TCU IN COLOR: A HISTORICAL FICTION APPROACH TO
REVISITING EXPERIENCES OF TCU’S EARLIER
BLACK AND BROWN STUDENT
POPULATION
(1970s-1990s)

by
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ABSTRACT

This is a historical fiction project based on research from TCU’s Special Collections that seeks to shed light on common themes, attitudes, and unique experiences of TCU’s students of color from earlier decades (1970s-1990s), including (but not limited to) financial concerns, community, family structure, social groups, and racism. Readers can analyze these short stories and compare to current students’ experiences and comment on changes/similarity. It also aims to increase dialogue around these social issues.
Acknowledgements

There is a myriad of people to thank for the successful completion of this project, all of them crucial in their own ways.

First, I would like to thank Professor Matthew Pitt being my supervising professor. He combed through all seventy-ish pages multiple times, and his detailed feedback always challenged me to think about where the stories were going and how to achieve the impact I wanted them to have, sometimes knowing these things better than I did (or was conscious of). He also ensured that I was aware of the project’s significance, combating any and all self-doubt I had during our meetings and regrounding me with the sense of purpose I started with. Moreover, especially when I was flustered and overwhelmed with life, he was kind and understanding with my writing process and schedule. During our check-ins, he always made sure I was taking care of myself and prioritized the right things. So, for his words of wisdom for writing and for life, I am especially grateful.

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Dr. Max Krochmal, my final committee member, was also an enthusiastic supporter whom I appreciate. He talked about the necessity for these stories from our initial conversation about him being on my committee and from the get-go assured me that he would support me any way he could. He checked in on my progress and consistently asked if there was anything else he
could do. Additionally, his feedback helped me focus on making the stories as accurate for the time period as possible.

Of course, thank you to the women at the TCU Special Collections. They were vital in my research stage on students of color at TCU, finding boxes of information that I would have never known to look for. Without their guidance, this project would have never left the ground.

Next, I would like to thank everyone who’s ever listened to me talk about my thesis. From the gal who took my Friday morning shifts at the Rec during the Spring 2018 semester so I could research in the Special Collections to the dearest of friends who’ve heard all of my griping and rants about either the information I was finding, my writing frustrations, or both. They have kept me sane on a daily basis and never let me feel like I was alone. Their kind words of advice and encouragement were essential in getting me to the final draft (and to the end of college).

Finally, thank you to my parents for being absolutely wonderful and supportive and patient. They have been the heart of all I have done at TCU, with this project being no exception. They have been waiting to read my stories, and now I’m glad to share this work with them.

And now, I’m honored to share this work with you.
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Artist Statement

There are numerous approaches I could’ve taken to this project. Looking back, perhaps there are some that I should’ve used. But I imagined this to be an archival-research-project-turned-historical-fiction, and, for all intents and purposes, I suppose that’s exactly what it still became.

However, I thought that I would be able to comb through the TCU archives and easily find information pertaining to students of color and their experiences. I felt relieved seeing that there is already a folder entitled “Minorities at TCU,” though was surprised to find there was (and still is at time of writing) a mere twenty-two items comprised of things about the same handful of historical events, namely desegregation at TCU and more recent attempts to make TCU more diverse and inclusive in its rhetoric and academic and professional environments. These items are important to TCU’s history and were a nice starting point, but very few of these include the perspectives of actual TCU students of color more than a quote in an article; most of them originate from an Anglo authority figure’s perspective (i.e. professor, chancellor, board members, student reporter). Thus, though much of this information, for better or worse, cannot be refuted, this folder is missing the voices of the demographic(s) it claims to be about.

Moreover, there is little-to-no information explicitly about Hispanics/Latinos, Asian Americans, Native/Indigenous persons, or International students, so, even at a glance, this starting point in no way provides a semblance of a snapshot of the entire population of color at TCU.

For that matter, neither is this project. It focuses on viewpoints/experiences of TCU’s Latino/a and Black student population for a number of reasons, primarily the following: the national prominence of desegregation regarding the Black community (namely students here), Texas’s history of discrimination against Latina/os, and, quite frankly, the information available. While there are a number of Skiff articles and such on other racial/ethnic identities, my research
turned up quite more interviews of Latino/a and Black alumni for projects on alumni of color that I could analyze and configure central themes and attitudes for characters. And there are even more remarks, events, observations, etc. not included in these pages that really made me stop and stare in sheer anger and disgust.

The thing is though, despite these initial reactions and the probability that the people who lived through some of these events felt even worse, I often questioned the validity of this project. After all, TCU’s history with racism and discrimination is nowhere near as overt as some other colleges: even desegregating the school itself seemed to be rather calm; no one was throwing things or screaming slurs (which was a relief). No, it seems like reflections are that everything was subtle or otherwise in hushed tones. Was I making something out of nothing?

But the more I took courses in ethnic studies after declaring a Comparative Race and Ethnic Studies minor, the more validated I felt when I learned more about systemic oppressions. I noticed that financial concerns, for one, were explicitly noted more often among Latina/os, which makes sense when you take wage discrimination into account. Moreover, social concerns were more prevalent among Black alumni, which follows social consequences of segregation and Jim Crow. I wasn’t making something out of nothing.

With all of this said, I hope someone creates a collection on Native/Indigenous students, Asian American students, International students, LGBTQI+ students, and all the intersections thereof. I hope this becomes just a stepping stone into more undergrad research into the history/experiences of marginalized students at TCU. I hope someone finds this project and becomes impassioned to expand on it, maybe even telling their own story. I hope everyone, especially students of color, realize their stories should be heard. And if you see yourself in these stories, I hope you know that I see you too.
Burn (1970s)
For the first time in a month or so, Elena wasn’t overwhelmed with fears or nerves about starting college, which was ironic since it was the night before the first day of classes. She looked around at her friends Yvette, Gloria, and Ana; they were all sitting on the floor of Gloria and Ana’s room, laughing and talking about the guys they’ve already met around campus and the ones they would probably meet. As far as friends went, she didn’t think she’d need to meet anyone else yet. Her roommate was nice, and they would probably get along fine, but the connection wasn’t there. She was happy that she found some people so soon; she was terrified of being lonely for a while.

Elena looked at the clock. 11:43. “No one has an 8 a.m., right?” she asked.

Gloria raised her hand but said she wasn’t worried. “I’ll have three hours until my second class. Plenty of time for a three-hour nap.”

“OR we could go get breakfast. You know you won’t eat before class,” Ana said.

“You know I don’t eat breakfast,” Gloria said.

“How are we even friends?” Ana joked. Elena knew Ana was the kind of person who could eat three breakfasts a day.

Yvette, sitting in the middle of the two, linked arms with both of them. “Because,” she began, “we’re obviously the coolest people on this campus.” The girls, with their hair in curlers and avocado face masks on, all looked at each other and laughed loud enough for them to quiet themselves once they realized some people might be asleep.

Elena lowered her whisper. “No, Yvette has a point, y’all. We’re all together for whatever reason, and let’s not kid ourselves, college is going to be hard already and a little harder for us.”
Yvette undid her curlers only to have them fall flat and put her hair up in a *chongo*. “I didn’t mean to make this into some borderline-Hallmark story. It doesn’t need to be a big deal. We’re here, and that’s that.”

“You’re right,” Elena conceded. “It doesn’t need to be, *pero*… I’m just saying that we need to stick together.”

“Hey guys,” Gloria interjected, uncovering the lighter she used when she smoked. She flicked it on. “We can make it official.” Everyone exchanged glances of fear and fascination, wanting to say something, but just moved their mouths as their minds threw out a slew of words.

“So… we burn our troubles away?” Ana finally asked.

Gloria laughed and flicked the fire off. “Look,” she finally continued. “Elena is worried that things will be harder for us. Maybe they will be. Maybe they won’t. Some things we can’t help. Pero, what we can do is make sure that we start as clean as possible.”

“By burning our troubles away?” Ana asked again.

“Yes, but symbolically. *Ya tu sabes,* setting ourselves free, so those things can’t come back to haunt us. Fresh start. Rising up from the ashes like a *como se dice*….” she hit the back of her hand against her leg a few times. “Phoenix.”

“Damn, Glo, that’s deep,” Yvette said.

Gloria grinned and shrugged. “I read sometimes. So, what do y’all say?” They all nodded and agreed to meet back in Gloria and Ana’s dorm in fifteenish minutes after finding anything to burn (and washing their faces off).

Elena held a small flashlight as she quietly ransacked her newly-organized-by-color shelves and noticed she didn’t bring much from home to begin with. She looked around and realized how
impersonal her half of the room was: it had a few novels (Agatha Christi’s And Then There Were None being her favorite), a planner waiting for syllabus information to fill it, and some fresh school supplies. A few old pictures of her friends and family, worn at the edges from both time and the move from home to TCU, laid at the top of her desk. Her sleeping roommate, on the other hand, had her walls full of pegged photos, letters, aesthetic store-bought photos, and a ragged stuffed bunny she said she had since she was two years old clutched under her arm.

Elena found the Bible her grandmother gave her, but she certainly couldn’t burn that. Ay Dios mios. She drew made a cross motion on herself to absolve the thought. She almost regretted not feeling a need to bring anything else up; she was, quite frankly, a little too ready to leave home behind.

She made a quarter-hearted effort to reorganize by stuffing things into her desk drawers and hiding things under her bedding (which wasn’t as discreet as she would’ve liked), so her roommate wouldn’t wake up and wonder why Elena was so messy. She realized she could just as easily put her books back on her desk, and when she took them out of the drawer, she noticed her old memory box, or rather, her mom’s.

***

Thirteen-year-old Elena ransacked her dad’s closet trying to find the shoes he asked for. In the back corner, Elena found an old, faded floral box she had never seen before. It didn’t look like something her dad would buy for himself, so she was curious as to what was inside. When she opened it, she found old love letters addressed to Vida Mia and Tesoro Mio and pictures of them when they were first dating. The letters were held between intricate burlap knots, and Elena didn’t want to risk messing them up, so she just focused on the pictures. She combed through pictures of her parents’ wedding and then later of them in the house she and her dad still lived in,
probably after her parents had just moved in. (Elena noticed the myriad of boxes around the rooms.) There were a few pictures of her mom with a baby bump, little Elena, inside a nursery—but none with Elena as a baby.

Elena’s dad, wondering why she was taking so long, came into the room to find her mesmerized by the images sprawled around her. “Why didn’t you ever show me these?” she asked. Her dad provided some details behind the photos (“This was our third date. Told her I loved her right then.” “This was the weekend we decided to drive all the way to the coast on whim. Best ‘worst’ decision ever.” “Right after this one was taken, we fought for two hours about where to put the crosses.”) and apologized for never talking about her mom; it was still so hard for him to accept her death (he still wore his wedding ring), but he admitted that it was time for Elena to know more about her mom. They talked for hours—Elena noticed he was fixated on her in every picture, and she had never seen him so happy—but he never mentioned how Elena’s mom died. Elena didn’t ask.

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Elena thought about that day as she traced the faded pink roses on the top of the box and opened it. Instead of the photos (which were now in their own album back home) were the letters she began to write to her mom that day to feel some semblance of a tangible connection in addition to her mom’s rosary. She picked a random one dated roughly four years prior, unfolded the fragile paper, and flashed the light on it.

