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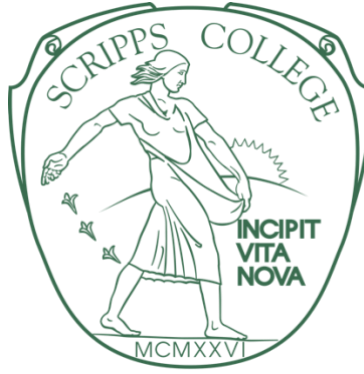


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**OF MONSTERS AND MEN: DECONSTRUCTING PATRIARCHAL RELATIONSHIPS
WHILE REDEFINING “FAMILY” IN SEVILLE**

by

Annika Johnson

**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE
OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

**PROFESSOR DRAKE
PROFESSOR SIMSHAW
PROFESSOR SANJUAN-PASTOR**

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PREFACE

Narcissistic Personality Disorder (noun) - “characterized especially by an exaggerated sense of self-importance, persistent need for admiration, lack of empathy for others, excessive pride in achievements, and snobbish, disdainful, or patronizing attitudes” - Merriam-Webster

People at the most extreme end of the Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) spectrum display six characteristics: entitlement, manipulative behavior, patterns of grandiosity, need for admiration, lack of empathy, and arrogance.¹ I often look for these symptoms in myself because narcissism runs in families, and it wouldn't be the first thing Dad genetically passed down. While everyone can possess elements of narcissism, only about 0.5% of the United States' population is diagnosed with narcissism.² Men, in particular, make up 75% of diagnosed narcissists in the U.S.³

The disorder is difficult to diagnose in America because narcissistic qualities in men – who have historically represented more than 90% of American CEOs – are celebrated by our capitalist-driven culture.⁴ These “audacious” individuals make strong Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) with their transformative visions, oratory skills, audacity, and grandiose ideas.⁵ Oftentimes, their successes disguise their weaknesses: lack of empathy, sensitivity to criticism, and poor listening with a dislike for mentoring. In contrast, narcissistic women's grandiose ideas are more likely to be dismissed as crazy, arrogance as hostility, and need for admiration as attention-seeking.⁶

¹ “Narcissism: 5 Signs to Help You Spot Narcissistic Behavior.” *WebMD*, WebMD, <https://www.webmd.com/mental-health/narcissism-symptoms-signs#091e9c5e82091a06-2-3>.

² “Signs of Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) Statistics: Learn More.” *The Recovery Village Drug and Alcohol Rehab*, 13 Sept. 2022, <https://www.therecoveryvillage.com/mental-health/narcissistic-personality-disorder/npd-statistics/#:~:text=Approximately%200.5%25%20of%20the%20United,narcissistic%20personality%20disorder%20are%20m>.

³ Sheenie Ambardar, MD. “Narcissistic Personality Disorder.” *Practice Essentials, Background, Pathophysiology and Etiology*, Medscape, 19 July 2021, <https://emedicine.medscape.com/article/1519417-overview>.

⁴ Hinchliffe, Emma. “Women Run More than 10% of Fortune 500 Companies for the First Time.” *SHRM*, 30 Jan. 2023, <https://www.shrm.org/executive/resources/articles/pages/women-run-ten-percent-fortune-500.aspx>.

⁵ “Narcissistic Leaders: The Incredible Pros, the Inevitable Cons.” *Harvard Business Review*, 1 Aug. 2022, <https://hbr.org/2004/01/narcissistic-leaders-the-incredible-pros-the-inevitable-cons#:~:text=Obsessives%20make%20better%20leaders%E2%80%94they,an%20ability%20to%20attract%20followers>.

⁶ Ingersoll, Alicia R., et al. “Power, Status and Expectations: How Narcissism Manifests among Women CEOs.” *Journal of Business Ethics*, vol. 158, no. 4, Sept. 2019, pp. 893–907., <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-017-3730-0>.

