't coppery, but it's curly. That's her's. I study Teddy. He carries Dad's face too, but I'm right about the hair.

"Why does it matter?" he asks.

"If we look like her maybe she's still here."

"She *is* still here. You shouldn't have gone in there. Just proves how long you've gone."

I shove a bite into my mouth, convincing myself I'm hungry.

"I still think I'm entitled to more time with her until I move back permanently."

“You’re not actually going to move back.”

“Yes, I am.”

“I do think you’re entitled, though.” He looks too relaxed, slumped into the chair with legs stretched underneath the table. His feet breach onto my side, forcing me to knot mine underneath the seat and sit upright. I narrow my eyes at him, but his hang. He’s exhausted.

“The time I do spend here means a lot to me. Even if it isn’t as often as I’d like—”

“What is it you even do again?”

“—I take it seriously, okay?” I assure him.

“We can tell. When am I going to get some time off?” His boots are caked in white paint. His thumbs are cracked at the tips like Dad’s. I used to pump lotion on Dad’s fingertips after long days at work to revive them. These days Dad drives Teddy to work, and Teddy’s the one with dirt under his nails and cracks in his skin.

“I wouldn’t call the time I’m away from home ‘time off,’ and we weren’t talking about you.”

“I don’t remember you being this much of a brat growing up. Really playing up the whole ‘favorite’ thing these days.”

“I *am* the favorite,” I sneer. There aren’t any bodies close enough to our table to keep my voice from carrying. Teddy sits a little straighter. If he doesn’t brace himself, his little sister might kick his chair out from under him. “You told me all the time. Everyone did. Baby sister, daddy’s little girl. I was born a decade after you. I’m the girl. *Her* only girl. That kind of love and attention sets a standard for the rest of your life. When it’s gone, it’s big, okay? When you’re someone’s whole world, then suddenly you’re not?”

Firstborn isn't as good as the kid you didn't need to try again after, because you'd already nailed it the second try. Teddy leans forward. The chair's metal legs claw against wood.

"Would you care about Dad this much if it was him?"

I'm not dignifying that question.

"Different story."

"What about me? You *are* a baby. You've only had her half as long as I have. Who's really losing more here? What about losing *my* mom? What about Dad losing a wife?"

Teddy thinks big picture. If I truly am selfish, then I was raised to be. I didn't grow up as a babysitter. I didn't inherit a job from Dad whether I wanted it or not. I was raised to dream big, get out as soon as possible, and only come back for the holidays.

"It's different." I say. "We've known her our whole lives. He hasn't."

"You don't know what you're talking about." He slouches back like he's decided I'm not a threat anymore. Or maybe he thinks I'm hopeless.

"I'm allowed to be upset. You're 'sibling-ly' inclined to indulge me."

"Am I still your brother if she's not here anymore?"

Teddy isn't Mom, but he's up there. When I was twelve I thought it would be fun to die for him. I thought, how cool must it be to have a little sister who looks up to you that much, who thinks an older brother was the best gift a parent could give? A kid sister that, if asked, would lay down her life for you? I thought I was lucky to love things that much.

"Of course you are."

It's easy to love when you're in the same house. It's easier to memorize a person. The older we get, the less I'll know. I figure if we continue like this we might have another two or three years before I'm out of his picture.

“Are you sad for her?” he asks.

“Sometimes.”

“Try feeling sad for her instead of yourself for a change.”

“No one else knows me the way she does.”

“Do you even know *her* that way? Or do you just have her hair?”

• • •

I was ten years old, lying awake in my parents’ bed. This was before we couldn’t all fit and Dad bought the futon. I was pressed in between their backs. It was only nine o’clock, so I rejected sleep. My brain folded in on itself, and the tingling in my shoulders became a darkness in my brain getting bigger and bigger. It had started spreading into my irises. If I didn’t tell someone about it, I’d go blind.

I let my morbid thoughts get ahead of me. What if Dad were to die? What if I’m not real? What if I wake up and my whole life has been a dream? What if one day I wake up and my whole family doesn’t know who I am?

My inner voice screamed and almost shattered my mind, but I couldn’t say anything. I couldn’t move. I couldn’t see. I closed my eyes and prayed. The only word I could form in my head was “Please,” over and over again. Chanting, hoping someone would hear me. To God, to my father, my mother, hoping she could hear me.

Maybe it was God or my mother who turned on her side next to me, brushing my arm with her body. A switch flicked, my eyes opened, I could see. I could move. I sat up and groped my mother’s face, kissing her in gratitude and glee. She gasped awake, and just as quickly went back to sleep. I eagerly went to sleep early that night. No other attack in my lifetime would ever be that quiet.

• • •

Peter and I, tipsy, giggling, and bumping knees against tables at 9 P.M. becomes me weeping in our bedroom by 11 P.M. Peter's a bit too dizzy to initially understand why. Our A.C. is broken. The apartment is boiling, and I've taken too many deep breaths too quickly. I try clipping my breath and exhaling in short bursts. I cough against my own spit. My hands grip my cheeks and press against them. Being touched, even by my own hands, might re-center me. My skin feels hot, slick. I wish my hands were colder. I dig the tips of my fingers into my temples. More tears squeeze onto my cheeks and slide between my fingers.

"Martha, stop." He raises his voice, not to frighten me, but because he's frightened. He thinks I need a strong, steady voice telling me to snap out of it. I don't need him to speak. I need someone to hold me down.