Querida Mamá,

Hoy terminé mi primer día de secundaria. Tú estaría muy orgulloso. Me gustan mis clases hasta y conocí algunas amigas agradables. Yo sé que es muy temprano, pero creo que lo haré. Ojalá pudieras verme ahora. Te quiero mucho.
Dear Mama,

Today I finished my first day of high school. You’d be so proud. I like my classes so far and met some really nice girls. I know it’s really early to tell, but I think I’ll make it. Wish you could see me now. Love you lots.

Xo,

Elena

Elena chuckled because those “nice girls” ended up being not-so-nice girls. She wrote about them a lot to her mom freshman year. She then looked at one letter — the letter, the one that still haunts her—folded up into the smallest square possible. Her heart broke a little more with every undone fold, but she still made herself read it.

Querida Mamá,

Lo siento. No sabía. Espero que me puedas perdonar.

-Elena

Dear Mama,

I’m sorry. I didn’t know. I hope you can forgive me.

-Elena

She wiped one tear away and swallowed the rest. She wrote that when she was sixteen, a sophomore, after her dad finally told her that her mom died after giving birth due to some complications. Elena started blaming herself for her mom’s death and figured her mom was mad
at her in Heaven and wouldn’t have even wanted to hear from her. She stopped writing then, never knowing how to follow up. She wondered if her mom was still (or ever) mad. All Elena knew was that sometimes she found herself mad that her mom wasn’t there for the bigger moments of her life, but she could never figure out if she was mad at her mom or mad at life for taking her mom. *Maybe I can start again in college*, she thought, but she knew she couldn’t if that letter still existed: she still didn’t know how to follow up. She stuffed it in her pocket as she heard faint knocking on her door. The girls were outside waiting. Elena apologized for taking so long, slid on mismatched *chanclas*, and left.

***

Yvette stopped on the edge of the dorm. Since Wiggins Hall was in the Hills, the outskirts of campus, they were already far enough away from anyone to randomly notice a group of girls on the way back to their dorms. They gathered in a circle around a trashcan full of paper at the center, lit a match, and tossed it in.

“Alright, everyone say what they’re giving up —literally and not— before you throw it in,” Yvette said. “I’ll start. I have a letter from my dad, saying why he left us. I kept it *porque* 1) it’s him and 2) I wanted to look back on it and realize I’d doing just fine without him. And I am. So, I’m letting go of looking back.” She threw it in and took a deep breath as she stepped back. Ana, wrapped in a blanket, comforted her by interlocking their arms and putting her head on Yvette’s shoulder.

Ana stepped forward next. She threw in an old journal from middle school, the “darkest years” of her life “so far” that she brought so no one in her family would find and read it, and she didn’t want to have that time hanging over her in college. Gloria tossed in a bear from her cheating first love that she kept because it was “cute, and he got it for our third anniversary,”
though she hated how her stomach twisted every time she looked at it when she was especially lonely and remembered he was already engaged to someone else.

Elena stepped forward and looked the fire, letting the bright orange light, smoke, and heat overwhelm her senses. Her friends called out her name, snapping her out of it “Oh, uh, yeah. It’s uh, the last letter I wrote to my mom. I just hope she’s forgiven me for being the reason she died.” The other girls went in for a group hug with Elena in the middle, assuring her that she was not the actual reason her mother died. They then all turned to watch the kindling and hear it reach every atom of the items they’d thrown.

“So,” Gloria said. “Now, we’ve let go of our pasts, and here’s to our futures.” She pretended to hold a glass up.

“We can do better than that,” Yvette said and stuck her pinky out.

“Seriously?” Ana asked. “We’re in college.”

“It’s the most binding thing there is in any friendship. Now….” She motioned to her lone pinky. Ana rolled her eyes and took it. Gloria and Elena followed, and they were all knotted together. “Okay,” Yvette continued. “From here on, we pinky promise to always stick by each other, for better or for worse, in sickness and in hea-”

“Whoa, are we getting married?” Elena interrupted. The others giggled.

Yvette hip-bumped her and continued. “Until graduation do we even consider parting. We start here together, we end here together. No matter what. Hope y’all can put up with me for four years.”

“Sí se puede.” Gloria said. They all smiled, and with that, they unlocked pinkies, locked arms, and watched the things holding them back shrivel up in smoke.

***
Elena, finally a junior, gently glided her fingers along the compact shelves of new textbooks, a slight euphoria coming over her with every bump between sets of books. While, like most students, she never looked forward to tests or homework, she did look forward to the plethora of books that the bookstore held for its students. She knew she could never read (much less buy) them all. Okay, focus. She looked down at the torn notebook paper with the smudged list of required texts. All she wanted today was to look up prices (and maybe buy one or two she was especially interested in), so she could start budgeting for the fall semester. She didn’t have as much as she hoped saved from working over the summer because her dad needed help with his car, so she didn’t have a strong sense of financial security.

“How much less am I going to eat?” she always half-joked.

She backtracked through the aisles, finding the titles she sought and jotting down the prices (and occasionally adding extra titles she was interested in). By book four, she was becoming weary of the prices. Were they this expensive last year? She added the prices and realized her books would cost about seventy dollars; she had never spent more than fifty dollars on books for a semester. She gasped, not realizing she stopped breathing.

“Are you okay, ma’am?” a store clerk asked, tapping Elena on her shoulder.

“Yes, sorry, just thinking.” She moved down the wall behind the stacks of loose-leaf paper. Pulling out her wallet, she emptied its contents into her hand and counted thirty-two dollars. She anticipated a little more than sixty dollars for her last paycheck; she had to cut down on hours to have enough time to pack and move into her new apartment. Ninety-two dollars... okay fifteen for food —can’t forget the milk this time— okay... we can make it work. She sighed. Again. She returned to the book stack, picked up a couple of books she was the most excited to read, and managed a slight smile as she gave the cashier twelve dollars.
Elena walked into her apartment, disheartened but still clutching onto her new books as if they were a newborn, and holding in the other hand two bags of groceries, including a tin can of her favorite almonds. She put the bags on the counter, the blood finally freeing flowing to the creases in her fingers that had discolored slightly from the weight of the bags. She flipped the light switch on only to have one living room light come on. Damn it. Forgot to buy replacements. Maybe Yvette got one but forgot to put it in. She hoped it would be in the kitchen. The only lightbulb box was the months-old one from the bulb that stayed on—they were terrible at throwing that kinda stuff away.

She put the groceries away and turned the stove on. She seasoned some ground beef and put in the pan. She turned the *comal* on to start warming up. She heated up some three-day-old rice as the beef cooked and picked at her almonds as she waited. When the beef finished, she put a tortilla on the comal, and while she waited for it to rise, she fixed herself a bowl. The rest was left on a low heat to keep warm in case Yvette came back soon and wanted to eat.

Elena took a deep breath and plopped onto the garage-sale cloth couch with faded greenery and a few stains, her food almost spilling out. She looked at the small coffee table and combed through the mail Yvette must have picked up earlier. *Junk... junk... Yvette’s... mine.* She picked up an envelope with a TCU seal where the stamp normally goes, with the sprawled-out horned frog logo. She looked closer at the horned frog’s mouth, never sure if it was supposed to be smiling or just a neutral expression. “Dear Horned Frog....”

The letter informed students about the latest eight percent tuition increase (second year in a row), going from eighty dollars per credit hour to eighty-eight. Resident hall and mealbook prices went up too, but since Elena didn’t use either of those, she skimmed those updates. She
took one more spoonful of dinner before setting the bowl on the table and scrambling to find a pen. Scribbling some quick math on the envelope, she figured it would cost about one hundred dollars more for both semesters. Elena added this to the already higher cost of her textbooks, and her stomach knotted. As she picked her dinner up again, she realized she became more nauseous than hungry and set it back down. She went back to the kitchen and found some Sprite and old saltines to soothe the churn. She thought about the Vicks in her bathroom but decided she wasn’t feeling that bad. Besides, she needed to make the bottle last all semester.

Grabbing the snacks and her new book, she walked back to her room and turned on the light. The bright light hitting against her dull mustard yellow walls reminded her of a sunset and made her smile whenever she needed a mental break. She laid against the wooden headboard and put the glass of Sprite on the nightstand next to her. Sprawling her legs across her thin navy-embroidered floral quilt, she propped the book under a pillow.

She looked up and somehow eyed an old almond can in the far corner of the shelf in her closet with a paper label that said “El futuro.” Elena had forgotten about her plan to put a few dollars away every month to save for a special trip after graduation. She kept having to take it out for an unexpected expense and eventually stopped. She got up to toss it; she didn’t want the reminders of a future that wouldn’t happen anytime soon. She grabbed a hanger and used the curve to bring it forward. Two dollars fell out as it came over the corner. Guess this is the future, she thought as she put the money in her jean pocket.

She went back to her bed, ate another saltine, and tore a page out of one of the old notebooks she figured she might need to reuse for this semester. She hadn’t written to her mom in a while — since the end of freshman year after her last final and before her dad came to pick
her up—and figured it was as good a time as any. She got to “Querida Mama,” when she heard Yvette come in and call for Elena to go the living room.

“This up for grabs?” Yvette asked, pointing to the stove. Elena nodded, and her eyes widened when she realized she left it on.

“You know who I saw today? Ana. She’s working at that restaurant on the other end of Berry, the one we always talk about going to,” Yvette continued.

“I guess you went?” Elena asked.

“Yeah, sorry. Jennifer wanted to go for her birthday. Anyway, she looked okay. Tired, but good. Either she didn’t recognize me or didn’t see me, even though I waved.”

Elena gave a mumbled “aw” but didn’t ask another question. She occasionally saw Ana at the panaderia and knew about Ana’s family’s financial struggles, which were why she dropped out during freshman year in the first place. Ana assured Elena that she was fine; her family was in a better place because she could help them with the bills and taking care of the kids. Her brother was set to start college next year. Her parents couldn’t have been prouder.

“I wonder how Gloria’s doing.” Yvette said as she cooled off her food. Elena didn’t answer, knowing Gloria was actually doing really well. She was five months pregnant (truly glowing when Elena ran into her) and getting ready to marry her boyfriend of a year and a half. Elena knew Yvette would say she was glad Gloria was happy but wouldn’t approve of the fact she became pregnant before getting married.

“Have you heard about this?” Elena instead asked, holding up the letter about the tuition hike. Yvette took the letter and read it, her shoulders dropping a bit.

“Again??” Yvette rolled her eyes. “At this rate, I’ll need to live at home my senior year.”
Elena didn’t know what her backup plan would be. She had already considered taking on a second job and either falling to part-time student or taking a break to save money before the tuition increased. It really wasn’t too much, she realized, but for her, it would be nearly all she could handle.

***

Elena, now in her spring semester of junior year, opened the door to her apartment, tired and slightly disheveled, undoing her already loose chongo and taking off her scuffed, black work shoes that had a subtle foul smell from the food caught under their grips. Yvette was curled up on the couch in her light gray robe, taking some notes on her history readings.