There is a positive correlation between perceived corporate success and the rise of narcissism in the United States in what has been called a “narcissism epidemic.” Dr. Jean Twenge and Dr. Keith Campbell likened its quick spread to America’s obesity epidemic.⁷ In this epidemic, though, men have remained the large majority of diagnosed narcissists.⁸ This suggests that American society rewards male narcissism in business at the expense of camouflaging abusive men in private as transformative leaders in public.

My dad was one of these CEOs. Well, co-CEO of an information technology company with two equally corrupt men. Dad’s grandiosity came in the form of inventions he had full confidence in but never worked on, spending money on cruises and treats, and being the poker dealer at my mom’s ladies nights. His need for admiration was deeply, and complicatedly, entwined with his relationship with us three kids. When we were dependent on my mom for food, diaper changes, and baths – my dad competed with us for her attention. His behavior was illogical at times; coming home drunk and incapacitated to draw her attention instead of helping her take care of us.

As we got older and more independent, his mindset shifted and he fought to be our favorite parent. Regardless of his faults, he was our dad and we dealt with him in an intimate family setting for 12 years before my parents divorced. Even though Dad held all the financial power and tried to starve us out of Mom’s custody – withholding a growing total of \$270,000 in spousal and child support – intimidation was his main weapon. He knew our car. He knew where we lived. He knew where we attended swim practice and school. As long as we remained in Orange County, California we were within his reach.

⁷ Twenge, Jean M., and W. Keith Campbell. “Introduction: The Growing Narcissism in American Culture.” *The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement*, Atria Books, New York, 2013.

⁸ Grijalva, Emily, et al. “Gender Differences in Narcissism: A Meta-Analytic Review.” *University of Nebraska-Lincoln Digital Commons*, Dec. 2014, <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1004&context=pdharms>. Accessed 20 Mar. 2023.

Ironically, I still chose to attend Scripps College in Claremont, California. I was enticed by the supportive environment of the CMS swim team, their outdoor pool that basked in the sun with the snowy San Gabriel mountains behind it, and the generous financial aid I received. Yet even a sophomore at Scripps, I entertained the idea of running far away from my home state. These feelings landed me at my home stay in Seville in the fall of 2021 where I grappled with feelings of discomfort around my host dad Paco. He was a three-time Spanish Olympian with a bear-like build and gruff but patient voice. He physically fit my ideas of *machismo*; a form of toxic masculinity that made me expect him to be like my father. Instead, Paco showed a level of care to his family that I had never seen from a father before. He confused my preconception of paternal figures, and unfamiliar men in general, as monsters. Because that was my normal.

My father's NPD diagnosis came so late in my childhood that his unexplained, unstable, and explosive behavior formed my perception of paternal figures. As I grew older and struggled to understand him and his actions, I began to characterize him as a monster. Monsters in the media function as physical representations of evil that are conquered by the end of the story. This provides the audience a sense of empowerment and a reassurance of the natural order of the world. For example, Bram Stoker kills Dracula in the end, Imhotep dies in Stephen Sommer's film *The Mummy* (1999), and it's implied The Creature perishes in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Using David Gilmore's definition of monsters as "embodiments of terror" and "grotesque hybrids" of human and animal parts, of great size and strength that possess "inherent evil towards humans,"⁹ I understood monsters to be tangible beings that put a face to intangible fears.

While I never thought Dad was vanquishable, seeing him as a metaphorical monster disempowered him and put distance between us emotionally. In his preface to Monster Theory

⁹GILMORE, DAVID D. "WHY STUDY MONSTERS?" *Monsters: Evil Beings, Mythical Beasts, and All Manner of Imaginary Terrors*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003, pp. 1–10. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt3fhdqm.4>. Accessed 2 Apr. 2023.