I double over and clamp harder against my face trying to get some sort of a grip. "Stop it." He grips my shoulders. "Stop *it*. Come on. She'll be fine."

He understands more than I think. I like when he surprises me like that.

But Peter sounds miles away. I push against my head as a surging pressure pushes outward. The inside of my scalp tingles. It spreads down my neck and into my shoulders. I arch my neck to relieve the sensation.

I can't scream. Peter places his hands gently on my forearms, but I push him away with my elbows. *No one on this earth loves me unconditionally the way she does. Even though I'm selfish. Even when I'm nothing. No one else ever will. When she dies, she'll take me with her. I don't know anything.* A wheeze rises from my stomach and catches in my throat. I open my mouth, A sound releases like I'm regurgitating a small animal. Peter steps back and widens his eyes.

I turn my back to him and fall to my knees in front of the full-length mirror. Whatever I dislodged in my throat lets me wail. If I force myself to look in the mirror, I might discover something she doesn't already know. I might be able to take something back before she takes it all with her.

I don't recognize anyone in the mirror. Not my father's face, or Teddy's, definitely not my mother's. I don't learn anything. I crawl away from the mirror, ashamed.

Peter kneels before me and holds my body until my breaths become long and slow again. We don't sleep, but he convinces me to lay in bed with him. The washcloth in my hand is crusty where the congestion has dried and cold where tears soaked through.

"Tell me about it," he asks.

"She's happy when she looks at me, but she doesn't know why," I croak. "I can see it in her eyes. The happiness is right in front. But, sometimes, there's this guilt. Like she knows. She knows she's forgotten something, something big. The guilt is right behind the happy. Then, the guilt will move in front, and I can't look at her anymore."

• • •

A year later, Peter and I fly miles to see her, but I still ask him to wait in the living room for me. I can't take two steps without one step back. Just to look at her.

Does she still love me? She doesn't remember I studied political science in school. She doesn't remember sewing the costumes I wore to Thanksgiving or Christmas school recitals or walking to my elementary schools, alone, to see me wear them. She can't make the dishes I grew up with anymore. She doesn't remember the acts of loving me. But did I love *her* when I was an infant and clung to her chest or cried when she wasn't near? Is love the action or a result of the act? If the acts are erased, where does her love go? Where does mine?

*“Te traje unas cosas.”* I set a small box on top of the bed. She’s under the covers, quiet and polite, watching me. First, I pull out a maroon-colored sweater. It used to be hers, then she gave it to me. She used to tell me I should wear it more often. I hand the sweater for her to feel and smell. I imagine it smells more like me now than her, because I can’t smell anything when I wear it.

I show her pictures of Teddy and I, pictures from her wedding.

*“Tu pelo era lacio. O te lo alisaste?”* I don’t need her to respond or even to move. I just need to show her who she is, tell her what I know. I pull out the blanket. The one she wrapped me in when I was born. The one I’ve kept for too long and have to store in the back of the closet if I don’t want it to unravel any further.

*“Lo has lavado?”* she asks. No, I’m scared to wash it at this point. Better just to press my face against it every once in a while.

I pull out two spiral notebooks. Every page is filled with Teddy’s notes from his college classes. I flip to the back of one of the pages. The pressure from Teddy’s hand has puffed the lines of his writing onto this side of the page. I run my fingers over it back and forth. I motion for her to do the same and she does—her hand over her son’s. I pull out three pairs of broken reading glasses. They’re Dad’s, all bought from a CVS or Rite Aid. She puts one of the pairs on. That’s right. Once she was old enough that she needed a pair to help her read, she never bought her own. She uses an old pair of Dad’s. She silently eyes the pictures. I don’t know exactly what she knows. I just know it’s less. But just how much is her own secret.

She doesn’t do anything profound. There’s no moment of clarity. She doesn’t give me anything. It is no longer her job to give—to love. It’s mine. And Dad’s and Teddy’s. It’s my job

to remember the shirts we wore when our pictures were taken, how to fold them, and put them all into boxes for her.

Once she's done with each of the pieces, I calmly put them back into place, one by one. It's not a big deal. It's weather. She no longer has to give me anything.

• • •

I don't imagine speaking with her in person. If I were to have another conversation with her, it would be a phone call. What might she say?

"What's left of you, then?" she'd ask.

"A lot of me left," I would say.

"That's good."

"But a lot of me is still here."

"Oh."

People don't meet versions of one other. They meet amounts. I stood behind 1% of a person in the grocery line today. In middle school I was a bit overzealous and let my first boyfriend meet a whopping 70% of me. The years have exponentially reduced his knowledge. We're lucky to meet anyone who ever breaches 60% and says "Great, what else is there?"

"How much of you is left?" she might ask next. "Who else is left?"

"A lot of people."

"What about Peter?"

"What *about* Peter?"

"How much do you each have of each other?"

"80%, maybe."

"Six years and only 80%."

“We’ve earned it, each little bit.”

When she left for good, she didn't take me with her. She left everything she knew behind. Every bit of me she carried is on my back now. With one person less to carry us all, Dad, Teddy and I try to shift the weight on our shoulders as evenly as we can. It’s hard to see outside the three of us sometimes, but we try.

“I think they’ve all earned the chance to earn some more,” she’d say. I decide not to risk what might happen if I don’t believe her this time.