“Ay, you’re getting in later than normal.” Yvette said, looking at the clock. 10:09 pm.

“Yeah, there was a party of ten that came in less than an hour til close, and they stayed late. And before you ask, no, I couldn’t just kick them out. Even though I wanted to.”

“Don’t you still have homework?” Yvette asked, to which Elena nodded. “Another late night, I guess.”

“Yeah, but I don’t have class until 9:00 tomorrow, so I can get a few hours of sleep.”

Elena sat down and grabbed the can of stale almonds she kept on the coffee table. Nowadays, she only ate a couple at a time, so she wouldn’t need to buy more as often. Yvette said that she had made some lasagna and put the leftovers in the fridge, but Elena said she wasn’t hungry and that she needed to study.

“I don’t know how you do it, reading and writing those essays and two jobs and all that. Especially during midterms.”

Elena sighed. “I’m not doing it. I’m barely passing every class except the one I’m failing. I’d drop it, but I don’t have an extra five dollars to pay the drop fee.”
“Still dumb that they make you pay for a class you don’t want, on top of taking the actual class,” Yvette said without looking up from her notebook.

Elena stared at Yvette for a second. “Yvette… this may be my last semester.”

Yvette’s pencil trailed off the page, and she looked up, her eyebrows saying, “Excuse me?” so she didn’t have to.

“I can’t do this. I’m working more than I’m studying just to pay for the classes I don’t have time to study for. It’s ridiculous, and I’m tired. I can take a semester off and come back. Retake the class I’m failing because Lord knows I need it to take other classes.”

Yvette put her notebook in the spine of her textbook to mark the place. “No. NO. No. You’re not going to be another Ana. You remember she said she’d come back, and did she ever? No. At least Gloria was bold enough to say that college just wasn’t for her.”

“Ana’s family still needs her. And Gloria is happy, okay? Her baby is doing well, too.” Yvette looked at Elena like she had a bunch of questions on how Elena knew all of this and Yvette didn’t, but Elena continued. “Look, this past semester with the first increase was harder than I’d like, and I don’t want to dig myself in deeper. I’m barely making it as is, you know that.”

“Have you considered asking….”

“Yvette, you know I’m not you. I can’t ask my dad. He’s working on about as much as I am. I can’t even get a loan. Look, I’ve been thinking about this since last semester. I’m not just giving up.” Elena said grabbing her book bag to comb through for her homework, not sure if because she still wanted to try or if it was just to spite Yvette. “Look, maybe I’ll just save up money and come back. Or transfer to a school in El Paso and live with my dad. I just don’t want to think about it now.”
“Mijita, vamos,” Elena’s father, carrying a box down the walkway to their truck, said to his daughter. Elena stood with Yvette at their apartment’s doorstep with the last box, which held most of Elena’s pictures and a few other knick knacks from over the last two and a half years.

“Ay, Padre, un minuto.” Elena turned back to Yvette.

“Don’t be a stranger,” Yvette said, trying to hold back some tears. “You better visit.”

Elena shifted the box to one arm and gave Yvette a hug with the other. “I promise.” She walked away, put the box in the truck bed, and hopped into the passenger seat. She made a vain attempt to get comfortable for the long drive back to El Paso and waved goodbye as Yvette leaned in the doorway.

***

“Es bueno tenerte de vuelta,” Elena’s dad said as she was unpacking the first of her boxes into her childhood bedroom. She knew that her dad would think it was nice to have her back, but she wasn’t so convinced it was that nice to be back.

“Gracias, Papá.” She looked at the faded floral wallpaper and number of ratty stuffed animals sprawled around her floor. She sighed, her heart feeling the weight of what she left behind at TCU. Her clock showed 7:34 pm; she’d normally be at work, tired and hungry, but busy making a life for herself. She picked up a picture from freshman year with her, Yvette, Gloria, and Ana sitting along the edge of Frog Fountain: the stadium is behind them, and they’re hugging each other, with their hair blowing in front of their faces. That first semester was the best one. The second semester, Ana left in the middle. Then Gloria. Now, Elena.

She knew that Yvette had it in her to finish, even slated to graduate with honors in math of all things. Elena couldn’t help but feel a twinge of envy, but mostly she was proud. She knew
how hard Yvette studied and how long she would spend on just one problem. Elena pondered as to how different things might’ve been if she could survive on just an on-campus job like Yvette, but she couldn’t imagine any other way. She didn’t see any other way.

Elena distracted herself by stacking the last of her books on her bookcase. She slid her fingers along the shelf’s edge, feeling every chip at the end of the aged wood, but the pokes didn’t bother her. She looked at the rest of the bookcase, which remained largely unchanged from the myriad of pre-college trinkets she never saw the need to take with her all the way from El Paso. She had some space for her college decorations, and soon there was an odd assortment of things from her elementary unicorn phase to her middle school ocean obsession to her high school music trophies and now her college horned frog collection. She combed through the rest of her things and finally came across her memory box, which was a little more stuffed from letters from freshman year of college.

She reread every letter, some talking about cute boys whose looks she couldn’t recall anymore, others talking about friend drama she forgot existed, and others about how Elena could tell her dad missed her mom. She recalled *the* letter, the one that she threw away into the fire to cement a promise long ago broken. She also thought about all the times she had nearly written since freshman year, all the things she never told her mom, from the stress of her midterms to the stress of uncertainty in whether she could stay at TCU. She wondered if her mom knew anyway.

Elena got up and went to a box for a pen. She sat back in her bed, crisscrossed, and grabbed a random journal and ripped a page out. She took a deep breath.

*Querida Mamá,*
Dear Mama,

I’m sorry it’s been a while. I miss you. I couldn’t do it, and I need you. Please, don’t be too disappointed in me. I’ll work, and I’ll go back and graduate. I promise you. Love you lots.

xo,

Elena

---

Siento que haya pasado un tiempo. Te extraño. No pude hacerlo y te necesito. Por favor, no decepciones en mi. Trabajaré y voy a regresar y me graduaré. Te lo prometo. Te quiero mucho.

xo,

Elena
Water (1970s)
Even though Abby’s dirty blonde and slightly wavy hair looks like most girls at TCU, and even though we haven’t talked in about a year and a half, I can still tell it’s her without looking at her face. It’s like a kind of sixth sense I developed from spending so much time studying for anatomy together back in our freshman year. I was pre-med, she was nursing, and we were both struggling to learn the material.

Like now in Rickel, I still see her around campus. I wish we were strangers because I hate barely nodding when we make eye contact, though I guess this is better than neither of us not acknowledging the other’s existence.

“Why don’t you go say hi?” Tamara asked. I never told her the real reason Abby and I stopped being friends. I never really told Tamara anything, actually; as far as she knew, Abby and I just grew apart over summer and never reconnected, which was believable because I’ve never been good at keeping in touch. I’m lucky Tamara, Kat, and Marie love me enough to practically kick down my door and make me hang out with them.

“I’m too sweaty,” I said, which was true. We were working out.

“So is she,” Tamara said, but I insisted. As we left, we walked by Abby and a friend of hers on the treadmill, and I wondered if she noticed me… I wondered what went through her mind.

***

I didn’t know what hurt my eyes more: looking at the pages of notes I had to study or the tiny print. Each was overwhelming, and I never understood the need to memorize every little thing; in the real world, if I needed to remember the name of a random muscle, I’d just need to look at an anatomy book, and since I planned on being a doctor, I’d probably have one around all the time. Across from me, Abby was hunched over, her nose a grand three inches from the book that her
hair almost entirely engulfed. I’m not sure how she breathed like that. Guess the oxygen seeped through her hair strands.

She swiftly moved from textbook to notebook and back again, oblivious to my intermittent “ahems.” She pulled her hair back in an attempt to keep it out of her face, but the effort was in vain because it immediately fell back, some even getting in her mouth. I sent a hairband at her like a slingshot.

“Heads up!” I shouted as it soared in the air.

Her back jerked straight up, but she still looked down at the hairband that hit her arm. She finally looked at me.

“Just put it on, so you can breathe every so often. Also wouldn’t kill you to take a break every now and then, but I figure you getting oxygen is a more pressing matter.”

“As long as I get it every—” she stopped to look at her notes, “Two minutes, I’ll be fine. You know I NEED to do well on this exam,” she said as she put her hair up. “Or my parents will kill me.”

“Your parents will not kill you for getting a B. You’re gonna be fine. You know this crap like the back of your hand. Hey, which side is the back, anyway?” I flipped my right hand to look at both sides.

She was already nose-deep in her notes again. “The side your nails are on. And you can never know something too well, you know. Especially anatomy. They call this a weed-out class for a reason.”

I walked around the desk to her. I grabbed her pencil, placed it along the book spine, and closed the book.
She looked at me, wide-eyed and mouth gaping. I remained steadfast as she tried to move my hand to get her book back, though she was stronger than I thought. “You,” I said, pointing to her. “Need a break. Maybe you should get out here.”

“Well,” she sighed and sat back, “I was looking forward to seeing the new Water Gardens downtown. Maybe we could do that?”

I thought that was perfect. Tamara, Kat, and Marie and I had planned to go that evening, and since I always talked about my friends to other friends, they at least knew each other were. Tamara, Kat, and Marie used to half-jokingly refer to Abby as “my white friend,” and though it wasn’t wrong, I still asked them to stop. Abby, on the other hand, never really talked about anyone else. I’d seen her around campus with some people, so I assumed she had other friends, but perhaps she didn’t consider them good friends.

I asked her if she wanted to go that night, and for a second, she seemed excited. But when I mentioned that my friends would also be there, her expression muted. “Actually,” she began, “I forgot that some girls from my sorority are supposed to go tonight, and they invited me yesterday. I should probably go with them, but I’ll see you there?” She started packing her bag. I asked if she was sure: she hadn’t mentioned it before, so I wanted to hear about why she chose now to say anything.

“Yes,” she assured. “I didn’t think I would go, but you’re right. I need a break. Thanks for looking out for me.”

The sounds of water gushing to pelt the terranean stone beneath it flooded my ears. I don’t know what I expected exactly; I guess I pictured more flowers and a few quiet fountains, but I suppose that’s too much like the Botanic Gardens. We made our way down the steps towards the bottom
of the active pool, each stair step two steps’ worth of our own tip-toed walking. I felt as though
the compact pressure of the pool pushing probably thousands of gallons of water down the
creeks both kept me in place and would’ve made me a goner if I fell out of it. Didn’t look like I
had much room for error, anyway, and the layered stone would’ve made for a bumpy fall.

“That’s a tragedy waiting to happen,” Tamara said behind me.

“Don’t you start,” I said, not taking my eyes off my feet. I needed some focal point to
ground me; I kept feeling like I was going to trip and fall, and it took more of me than I’d like to
admit to not turn around and make everyone go back up just so I didn’t have to be there
anymore.

I heard Marie yell, “WAIT!” and sucked my stomach in to maintain balance as the shock
of the imperative wore off. Even then, the brief uncertainty convinced me that someone found a
-crack and that the whole thing would come crumbling down. We all turned around and see Marie
tip-toe running to the couple a few steps behind us, Polaroid in hand. She asked them to take our
picture because “it’ll look cool with us going down the steps.”