(1996), Jeffrey Jerome Cohen explained America's cultural fascination with monsters as a "desire to name that which is difficult to apprehend and to domesticate (and therefore disempower) that which threatens." It is the reason American depictions of monsters range from "the demonic disemboweler of slasher films" like Freddy Krueger and "sickeningly cute plush toy[s] for children" like Barney.¹⁰ Though the first creatures to build my cultural consciousness of monsters were on the loveable end of that spectrum, notably the seven Wild Things in Maurice Sendak's children's book *Where the Wild Things Are*, it expanded to include monsters in films (claymation, animated, and live action). Eventually, skeletal depictions of my father appeared in my dreams too. These stress dreams reinforced the emotional wall I put up between us. He became an irredeemable monster and the only thing I allowed myself to feel in relation to him was fear.

Haunting is a unique trait of the monstrous in relation to time, Cohen also explains, as the monster "introjects the disturbing, repressed, but formative traumas of "pre-" into the sensory moment of "post-," binding the one irrevocably to the other.

"The monster commands, 'Remember me.'"

As I attended my Sevillian Novel and Cinema class every Tuesday and Thursday morning, I gradually learned how past trauma – on a national scale – is a unique monster in itself, haunting us and warping our behavior in the present if we stay silent about it. The military dictatorship of Francisco Franco after the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) is a time period blurred by the "willful amnesia" of the older generations.¹¹ They often refuse to talk about it due to the shame of their relatives' involvement and the pain of so much loss. Franco's nationalist regime slaughtered 200,000 soldiers, bombed an unknown number of civilians, and executed an estimated 200,000

¹⁰Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome, editor. "Preface: In a Time of Monsters." *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, NED-New edition, University of Minnesota Press, 1996, pp. vii–xiv. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.cttsq4d.3>. Accessed 28 Apr. 2023.

¹¹ Preston, Paul. *The Spanish Holocaust: Inquisition and Extermination in Twentieth-Century Spain*. HarperPress, 2012.

people during the war.¹² The continued violence against civilians after the war created a long-lasting national trauma that became blanketed in silence. One of Franco's senior generals defended their violence, saying, "It is necessary to create terror. We have to create the impression of mastery, eliminating without scruples or hesitation all those who do not think as we do."¹³ Franco was a man deserving of the label "monster."

Later in the semester, Professor Ángel de Quintana took our class to the movie theater to watch Pedro Almodovar's new movie *Parallel Mothers* (2021). I was moved by the storyline of the Spanish Civil War and the search for lost relatives in mass graves in a movie made years after the end of the dictatorship. It demonstrated the necessity for continued conversation of this era to facilitate healing. As I watched Penelope Cruz, a representation of Spanish youth putting together the missing pieces of Spain's generational trauma, I recognized the importance of conversation in my own healing journey. I realized that the pain Dad caused me in the past made me unfair to others.

As I began to realize the purpose of this project, paralleling these two healing journeys linked by their location, themes of silence, and uses of media, I dug deeper into Spanish film history to see and understand how long conversations about Franco's dictatorship had been going on. I found that director Víctor Erice used monstrous imagery to indirectly critique Franco's regime. In 1973, two years before Franco's death, Erice released *The Spirit of the Beehive* which used the horror and fantastical genre, the monstrous, and the child's perspective to symbolically depict the horridness of life in Francoist Spain and avoid censorship. After Franco, the theme of the monstrous continued to be an angle to explore national trauma and facilitate country-wide

¹² Preston, Paul. "Prologue." *The Spanish Holocaust: Inquisition and Extermination in Twentieth-Century Spain*, HarperPress, Great Britain, 2012.

¹³ Preston, Paul. "Chapter 6: Mola's Terror: The Purging of Navarre, Galicia, Castile, and León." *The Spanish Holocaust: Inquisition and Extermination in Twentieth-Century Spain*, HarperPress, Great Britain, 2012, p. 179.

repair in Spain. The perspective of an innocent child became a lens that allowed audiences to interact with the wondrous mythological monsters and perceive the hidden monsters that, like narcissists, can be more difficult to spot. In the early 2000s, Guillermo Del Toro directed *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006) which uses a similar child perspective and fantastical elements as Erice's works, even alluding to *Spirit of the Beehive* directly at times.¹⁴ While watching *Pan's Labyrinth*, I noticed similar patriarchal power dynamics as the ones within my own family. I related to the young protagonist Ophelia and how she uses the fantastical—physically and in her storytelling—to cope with and escape a paternal monster.