We each stepped out one foot further to the right than the girl in front of us and lean, so
all our heads were in the picture. “Thanks so much!” she said, yet again tip-toe running to get the
camera and the developing picture.

All of us fit on the bottom two steps, and all the water collected just a few inches below
our feet. Surprisingly, if you stared right at the middle, it was comparably calmer to the rapids
that crashed into it, save for the natural rocking of the water. Marie asked the same couple to take
our pictures again (they were super nice about it), and we made our way back up. Going back up
was mentally easier: my fear of falling up stairs wasn’t as bad, especially since “down” meant
gushing water.
To my right, I heard Kat ask which section of the pool we should see next. (“Which one can we swim in?... what do you mean none?”) To my left, I happened to catch the tail-end of a familiar laugh and in my periphery saw a familiar flick of dirty blonde hair. A double take confirmed that it was Abby, who seemed happy and relaxed. I was glad she didn’t bail on her other friends and did take some time for herself.

“Oh, which one’s Abby?” Kat asked, and I pointed her out. “She seems nice. Are you going to say hi?”

“Yeah, I probably should.” I made my way over. Her back was to me, but some of her friends’ backs weren’t. A couple of them happened to look up and made eye contact as I walked towards them, but they kept laughing when they looked back, so it didn’t seem like they were too fazed about the black girl walking towards them, which made me feel better. I never really interacted with sorority girls aside from Abby; they didn’t look as presumptuous as some of my friends described.

Abby still hadn’t made eye contact with me.

“Hey Abby!” I finally called out. She looked behind her and gave me a polite wave. A few of her friends looked back, so I waved to them as well, but they looked confused. They kept sneaking glances, so I guessed that they were probably talking about me.

I turned around to walk back to my friends when I felt a tap on my shoulder.

“Told you I’d see you here!” she said like her normal self. I felt a little more at ease.

“Glad you didn’t bail! Hey, do you wanna meet my friends? I’d love for y’all to meet; I talk about you a lot.”
Abby looked in their direction, sunk her shoulders in, and pursed her lips, so I didn’t have a good feeling she’d say yes. “Actually, I should probably get back to my friends. I don’t want to lose them, you know?”

“No worries, ahah. Next time.” I accidently made eye contact with one of Abby’s friends, so I smiled. She gave me half a smile and polite wave, and suddenly a few others looked back at me again. Unsettled, I looked back at Abby, hoping she would say something to explain because I really wanted to give Abby’s friends the benefit of the doubt. I mean, it’s 1974, for goodness sake. After the Sixties, you’d think that having friends across races wouldn’t be a big deal, but Abby’s cheeks looked red.

We briefly talking about the next day’s anatomy exam before another friend cut in between us to ask if Abby was going with them. She didn’t even say sorry as she cut me off mid-sentence.

“Well I guess I should get going,” she said, flinging her arm in their direction and slowly walking that way. A few steps out, she halted and turned back to face me. “Hey, you and me. Dinner tomorrow night?”

I have a half-hearted smile. “Sure.”

“You and me. Okie dokie! See you!” She waved goodbye.

I walked back to my friends. One of them suggested we go to the quiet pool for a bit. “Yeah, of course,” I muttered, not making eye contact with any of them. I shook off the internal discord I felt with my conversation with Abby and smiled for another picture.

“Everything okay, Christie?” Tamara asked, and I saw the others circling in, too.

“Did you say hi? I didn’t see y’all talking,” Kat said.

“She’s, um, busy, I guess,” I said.
“Yeah, real busy,” Marie scoffed.

My radio played as I unwound from my day. My anatomy test went okay, so I felt more confident about being pre-med, but I was still mentally drained. I just needed to decompress with some cookies and a book before I met up with Abby later. Thankfully, my roommate wasn’t going to be back until late, so I had the room to myself.

I heard a knock on my door, but I really didn’t want to talk to anyone. I slightly raised the volume and hoped that someone would take that as a hint. When the knocking continued, I gave up and finally opened the door to see Abby, flustered.

“So.” She took a deep breath. “I’m worried about the second part with the nerves, but overall I think I did okay. What about you? You were still there when I left, right?”

I turned my back to her. She followed suit and sat on my roommate’s futon. I told her I thought I did okay and that the nerves were tricky for me, too, even though I knew the nerves very well. She kept talking about how she was annoyed that things that she didn’t think would be on the exam were there and how that wasn’t fair.

I just mumbled “mmhm,” and judging by her constant subtle fidgeting and repositioning, she sensed something was off but didn’t want to ask what. I really didn’t know if I could’ve given her much of an answer, anyway.

I heard the chair creak like she was starting to stand up. I knew in my gut either we were going to talk about it now or never, though I didn’t know which I wanted. “Your friends seemed nice,” I said, taken aback by my own interjection.

She slowly sat back down. “Yeah… they are.” She said she met most of them through her sorority, so they were close. They pledged together or something.
“So sisterhood and all that jazz, huh?” I said. She nodded. “Cool.”

“Your friends seem really cool, too.”

“Yeah, we just kinda found each other, I guess. So, do y’all actually have anything in common, or is it actually just sisterhood?”

“I mean, I guess we all have similar values.”

I asked her what they were. I couldn’t imagine they were too different from mine. She mentioned community, health, friendship, and sisterhood. I’m not sure what came over me, but I finally just asked, “Are we friends?”

She was obviously struck by my question. She kept tilting her head at various angles, and her eyebrows somehow kept furrowing. We’ve studied together enough to know that that’s what she looked like when she’s trying to figure out how muscle fibers connect.

“Are you talking about what happened yesterday?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Honestly, I felt like you just ignored me as much as you could.” Her face unscrunched, and she looked genuinely concerned at the possibility that she may have upset me.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to. It’s just, my friends would ask a lot of questions about you, and I wanted to avoid as many as possible.”

“Questions? I thought we were friends, but I guess it’s not the same as with your sorority sisters or whatever. You don’t talk about them, and you clearly don’t talk about me with them.”

“Look, it’s not personal—” I turned my torso towards her. Of course it’s personal. It’s a damn friendship. It couldn’t be more personal unless we were dating. I opened my mouth to rebut, though every time I did, I couldn’t form a coherent thought. “I don’t know,” she continued. “It’s hard to explain. I guess if you were in a sorority, you’d understand.”

I pursed my lips. “What don’t I understand? The value of friendship?”
“No, it’s just—”

“‘Sisterhood’? I have an actual biological sister.”

“Look, it’s not some superficial thing. I can’t explain. It’s just special.”

“Okay. Fine. I get it. I’ll never understand.”

“Why don’t you join one of yours? I don’t know how your rush works, but maybe you could just be a late rush? We’re only freshmen.”

“My what?” I said.

“Your sororities. I forget what their names are, but I see them around every so often.”

I almost wanted to rattle off all the names because of course I knew. My friends were interested in a few but couldn’t rush until later. I just didn’t want to be in one. “What about yours?” I said.

She sank into her chair. “You wouldn’t like it. It’s just not… you.”

I stood up and started to gather things into my bag for tomorrow. It was only a small notebook and a few writing utensils, but I needed to do something to get some of the energy out.

“Well, can’t exactly argue with that, can I?”

“Don’t make this something it’s not.”

“I’d never make something something it isn’t.”

“So what do you think it is?”

“I know it’s racist.”

“We’re not racist.”

I sighed. I wanted to give Abby and her friends the benefit of the doubt, but the doubt was fading away. I finally had to explain that even if her friends weren’t racist, it wasn’t like sororities were actively recruiting girls who looked like me or my friends. “Evidently,” I
continued, “even publicly maintaining individual friendships with us is hard. At this point, I’m surprised you started talking to me at all.”

“Someone had to.” Her eyes grew wide as she realized she actually said what she’s probably been thinking since the start. “Um, I mean….” She fumbled for a few seconds before coming up with some excuse about how she always felt bad when “anyone, no matter who” didn’t seem to have a friend in class.

“I would’ve been fine,” I said as calm as possible. The last thing I needed was to yell and say something I shouldn’t.

“Oh please. Yeah, sure, Christie, you’re good now, but that first test? You were so lost; you didn’t even have the right book. If I didn’t help you, you would’ve dropped the class.”

I froze. That was among the last things I expected her to say, and I really couldn’t believe that’s what she really thought. We were all lost, her included. So, yeah, I guess it was nice to have a friend in that class, but I would’ve been fine studying alone. And I only had the wrong book because I accidently picked up the one for another type of science right next to it. If that’s how she thought of me, maybe it’s for the best that she didn’t talk about me to her friends. The last thing I needed was to be the little black girl she saved.

She seemed to breathe a little easier as if she felt like she had redeemed herself in her eyes, like if she was right about her influence, she’d be on the right side again.

“So you’re just going to ignore the fact that if you didn’t have me, you would’ve failed the last two tests?”

“I would’ve been fine.”

“Oh please, you thought the funny bone was an actual bone.”
“Well it has ‘bone’ in the name, doesn’t it?” I flailed my arms for a second. “Whatever, it’s not about a bone.”

“So, what, are we not friends?” she asked, standing up from the futon.

“You tell me.”

I woke up with a headache and almost didn’t go to class the next day, but I had already skipped too many times, and I didn’t want Abby thinking she got to me as much as she did. Unfortunately, my book bag didn’t fall to pieces, so I guess I had no excuses to not leave my room. Here we go.

I walked into class a few minutes late and went to my seat, surprised that no one took it; it was a prime back seat. Abby was in an aisle seat a few rows ahead. Guess she wanted me to have the usual spot. We made side-eye contact as I walked by and gave each other stiff smiles and “hey” nods.

“I’m sorry for yesterday,” she said after class. She had waited by the water fountain just outside the room.

I half-wanted to pretend like nothing happened and go back to fun-loving anatomy friends, but I knew it couldn’t be that simple. I composed myself and tried to figure out how I was going to handle this. I leaned over and whispered. “Look around,” I said. Her eyes jerked in each direction, and she looked back at me confused. “Do you see anyone else who looks like me?”

She scanned again, a little slower this time. “No,” she said under her breath.

“Your friends, your sorority… they aren’t ‘me,’ but really, this school isn’t. Look, I don’t think you’re a bad person. I just don’t think we can be friends.”
“Christ—“

“Look, Abby, I know I stick out like a sore thumb. I wish I didn’t, but that’s my reality. I’m already the black girl in every single one of my classes. And I’m tired of being seen as a thumb and not as a whole person because it’s so damn easy for you people to think that I need someone to save me or whatever, and I don’t. And I don’t think you understand.”

I noticed her subtle discernment. Judging by her eyes darting back and forth, she was internally frantically scrambling to find something appropriate to say. I prayed she’d say something like “I’d like to try.” I’d never had to break up with a friend, at least like this.

“Maybe you’re right,” she said.

***

I stopped for water before Tamara and I left Rickel. I hated myself for agreeing to another round of circuits, and the warm water wasn’t helping at all. I almost choked when I turned around to see Abby right behind me.

“Hey,” she said. Did she want to talk to me? What could she have had to say? Was there anything to say?

“Hey,” I said. She looked past me at the water fountain. Oh. I moved to the side, unsure of if I should say anything.

“See you,” she said, walking away.

“What was that?” Tamara asked.

I pushed the fountain for more water, but the sight of it made me nauseous.

“Nothing.”
Black Cat (mid-1980s)
Wes’s heart raced as he felt every pebble between his fingers and speck of dirt underneath his nails. He retraced every step he could imagine but had yet to find his grandfather’s ring, which he assumed slid off his hand walking to or from the library. He had lost some weight and considered wearing it on a chain around his neck, but his ring staying on hadn’t been a problem until that night. *If it’s not here, I don’t know what I’ll do.* He checked his pockets for the fifth time, praying to have somehow missed it before.

The sun setting wasn’t helping, either, and Wes knew that if he was going to find this thing, it better be before it goes down completely. And even still, he had an important midterm he needed to finish studying for, and he was supposed to meet his friend Josh at the library after he went back to his dorm to get the textbook he needed. He continued to retrace his steps, moving from spot to spot, eyes peeled and reacting to every shiny object (though at this point, the sun’s angle made a lot of things shine).

While coming up to the sidewalk he wanted to take, he saw “sidewalk closed” and “detour” signs. He sighed and rolled his eyes. *I swear, this school is always doing something at the most inconvenient times. It’s like the C in TCU stands for “Construction.”* He looked up to see a sliver of the sun in front of him, with sheer darkness creeping up behind him: his self-allotted timeframe was almost up. He walked around and approached the edge of the parking lot. His favorite part of TCU tended to be its greenery, but right now, everything was just dark gray with vague, green undertones, so he’s not as enamored.

“Forget this,” he muttered as he reached into his pocket for his keys to use the mini-flashlight he attached to them. The light flickered for a few seconds before going off completely. He tapped it and hit it against his leg, both efforts to no avail. In frustration, he inhaled through his nose and put his palm on his chest to calm himself. He knew it was getting late, and he didn’t
know if he should cut any more into his study time. *I can always come back tomorrow.* It wasn’t like he was worried about someone stealing it: it wasn’t monetarily valuable or anything, but he grew up admiring his grandfather, who had given him the ring the day he graduated high school. First in the family to do so. His grandfather passed away a year later, and that ring was the closest connection Wes had.

Disheartened, he started to make his way to his dorm, tripped on a low branch, and dropped his keys. As he crouched to feel around for them, he heard distant voices becoming louder. Always curious about how the other half lived, he stayed down and waited to hear about what they were talking about. As they got closer, almost-muffled cat screams caught his ear, and his heart raced. He was careful to not stand up, despite the arches of his feet radiating with discomfort and his hands getting poked and prodded with the plethora of broken branches and loose pebbles. He felt their shallow indentations on his hands as he wiped off the debris, only to put his hands back down.

He situated himself in a less uncomfortable position and looked around to adjust his eyes quicker to the dark. He peered through the loose holes between the leaves and stems of the branch in front of him. He could barely make out both of their figures, much less any distinctive features, but he could see them over the cat they placed on the ground of the parking lot. Its limbs were sprawled apart, and he hadn’t noticed it make a noise in a while and just hoped it wasn’t dead.

“Just find the car,” one of the guys said.

“Which car is it?” The other guy said. The first one told him to look for a license plate that with X89. The second one then said that there were two with an X89. “What if we pick the wrong one?”
“Pretty much everyone here is at that South Africa game, so it would at least go to one of them,” the first guy said. He was talking about the event in Jarvis that allowed students to get a sense of what life was like in apartheid in South Africa. He felt bad because he’d told Dr. Robinson, his geography professor who was heading the event, that he would go but completely forgot about it. Wes internally chuckled at the irony of Dr. Robinson’s midterm being the one he needed to study for but then started realizing that these guys were targeting the car of someone at the game, most of whom were Black.

Wes broke concentration on the conversation when his hands started to feel the pangs from his rigid nails digging into his palm in the fist he subconsciously created. He had considered going to Jarvis — it wasn’t that far away — to warn them that these guys were going to break into their cars (and leave the part about the cat out. He got sick just thinking about it). He doubted anyone would believe him — TCU is a pretty safe campus, and really, who would do that? He could just stand up and walk like he hadn’t seen or heard anything but let them see him and hope that would be enough. He could just stand and sneak away and save himself. Either way, he was tired from just staying there. He felt around for his keys, finding them just behind him. The mini-flashlight flickered and decided to stay on for the first time in God only knows how long. His heart and breathing stopped (he convinced himself that would make a difference) as he placed his entire palm over the one-centimeter-long spotlight and prayed that neither of them noticed anything.

“Did you see that?” the second one asked. His muscles tightened, and he tried to slow his breathing, both to calm down and to reduce the risk of them hearing him if they walked closer.

“No. You’re just paranoid,” the friend said.

“I’m still gonna go check.” *Fuck. fuck. FUCK.*
Wes gripped his keys so tight that he could feel the ends cutting into his skin, but he decided he’d rather bleed than have them jingle and be heard. The guy stopped at the edge of the lot a good five feet from where Wes was, scanned a small radius, shrugged, and turned around.

“I fucking told you,” the friend said in a hushed, albeit loud, voice. “Probably a headlight or something. Now GO FIND THE CAR.”

“Maybe this is a bad idea,” the second guy said. Yes, it’s a terrible idea. Now let me go to my dorm in peace. And in one piece.

“Why are you such a wuss?” the first guy said and headed toward the cars. “It’s over here,” he said, and led the second guy, who was clutching a limp cat body (what the fuck), to a parked car a few spaces away from the shrub edge. As they got closer, Wes heard a few weak, intermittent cries from the cat, so at least he could tell it was alive. Whether or not that was a good thing for the animal, Wes didn’t know.

“It’s not dead, yet?” the first guy said.

“Damn, have some respect,” the second guy said. Wes loved cats as much as the next guy, but he was confused as to where this guy’s line of respect was.

Wes prayed for the courage to stand, yell, do something. He knew the cat was probably going to die regardless, but there were better ways to go. Hell, even if I leave, I have to do something. But he couldn’t move. He learned about “fight or flight,” but he supposed there was a secret third option: freeze. I have to believe God knows what he’s doing, otherwise I’d been either gone or dead a long time ago. Wes knew all too well what could happen if a black guy questioned two white boys with a knife.

He tiptoed to see if there was anyone else around him in the back. He saw car headlights passing in the distance, but no one was walking. At this point, he didn’t know how long he’d
been out here, but it was getting later and later. *Oh my goodness. I forgot about meeting Josh,* he realized. He knew Josh wasn’t the type to overly worry, but Wes also wasn’t the type to be late. He turned to look around at the guys again and heard glass breaking. They broke a window. One guy dropped something, probably a hammer, leaving them just standing there.

“Here, put the cat in,” the first guy said, holding the body for the other guy to take.

“I don’t want to touch a dead cat.”

“It’s not dead.” He shook the body a little bit, and no sounds came out. “Oh, maybe it is. Fine, if you’re gonna be like that...” He lightly tossed the cat into the back headboard, and Wes somehow felt when its head hit the glass and became sick. The guy wiped his hands on the car’s seats, and the two scanned the area before walking closer towards Wes again. *Fuck.*

*Shit, shit, shit. They’re gonna find me and I’ll say I saw nothing, but they’ll know and —.*

They left through the bushes a good few feet to the side of him. He exhaled, realizing he hadn’t actually breathed in a good bit.

As the sound of their footsteps faded, Wes slowly began to feel safe to leave but still had a lingering fear that they were still around in case they wanted to see the reaction of whoever’s car they broke into. He decided to give himself another minute and closed his eyes. *One Mississippi... two Mississippi....*

“What the hell?” Wes heard a familiar male voice yell. He opened his eyes and looked back out the bushes. He saw Dr. Robertson just staring at his car. He jerked to look around at his immediate area and then to the rest of the lot. Disgruntled when he saw no one, he picked up his briefcase and speed-walked back to Jarvis. Wes assumed Dr. Robertson was going to call the police and figured everything would be okay.

***
“Hey man, where were you yesterday?” Josh asked the next day at lunch. Wes knew this question was inevitable, but he really didn’t want to think of a cover story. He just wanted to forget last night even happened. “And where’s your ring?”

Wes hoped they could focus on that. “I don’t know. I was looking for it, and soon enough, it was too late to study. Pretty sure I didn’t even get a B on that midterm.”

“Ah man, sorry about that. That was your grandfather’s ring, right? I know you were close. I can help you keep looking for it, if you’d like.”

“Might take you up on that,” Wes chuckled, grateful for the distraction. He thought about telling Josh the truth, but then Josh starting venting about the midterm, and Wes left well enough alone. He trusted Josh, of course, but the less he had to talk about what happened, the less chance that the wrong person might connect the dots.

“So where do you think you lost it?”

“The lot near Jarvis. I really think it’s a lost cause at this point.”

“Hey man, you never know. Could be like one of those times where you can’t find anything, but then your mom starts looking for it, and it shows up. Spooky.”

“Yeah if I told my mom I lost the ring, she might kill me.”

“Yeah,” Josh said between bites, “but you’d have a clear conscience and be wearing your ring in the coffin.” They laughed and started talking about what their weeks looked like.

Wes decided to visit Dr. Robertson’s office later that day before he headed to Dr. Robinson’s class. He didn’t know what excuse to use for why he was there. Just make conversation about the assignment I didn’t have on me? About the exam I haven’t studied for? He contemplated just saying he saw everything, but he didn’t know how Dr. Robertson would react. Dr. Robertson
was obviously upset, but Wes didn’t know how personal the attack (if one could call it that) was for him. *I suppose I’ll figure it out once I get there.* Wes inched forward, trying to give himself permission to just leave but arguing against himself. He reached Dr. Robertson’s door.

*Dr. Robertson’s office hours for today, 04/18 are cancelled. Sorry for any inconvenience. Test 2 also postponed for Friday, 04/22.*

Wes didn’t know if he should feel relieved or not, but he did anyway. *Does this mean no class?*

“Did you hear about what happened with Dr. R?” a voice behind him asked. He turned around to see Josh, his backpack hanging over one shoulder, geography books in his other hand. He was wide-eyed, and Wes noticed he was breathing like he was unwinding from a jog.

“Um…” Wes’s thoughts blurred together with an internal dialogue on whether or not to tell Josh the truth, some variation of it, or just to deny any knowledge. “What happened?”

“Someone broke into his car last night and put a dead black cat in his backseat.”

Wes didn’t realize the cat was black. It was dark, and he just thought it was dark fur. Black cats are something else though. Someone gives you one alive, they don’t see you as human. Someone gives you one dead….

“Do they know who did it? Any witnesses?” Wes asked, trying to hide a sense of panic.

“They don’t, and I don’t know. It was late, so probably too dark to see anything.”

Wes took a deep breath. *You can trust Josh.* Another breath. “Josh, I—”

“Gentlemen,” a deep voice interrupted. Wes froze, his spine chilling a good ten degrees, enough to knock a bit of wind out him. He closed his mouth, swallowing the air he didn’t fully inhale. Dr. Robertson, in his usual suit and tie, separated Wes and Josh as he walked by, extending a key to unlock his office.
“Oh, Dr. Robertson, how are—” Josh began before he was cut off.