The necessity of conversations to heal and educate young generations in Spain on the impact of their national trauma spurred my own kairotic moment for this project. While my familial trauma is nothing like the trauma suffered under Franco's regime, I found comfort in the similar process of continued generational reflection and searches for answers. Young adulthood is a relatively peaceful time of my life. I have more control. That also makes it a time to remember and learn from the impact of my past. The past never really leaves us, but trying to ignore it would only allow it to cloud my judgment, harden my empathy, and tarnish my ability to forgive.

The wide reach of media creative nonfiction inspired me to pen a memoir that facilitates conversations and healing for those affected by parental NPD while also providing a window into what modern childhood is like for older generations. I took inspiration from Spanish and American memoirs about toxic parents and families including *Nada* by Carmen Laforet. I was enthralled with her use of imagery to describe her family members in ways that reveal their character instantly, and by her own process of using writing to heal and understand. I was also influenced by the use of matter-of-fact reporting in Jeannette Walls' *The Glass Castle* to reflect on

¹⁴Smith, Paul Julian. "Pan's Labyrinth (El Laberinto Del Fauno)." *Film Quarterly*, vol. 60, no. 4, 2007, pp. 4–9. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.1525/fq.2007.60.4.4>. Accessed 3 Apr. 2023.

absentee and abusive parenting she experienced and in Jennette McCurdy's *I'm Glad My Mom Died* to depict her relationship with her narcissistic mother. Both authors embody their childhood thought processes and emotions which guide the reader through the experience of their confusion, exploration, and self-reflection in real-time. McCurdy's story was particularly compelling because she is unlearning the normalcy of her mother's behaviors as an adult. The exponential increase in the number of labels she places on her mother's actions at the end reflects her growing recognition of the abuse.

I have chosen to write a memoir with a braided structure. The braided structure is a unique tool I learned about from Leslie Jamison's *The Empathy Exams* in Professor Drake's Creative Nonfiction course, and Brenda Miller's *Swerve* that allows me to combine threads of my childhood, study abroad and historical research of Spain with my relationships to intimacy, monsters, and independence and bring the reader into my evolving understanding of family. I did not find braided memoirs by Americans abroad to draw inspiration from that specifically paralleled their own healing journey with national conversations about the historical traumas of their new setting.

Here I present my own Frankenstein. Suturing themes of forgiveness and family across the past and the present and about 6,000 miles, my thesis re-examines the monstrous narrative of my father and my childhood. I explored the questions: Does a patriarchal society inherently create monsters that we have to face or are the monsters the exception? *How* do paternal figures become monstrous? And in the end, does their trauma mean they deserve forgiveness? I arrived at the conclusion that the monsters are the exception, but the definition of family within a culture dictates whether we disown the narcissists entirely or simply acknowledge them as what they are.

Of Monsters and Men: Deconstructing Patriarchal Relationships While Redefining “Family” in Seville

One calm Sunday afternoon in Seville, about three months into my homestay, the cold seeped into the white tile floors of the house and nipped at our feet. My host family and I gathered around the small kitchen table for *almuerzo*¹⁵ and Paco’s feet poked out from beneath it wearing red Minnie Mouse slippers. Paco, a six-foot-two three-time Spanish Olympian, liked to stay up late and sleep in. His gray hair was often wild and ruffled and his clothes were wrinkled when I ran into him in the dark hallway. During the day, I scuffled around with silent footsteps and snuck out of the front door to avoid him. My heart pounded and I held my breath in those moments, but I didn’t understand why. I dismissed my awkwardness for sleep deprivation that was inflicted by my remote sports journalism job and my late-night adventures to tapas bars with friends.