“I’m fine, Mr. Williams. My office hours are still cancelled. So is class, so if you see anyone on your way out, please them know.” He opened his door just enough for him to slide through. He didn’t look at either of them.

“Yes, Sir. I just—”

“I’ll see you both in class Wednesday.” He closed the door.

Wes and Josh looked at each other and silently decided to walk away before saying anything else. Josh looked back, but Wes kept his eyes on the ground; he just wanted to get out.

“How was he so calm? I would be fucking snapping at everyone if someone did that to me, especially since it was just last night,” Josh said right as they walked out of the building.

“Could still tell he was pissed, though. He didn’t even look at us,” Wes said.

“Can you blame him?”

“I don’t know man, but let’s—”

“I mean, what kinda sick person does that?” When Josh just kept talking, Wes knew that he wasn’t paying any attention to whatever Wes had to say. Understandable. Annoying, but understandable.

“LISTEN. Josh.” Wes looked him in the eye, grabbing his shoulder. “I….” He paused to rescan the area. Empty, thank God. “I was there.”

Josh stepped back to where Wes was no longer holding his shoulders. “What do you mean you were there?”

So, Wes told him everything.

“Well damn,” Josh said, one hand combing back through his curls in disbelief. “What are you gonna do? Guess you haven’t told the cops yet?”
“Nah, not yet. I don’t know what I’m going to do. Hell, I’m still trying to process everything.” Wes sat down on a nearby bench, his back prodded by the wooden top edge.

****

Wes had plans for dinner that night with Josh and some other friends at the cafeteria. He wasn’t that hungry, so he just got a burger and fries to pick at while everyone talked. When he got there, they were already talking about Saturday plans. Wes was caught up in his own thoughts and barely catching bits and pieces of the conversation, something about how Suzanne wanted to go dancing, but Joe just wanted to hit the bars, but someone else said whatever else. He was more concerned with the fry he was twisting in circles around the mound of ketchup on his plate.

“Hey, Wes. HEY!”

Wes jerked my head up to the group when he realized they were actually talking to him.

“You okay?” Suzanne asked, concerned. Wes nodded and told them he was just a little tired. He briefly eyed Josh, almost as if he was asking for help.

“So, are you in?” Joe asked. I guess they settled on some plans.

“Yeah,” Wes said, dropping his fry into the ketchup and rustling his hair in frustration. In his peripheral vision, he saw everyone exchange glances, but he didn’t care. He didn’t want to be social anymore, so he mentally started preparing to leave. He still had a bunch of homework, anyway.

A group of white students sat next to them. There was nothing immediately suspicious about their laughter, but his gut told him to stay seated. It was the same feeling that kept him in the bushes. The other group continued talking, and Wes tried to listen in on what they were saying.

“Any update?” one of them asked.
“Nah, man. The cops got nothing. Couldn’t have gone better.” *Fuck. Don’t look.* He tried to sneak a look at the group and almost caught one of their eyes. *FUCK.*

“Good thing there wasn’t anyone around. Would’ve had to rough ‘em up.” This guy made punching motions, and the other one pretended to get knocked out. Wes wondered if the other guy was the second one there.

“What if someone was there, but you didn’t see them?” one of the girls in the group asked.

“Better late than never,” he said and made more punching motions.

“This whole thing is kinda fucked up,” she said.

“Gotta show them who’s really in charge, you know?”

“You can’t be serious,” she scoffed.

“Well…” He shrugged and smirked. The girl’s face curled in disgust, and she left. The other girl at the table, who hadn’t talked since they sat down, followed her. “Women. Too sensitive.”

Wes felt someone poking his shoulder and could almost swear he would’ve gotten whiplash if he turned around any faster. “Hey, what’s up with you, man?” Joe asked.

“Nothing,” Wes said, avoiding eye contact. “Sorry, I’m just tired. I should probably get going. Still have some homework to do.” He stood up and gathered his things, including his largely untouched plate.

“Hey,” Josh said. “Wait up, let me come with. We can work on that, um, geography stuff together.” They gave each other a knowing glance and waved bye to their friends.

“Hey! Hey, you!” a voiced called out as he walked away. *Please, God. Please.* Wes and Josh turned in the direction of the group of white guys. He motioned to himself to make sure
they were talking to him. “Yeah,” the guy said. “You’re in World Geo with Dr. Robertson, right?” Wes nodded, not being able to say anything else. “Loved that class was cancelled. Got some extra studying in. Have you finished the study guide?”

“Um….” He scrambled to stay cool. “I haven’t really even started, honestly.” He spoke slower than he’d like and only managed to make quarter-second eye contact.

“Damn, same, haha. Was hoping for some answers. I have like three other tests this week.”

“Haha, yeah, I get that. Midterm season, you know. Didn’t do so hot on mine today.” Wes dug his nails into his bag strap.

“Yeah, man. Oh well. Thanks anyway.” The guy turned back to the group.

Wes gave a half-wave as he turned, though he knew the other guy wasn’t looking at him anymore. He caught some comment about him being a “weird guy” but shut off his mind to the rest of the conversation. He consciously paced his footsteps and breathing, so he wouldn’t run away or otherwise look frantic. Last thing he needed was to raise flags.

He finally walked out the cafeteria doors and bee-lined for the nearest restroom and threw up his one fry. When he finished, he sat there to calm himself and think. He doubted the police would believe him if he went to them, at least not enough to do anything (they rarely believed racial things like this to be anything more than simple vandalism), much less anything that wouldn’t get him beat up. Or worse. He ran through these ideas with Josh, who still thought that the police were his best bet.
Wes put a quarter in a payphone near campus and dialed the police’s number, written on his palm. He played with the line with his free-hand once someone picked up. *Breathe in. Out. In.*

“Hi, I’d like to leave an anonymous tip….”

He was walking back, feeling a little freer. Did he think anything would actually happen because of his tip? Probably not. The police were pretty dismissive. But still, he did what he knew he had to do, and that’s all he could ask of himself.

He cut across the side of Jarvis, hesitating because it had been less than twenty-four hours since everything happened. But still, it was the quickest way to get to his dorm.

In the corner of his eye, he caught a small glimmer from a shiny object on the ground. He bent down, almost convinced he was kidding himself, but he hadn’t. His grandfather’s ring was hidden under some brush. Wes blew some of the excess dust off and wiped the rest with his shirt. He slid it back onto his finger more easily than he anticipated, realizing how easy it had fallen off. He put the ring on his chain, letting it fall to his chest underneath his shirt.

He walked past the parking lot and saw Dr. Robertson near his car. The window the guys broke had been covered with tape. Wes must’ve been staring more than he thought he was, and Dr. Robertson called out to him.

“Something I can help you with, Mr. Smith?” he asked.

“I just… I hope they catch the guys who did that.”

“Yeah, so do I, Mr. Smith, so do I. Don’t hold your breath, though?”

Wes took a deep breath, and Dr. Robinson chuckled. Wes laughed nervously; he didn’t mean to be funny, but at least Dr. Robinson was taking it well.

“You’re alright, Mr. Smith,” Dr. Robinson said, putting his shoulder on Wes’s arm. “I needed a laugh today.”
“Alright enough for extra credit?”

“Don’t push it,” Dr. Robinson said, smiling and shaking his head. “You do need it though, so I would use the extra couple of days to study.”

Wes gave a flat smile. “Yes, Sir.”

Dr. Robertson said goodbye and drove away. Wes felt the ring around his neck, and his breath caught again.
First-Name Basis (1995)
Criss-crossed on a bench outside her dorm, Maggie (short for Magdalena, but anytime someone hears her real name, they look taken aback and say something completely different) hunched over her weathered copy of Shakespeare’s *Othello* laid on the gap between her thighs. Off to her side were her notebook for writing down important quotations for her essay and her copy of Steven King’s latest novel, *Pet Sematary*, which she allowed herself to read after every few parts of Shakespeare. Her head bobbed along to music, which probably wasn’t helping her understanding, but she didn’t care.

Maggie felt a tap on her shoulder and turned off her Walkman. Looking up, she saw Paige, her blonde hair in a braid draped along the side of her neck and onto her shoulder.

“Hey!” Maggie said, tucking one thin, foam-lined earpiece behind her ear. “What’s up?”

“Not much,” Paige said. “Just saw you and wanted to see if you were working on the essay for lit.”

“Oh yeah, my essay’s going to be terrible. Shakespeare and I are not friends.” Maggie sighed and looked at her book.

“At least we have a week left to finish it.”

“Yeah, might wrap this up pretty soon and read my other book,” she said, holding up *Pet Sematary*. The cover’s combination of angry cat, eerie cemetery, and black and red color scheme disturbed Paige.


“That’s not true!” Maggie piped back. “I go to nice coffee shops and sometimes shopping.”

“With who?”
“I like spending time by myself. It clears my head.” Maggie adjusted herself on the bench.

“That’s sad,” Paige said. “Look, some of us are going to eat and then to see The Scarlet Letter.”

“You didn’t even finish the book.” Maggie said.

“So? It has Demi Moore.”

Maggie sighed. “Who’s going?” Paige listed off names from her sorority and some from a fraternity that Maggie recognized from talking to Paige, but she didn’t them personally know. Maggie pursed her lip and spoke slower, in case she changed her mind midsentence and wanted to say something else. “I… should probably stay in.” She avoided eye contact.

Paige shook her head. “One of these days, Maggie, one of these days.”

After Paige left, Maggie went back upstairs. She put her books down near her computer and leaned into her wooden chair, getting up after almost losing her balance on the back two legs. She lie on her bed, her head peering up at the bottom of her roommate’s lofted bed. Maggie stared at taped pictures of high school friends and family on her wall. She grabbed her raggedy childhood teddy bear, hugged it tightly, and looked at the clock. 10:11 P.M.

She didn’t want to wait another hour to make a wish that wouldn’t come true, so she closed her eyes and whispered into the rosary around her neck.

Maggie glanced at her essay to see a solid “C-” and a bunch of comments in the margins she couldn’t bring herself to study. She flipped through the six pages and barely saw a paragraph without some type of feedback. She even eyed occasional question marks around some ideas,
though she remembered turning it in thinking everything made sense. She put the paper between randomly selected pages of her spiral, taking care that her grade didn’t peek out from the edges.

She recomposed herself and opened her spiral to take new notes as Professor Phillips spoke. With her free hand, she gripped her rosary underneath her shirt and moved her hand to fiddle with the strands against her chest. She felt her heartbeat quicken but couldn’t tell if her actual breathing was getting faster. *Ay Dios mio.* She started to try to calm herself down, not knowing why she was so panicky in the first place. *It’s just one essay, right?*

She knocked on her professor’s door, hoping his office hours were as lonely as he complained they were week after week. The last thing she wanted was someone in her class to know she did so poorly.

“Come in,” Professor Phillips said. She walked in to see him skimming papers, his reading glasses on the tip of his nose. He peered up. “Oh, Magdalena,” he said. He was the only professor who actually insisted he get her name right. “I can probably guess why you’re here. Please, sit.”

She did so without speaking. Her bag was thin enough to keep on. She didn’t have a class before or after but didn’t want to go empty handed and look even less prepared than her essay made her seem, so she took an almost-empty backpack.

“I’ll be honest, Magdalena,” he began. “I was disappointed.”

“I had enough sources, though, didn’t I? And analysis?”

“Sources, yes,” he conceded. “You actually got full points for those. Better than most others. But your analysis failed you.” He reiterated the prompt: six pages on a key theme in *Othello*, and how Shakespeare’s social commentary could be seen today. “You chose racial
prejudice,” he continued. “But you didn’t actually tie much into today’s society. It was more hypotheticals. Realistic hypotheticals, but I don’t think you did the required extra research to give specifics.”

_Well, he wasn’t wrong._

“They weren’t all hypotheticals,” she said. “I got some inspiration from some friends back home. They just didn’t get put in newspapers.” Some things are too commonplace that if the paper writes on every instance of it, there would be nothing else in it.

Professor Phillips sighed. “I believe it. But, still, I asked for concrete sources.” Maggie nodded. “Look, I don’t normally do this, but I can give you until Friday to redo it if you’d like. I know this isn’t your usual work.”

Maggie swallowed, struck by the offer. She gripped her rosary again. _Gracias a Dios._ “That would be great. Thank you so much. I won’t disappoint you.”

Professor Phillips smiled. “You better not. And do the research next time!”

As she walked down the hall, trying to slow her heartbeat (her parents would’ve killed her, she was sure, if her GPA dropped), she happened to eye a _Daily Skiff_ paper. “Official Language Debate Continues,” the headline read. Apparently, people still wanted to make English the official language of Texas, and Maggie thought about her parents. They already struggle enough to talk to other people without her around to translate, and she couldn’t imagine that getting any harder. Maggie was lucky she grew up speaking English. Since coming to college, the only time she really only spoke Spanish was during phone calls to her parents. How that suddenly impacted so many other people to the point that it became a political agenda, she’d never know.
Her fist clenched the paper. She saw no need to take it, so she put it back underneath a few other copies to hide the wrinkles and maybe smooth them out a bit. As she walked away, she realized that she might be able to use that article as a source for her revised paper, so she went back, grabbed the same copy she hid, and smoothed it out herself.

When Maggie finally got to the library to comb through recent newspapers for sources, she only had two days left to redo the paper. She found things on Greek life at TCU, which mainly seemed, like much commentary on racism nowadays, more subtle than overt. The more she looked and less she found, the more she figured that anything that happened just wasn’t big enough to make papers. That, or there was some heartbreaking story.

For the sake of her sanity amongst a busy week, she turned in a paper focusing on gender and how society orients itself around it. At least she had an excuse to look up things about popular icons she always heard about but didn’t know much about, like Gwen Stefani. (Sure, she knew some songs, but that was pretty much it.)

She got a B+ on the paper, which made her feel a little better, but Professor Phillips, for some reason, gave her a weird look of disappointment when he handed it back to her. She supposed he wanted her to stick with her original approach, but that wasn’t a stipulation of the extension, so she didn’t worry too much about it. She got her essay and her other homework done. That’s all she cared about right then.

Maggie, settled on a corner seat in a nearby coffee shop, had her nose in *Pet Sematary*, finally getting a chance to read it again. Unfortunately, it was getting a little too cold outside on her
favorite bench, but the warmth she felt as her coffee went from her tongue to her stomach and radiated throughout her body was worth it.

She saw someone approaching her out of the corner of her eye and kept her nose in her book, hoping the stranger wouldn’t actually talk to her.

“Excuse me?” a hushed feminine voice said. “May I sit with you?”

Maggie looked up. She recognized the girl from around campus. They smiled at each other whenever they crossed paths but had never officially met. She was slightly darker than Maggie and also wore a rosary around her neck. Maggie looked around to see why this girl would ask to sit near a stranger, but looking around she realized they were the only two brown people in the whole place. Maggie smiled softly and moved her bag from the seat next to her.

“Aracely,” the girl said.

“Maggi—, Magdalena.” The girls nodded and got back to their respective studies. They didn’t speak another word until place closed. Even then, it was just a simple, “Well, have a good night.”

***

Maggie looked at herself in the mirror. She knew that she didn’t look “country-western” enough for Billy Bob’s in her plain maroon v-neck and Chuck Taylors, but Paige said nothing when she picked Maggie up from her dorm. Paige even said Maggie looked cute and assured her that her shoes would be fine on the dance floor, though she might find herself slipping every so often.

“Oh, okay good,” Maggie said, knowing that she wouldn’t be dancing as much as Paige thought.

Through the night, Maggie pretty much stayed off to the side and people-watched. She nursed a rum and coke for a while, using that as an excuse to not get out and dance whenever
Paige asked. If Paige hadn’t driven, Maggie would’ve made an excuse to leave after about an hour and a half, which was about ninety-five.

“Wooo,” Paige said. “I need a break. You having fun?” She leaned against the wooden railing next to Maggie. Maggie nodded and took a sip of her drink. One of Paige’s other friends, Charles, came around to ask Paige to dance, but she declined. “Maybe Maggie would?” Paige asked, but Maggie said she was tired. “Maybe the next one,” Paige said. Maggie felt bad because she knew Paige really wanted her to have a good time, but no one had talked to Maggie without Paige directing the conversation. In the beginning, they were nice enough to ask about her major, where she was from—the basics—but that was the extent of conscious inclusion.

A few songs later, the DJ announced last call, which the group apparently took as their cue to leave. Someone called for a picture as they left, and one of the girls asked Maggie to take it. Maggie took a couple before Paige bolted after a passing couple and asked if they could take a picture and called Maggie over to give them the camera, so she could also be in the picture. When Paige later got the pictures developed, they discovered the lighting was terrible; the neon signs around them made everyone darker than normal, and Maggie, with what one girl called her “nice tan,” might’ve almost faded into the background if she wasn’t in the front row.

***

Maggie sat in her typical middle-of-the-front seat on the second day of class for the spring semester. She flipped through the syllabus for her Intro to Rhetoric class, the class she signed up for with Phillips again just because she needed another class. She was already familiar with the material enough because Phillips incorporated some of it into the last class she had with him. She focused on the “solo or with a partner” paper and presentation and looked around the room. Almost everyone had a friend. Guess I’ll be solo.
As Phillips began to take roll, the door opened, and the girl from the coffee shop whose name she couldn’t remember walked in.

“Sorry,” the girl said to Phillips. “Thought this class was on the fourth floor.”

“It’s okay this time. Thank you. Please sit down.” She sat right next to Maggie.

When class let out, the girl grabbed Maggie’s arm and leaned in as they walked. “Hey, Magdalena, do you think he hates me?”

Maggie was almost unnerved by the sound of her full name; only her parents really used it. “Phillips? No, he just hates tardiness. Last semester, there was a guy who was always fifteen minutes late for a fifty-minute class. I don’t know if I would say Phillips hated him, but….” Maggie shrugged. “I’m so sorry, I feel bad I don’t remember your name.”

“Aracely!” she said. “Don’t worry about it. Names are hard.”

“You remembered mine.”

“I remember pretty names!” Aracely said. Maggie smiled. Her mom always told her it was a pretty name, too. “Pretty name for a pretty girl!” she’d say, and teenaged Maggie was always embarrassed.

That Wednesday in class, Phillips introduced their paper and presentation project. It wouldn’t be due until the midterm, but he suggested starting to think about it in case anything interesting came up between now and then.

“You’re going to analyze a newspaper article using all the tactics we’ll be looking at between now and the midterm. It can be any article, any news source, any length. Word to the wise: don’t try to use anything that barely covers one full column. You’d probably have trouble meeting the minimum requirements,” Phillips explained. He went into different considerations
they would have to look at—such as audience, appeals, and devices—and how these topics would be covered over lecture.

Maggie drowned out the overview of the difference between pathos, ethos, and logos and started thinking about what she’d like to do (she’d probably need to actually look at more newspapers), but Aracely whispered that she had some ideas in mind. They never talked about working together on the project, but Maggie just nodded as Aracely scribbled whatever Phillips wrote on the chalkboard.

When Phillips dismissed the class, Aracely started listing a bunch of topics that they could cover: Operation Desert Storm, apartheid in South Africa, peace in the Middle East. Maggie didn’t know too much about any of these.

“OH,” Aracely interrupted herself. “I’ve seen a few articles on that English-Only bill they want to pass. We could definitely do that. Let’s do that. We’ll probably have a good few presentations on some of that other stuff, anyway.”

Maggie just nodded, relieved that it was something she had some familiarity with.

“Do you want to meet up at some point?” Aracely asked.

“It’s only the first week of school. We have time,” Maggie said. Aracely agreed, but still roped Maggie into meeting later that week. Aracely suggested the coffee shop they met at just about a month prior. Maggie didn’t see much of a point (they could have easily set something right after class), but she didn’t have any believable excuse not to. Besides, it seemed like Aracely thought of Maggie as a good friend, and Maggie didn’t want to ruin that.

Maggie walked into the coffee shop to see Aracely reading the latest edition of the *Daily Skiff* and laughing. As she put her bag on the seat opposite Aracely, Aracely looked up and asked if
she’d seen the paper. Maggie admitted she didn’t exactly read the Daily Skiff often, and Aracely directed her to an article about how “TCU should try to improve the way it operates.”

“‘TCU’s SAT average,’” Aracely read, “‘is equivalent to a glass of tap water (not with lemon, mind you; that would be hyperbole). The graduation rate is around 59 percent, which means a good portion of your friends will transfer, die, or just drop out.’”

“What even is—” Maggie started to ask before Aracely motioned to her to wait.

“If God came to earth in an unprecedented media blitz and bellowed in an ominous, prophetic way, ‘TCU, compared with universities, sucks…’ Provost Koehler would still be quoted as saying, ‘You know, I’m not sure what meaning he is trying to convey and whether it has any validity concerning TCU.’ Wow, this dude knows his way around words. And kinda looks like Chandler from FRIENDS.”

Maggie squinted at the black and white image and agreed. “We could just do our project on that article. It even mentions hyperbole, so that’s one device down.”

“We could, but I still like the idea of doing something related to the English-only thing,” Aracely said, pointing to the article above the one she just read from. It was an opinion piece that argued that English should be the official and only language taught in schools but agreed that everyone should be able to speak whatever language they wanted at home. “‘I believe that everybody who wishes to live in the U.S. should be required to learn English, but we should likewise encourage people to learn other languages,’” Aracely quoted. “And here,” she continued, “it says that English is the ‘most important language… in the world.’”

Maggie just stared at the paper and make an extended mmmmmm sound.

“See?” Aracely asked. “A lot to unpack here. But you were right. We have all semester, so we can just work on this every so often. Anyway, what does your week look like?”
Maggie thought about making an excuse to leave; they seemed to be done with what Aracely wanted to do, after all. And Maggie still didn’t think she and Aracely were exactly friends. “Um, not much. Some readings. That’s about it.”

“Are you free Friday night? Some friends and I were having a little party. Nothing fancy, just hanging out at my apartment.”

Maggie nodded and tried to think of something to say but was interrupted by a sudden hug from Paige.

“Maggie!” Paige called out as she walked towards Maggie and Aracely. “How are you? I haven’t seen you yet this semester!”

“Hey! Yeah, I’ve just been getting used to my new schedule. How are you?”

“Good! Just trying to catch up with everyone. Hi there!” Paige said, turning to Aracely.

“I’m Paige.” She stuck out her hand.

“Aracely,” she said, shaking Paige’s hand.

“Can you say that again?”

“Aracely,” she said, a bit slower.

“That’s so pretty!” Paige said. Aracely smiled and excused herself to a nearby payphone to make a call. Paige asked Maggie if she was free Friday: her friends were going to some club, and she thought Maggie might want a night out. Maggie noticed Paige was disappointed when she mentioned plans with Aracely, and Maggie hoped Paige didn’t notice the relief on Maggie’s face from avoiding a night out with Paige’s friends.

Aracely had a loud laugh, and in the lull of the conversation, they (and other people) heard Aracely making some joke in Spanish. Maggie chuckled at the bits that she heard.

Paige shifted in her seat. “Just wish she wasn’t speaking Spanish.”
Maggie jerked her head a bit in response. Not wanting to make the comment more than what it was, she half-jokingly said, “Are you trying to eavesdrop or something?”

“No, of course not. I just like to know what’s going on around me.”

“But this isn’t around you. She’s over there.”

“Whatever,” Paige said. “Anyway, I need to get going. WE need to catch up soon.” Paige waved goodbye to Paige as Aracely came back.

“You’re just a riot, aren’t you?” Maggie asked. Aracely laughed.

“Your friend seems nice,” Aracely said, readjusting herself in her seat. “Does everyone else call you ‘Maggie’?”

“A lot of people here do. Magdalena is… hard for people to say sometimes. I pretty much just introduce myself as ‘Maggie’ here to make things simple.”

“So? She’s your friend, right? She can make the effort, if you wanted. Or, if you want, I can call you ‘Maggie.’”

“It’s whatever. I really don’t care. I do like my full name, and no one else has it here; I’ve met three other Maggies already. But it doesn’t matter, only my parents and a few hometown friends call me by it anyway. Oh, and Phillips.”

“I’ll stick with ‘Magdalena,’” Aracely said with a grin. Maggie smiled back.

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Maggie pulled up to Aracely’s apartment, worried that she would either be underdressed or overdressed, but everyone said she looked cute, complementing her gold hoops and eyeliner. Aracely offered a margarita, and Maggie took it and settled on the couch as Aracely introduced her to Candace, Melissa, and Edith.
“Okay, now we can start,” Aracely said, walking to a coat closet. Maggie didn’t know what to expect her to bring out, but she certainly didn’t think it would be Monopoly.

“Okay, Magdalena,” Melissa said, surprising Maggie by using her full name. “Fair warning, I play to win.”

“She cheats,” Edith added. Melissa hit her with a pillow.

Two hours in, and it was a more intense game than Maggie anticipated. She didn’t talk much outside of her turn, though the others consistently made the effort to ask her questions about her life and loved that she was studying English.

“We already do enough reading for classes,” Candace said, taking a sip of her third margarita for the night. “To read outside of that, cómo se dice, for pleasure? No, thank you.” Aracely noted that Maggie was an avid Stephen King fan like her. “More power to you,” Candace said, giving them a mini toast before taking another sip.

Though the radio was low in the background, everyone’s head perked when they heard the all-too-familiar “Heyyyyy yeah!” from Selena’s “Bidi Bidi Bom Bom.” They took a break from the game to sing along and dance, and Maggie even forgot that she tried to never dance in front of other people. She was already more comfortable around them than Paige’s friends after knowing them for months.

“RIP La Reina,” Candace said, wiping a small tear from her eye.

“Still feels like she died yesterday,” Edith said. They all took a moment before resuming the game.

When it was all over, Maggie won, officially dethroning Maggie as the undefeated champion. “You’re alright,” Melissa said. “Still a pendeja for taking my railroads but alright.” Maggie felt relieved.
“Alright, you know I need a picture,” Candace said. “I’m making a scrapbook, and I need some more of my girls.”

“Do you want me to take it?” Maggie asked.

“What? No, you need to be in it! I’ll take it,” Candace said. Aracely offered to take it because she complained she looked like a mess, but Candace just shooed her away and told her to get on the couch. Maggie tried to quickly move next to Aracely, but Edith and Melissa already both had one arm around her.

In the weeks to come, Maggie hung around Aracely and her friends more often. Since none of them went to TCU (Edith and Candace went to Tarrant Community College, and Melissa was taking a gap year to work and help support her family), Maggie spent a good chunk of her weekends with them. They usually had plans before Paige asked if she was free, and between this and Maggie needing to meet up with Aracely to work on their project, Paige was increasingly becoming irked that Maggie wasn’t making that kind of time for her.

“I miss you,” Paige said one day when she caught Maggie reading in between classes. Maggie looked confused because they still ran into each other decently often. “You always hang out with them,” she continued, with a slight look of disdain on her face.

“They,” Maggie said, “are my friends.”

“I’m your friend. And what about our group? It’s not the same without you.”

“Look…” Maggie said. She explained that she thought Paige’s friends were “nice and all,” but she’s pretty sure none of them actually care if she’s there on a given night much less if they got her name right. “It’s just different with Aracely and them. I don’t know what to tell you.”
Maggie’s phone went off, and after she answered, she mouthed that it was her dad. He was just calling to check in (he was concerned because she missed their weekly phone call), and she briefly caught him up on her busy midterm schedule and that she had another ten minutes before her next class. The conversation was all in Spanish, and Paige squirmed through it. *Crap,* she thought, remembering Paige’s comments on Aracely speaking Spanish. However, Paige resettled into a smile once Maggie hung up.

“Everything okay?” Paige asked. Maggie just explained that her dad wanted to make sure she was okay and let her know that her cousin was engaged. “I didn’t know you spoke Spanish.”

“Yeah, pretty much exclusively with my parents. They don’t know much English.”

“Why not?”

“Harder to learn languages as you get older, you know? And English is hard enough already.”

Maggie could tell Paige was combing through a bunch of thoughts before she finally settled on, “Do you speak Spanish with your other friends?”

Maggie took a second before saying, “Yeah, sometimes. It’s more a mix, I suppose. Spanglish. Probably a little more English. It just depends.”

“Well, I guess if I ever meet them, I’ll have to tell them to only speak English around me.”

“I doubt they would actually speak Spanish to you,” Maggie said, and Paige rolled her eyes. She really didn’t want to start a fight with Paige about this.

“Hey, *chica,*” Aracely said as she walked in from the side. “Class starts in two minutes. You ready?” Maggie left with her, assuring Paige that they would talk later.
After class, Maggie caught Aracely up on everything that was going on with Paige. She sighed and explained that she didn’t know what to do about her friendship. Aracely told her that she had a similar experience with her first roommate.

“She wasn’t a terrible person, but she didn’t know any better, and I didn’t know how to explain why her ‘jokes’ weren’t funny. So, I just left.”

“So are you suggesting I just… leave Paige?”

“You clearly care about her, and she obviously misses you. So, hang out with her tonight. The girls will understand. But when you do, try to explain why her comments bother you and go from there. Push comes to shove, you always have us.”

When Maggie finally talked to Paige, it wasn’t particularly dramatic like Maggie was concerned about. No one yelled, no one cried, and no one left especially angry. Paige kept repeating that politics shouldn’t get in the way of a good friendship; plenty of people are friends with those who have different views. Maggie knew this was true, and she never considered politics to be a deal breaker for friendships. But then again, she never talked about politics with her friends, and she didn’t even explicitly bring up politics here; Paige made the jump. Maggie thought that perhaps she was always afraid of having conversations like hers and Paige’s. Perhaps she was always afraid that she would have to choose between beliefs she didn’t actually think about too much and a friend that she would probably see no matter what. The question of which truly mattered more never had to be asked until now, and even then, Paige was giving her an easy way out; Maggie could have both, but she didn’t feel like she could wholeheartedly have both. She would always be turning her head away from either Paige or part of herself, whichever was least relevant at the time.
“So you’re really choosing them, people you’ve known for maybe two months, over me?” Paige said.

Maggie never thought about looking at it from that perspective, but she figured Paige looking at it like that meant Paige didn’t fully understand where Maggie was coming from. Either way. Maggie wasn’t choosing between Paige and Aracely, Edith, Candace, and Melissa. She just found herself a little more with Aracely and them. She didn’t realize she was missing a true feeling of community until she started hanging out with them. They understood her family better than Paige, who had probably been her best friend for the last semester or so. If anything, she and Paige just grew apart.

“Do you even understand where I’m coming from?” Maggie asked one last time.

“I just don’t see why it has to be a big deal,” Paige said yet again.

“Did I ever tell you my full first name is Magdalena?”

Paige repeated it slowly. “Magdal-ay-na? No, you never told me that. It’s pretty. But why are you bringing it up now?”

“I never really cared that people here couldn’t say my name properly, so I let them call me Maggie; no one ever really asked if it was short for anything.”

Paige sat back, and Maggie knew she was combing through all the times they hung out since they met, and she realized she never asked Maggie what her full name was. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine. Like I said, I didn’t care. But now, I do.”

“But ‘Maggie’ is so much easier.”

And that’s when Maggie knew that her friendship with Paige had been easy until then because she made it easy on Paige.
Magdalena went through everything with all the girls over drinks at Aracely’s apartment.

“Good riddance,” Melissa said.

“Melissa!” Candace snapped. “She’s kidding. We know it’s always tough losing a friend. She seemed like a nice person.”

“Yeah,” Melissa said. “I’m sure she would be nice to the 911 operator she’d call if she ever heard us speaking Spanish.”

“Melissa!” Candace said again.

“What? Are you actually going to say I’m wrong? Look, I’m just saying that Magdalena needs people who understand her.”

“It’s not the time,” Edith said.

“Thanks, y’all,” Magdalena said as she took a sip of her wine. Edith gave her a side hug, and the conversation turned to that night’s plans. It was Aracely’s birthday, so they were going bar hopping. Magdalena looked around at her laughing friends. If she lost one friend in Paige, she gained a few more in them.

The doorbell rang. “Oh! I forgot,” Aracely said. “I invited Gabby. Y’all have met her, right?” Edith, Melissa, and Candace shook their heads yes. “So Magdalena, I’ll just need to introduce you. She’s my sister.”

Aracely opened the door and squeezed Gabby, who handed Aracely a small bag and said, “Happy birthday!”

Gabby walked in and immediately locked eyes with Magdalena. “Hey, I’m Gabby. Nice to meet you!”

Magdalena smiled and shook Gabby’s hand. “Is your name short for ‘Gabriela’?”
“Yeah, but people just call me ‘Gabby’ for short. They say I talk a lot, so it fits.” Gabby said, and they both chuckled. “Your name?”

“Oh! Sorry. I’m Magg—” She stopped herself and smiled. “I’m Magdalena.”
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