Paco stood up and walked a few steps to the kitchen counter, on which sat a gigantic cast iron pan filled to the brim with his homemade paella. His stature dwarfed the small space—a kitchen where two people can’t stand back-to-back, so you would have to squeeze past Paco at the stove if you wanted to reach the trash or toaster—and I realized the most helpful thing I could do was remain seated. Paco dished out portions for us with care which only made my chest tighten more. I felt guilty. *Why do I feel so unsure and uncomfortable around him?* It felt unfair.

As we sat around the compact table, his 21-year-old daughter Ana hugged him before sitting down on a plastic stool, excitedly telling him about something in Spanish. Her curls were wild and blonde-kissed from the sun; bouncing with the same energy as her hands when she speaks. She was clearly her father’s daughter, a national canoeing champion of Spain who spent hours on the Guadalquivir River nearby. Her competition medals (as well as her siblings’) hung on

¹⁵ Lunch, the largest and most family-centered meal of the day in Seville.

the corners of framed canoeing certificates and team photos along the otherwise modest hallway. There was a presence of family on each certificate in the form of small baby pictures of the kids and photos of Paco holding them wedged into the front of the frames. At the table, Paco listened to Ana intently, giving short and enthusiastic answers. “Qué?!”¹⁶ he replied, lingering on the last syllable in his deep, gruff morning voice. His bushy eyebrows leapt up in an exaggerated expression of surprise. Then, he cleared his throat, and his voice became soft and full of patience. He was giving her some sort of advice.

I couldn’t decipher what they were talking about, not because my language comprehension was faulty, but because I was distracted by Paco’s cozy slippers. *Stop staring*, I chided myself, but it was too late. Ana noticed my eyes lingering on his shoes and she laughed before telling me they were hers and asking how great they look on him. *He’s wearing his daughter’s Minnie Mouse slippers*. My eyes watered for some reason, and I felt embarrassed. Paco and Ana continued to laugh, and I joined them, wishing I could act normal during intimate moments like these.

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It was the early 2000’s and my twin sister, older brother, and I (ages six and seven) were tucked into the black leather couch in the living room. The high ceilings of Fancy House (House #2) could fit a 12-foot-tall Christmas tree and made for a perfect movie room; Dad set up the projector to show films on the wall to the left of our piano and air hockey table. It was another Friday movie night and Mom was out. “Abazabas!” my dad exclaimed, pulling various candies out of a plastic bag. I tried to match his excitement about the tough, chewy banana-flavored candy, eventually accepting one and gnawing on it purposefully. *Maybe I can wiggle my loose baby*

¹⁶ “What?!”

tooth. I don't remember House #1 and by House #6 our ceilings were much lower, the leather couch was long gone, and movie nights became scarce.

Dad was obsessed with showing us films that gave me nightmares. The worst were *X-Men* (2000), where a minor villain's face grotesquely melts through jail bars, and *Coraline* (2009) where the villain turns into a giant spider and threatens to sew buttons into her eye sockets. I was equally terrified by the supernatural villain Red Skull in *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011), a Nazi agent whose head is skinless and bright, blood-red. My nightmares force me to watch Senator Kelly's skin liquify on loop—his eyeballs popping out of his melting face and his mouth twisting—before he lands in a pale, bloody puddle on the floor. Other nights, I'm on a metal-grate ramp facing Red Skull where he stands gloating with his white, repulsive smile that has no lips or skin surrounding it. My legs are cemented to the floor and eventually terror overwhelms me, and I beg him to catch me to end the dream. He lashes out and pushes me off the ramp to my death and my body relaxes as it falls.

These nightmares were avoidable, though, and I quickly learned to stay away from Dad's movie nights. I remember listening to the entirety of *Star Wars: The Clone Wars* from one room over because I feared General Grievous (a murderous cyborg with a hacking cough who hunted Jedis). The fight scenes sounded scarier without the visuals but sounds never gave the monsters a path into my dreams. My brother often left those movie nights too, after which point, Dad would turn to Leah and say, "It looks like it's just you and me," with an excited sigh. It was him and her against the world; he often emphasized that she was *his* daughter while Doug and I were my mom's. Leah was a spunky kid—a bit of a rebel—and Dad made her feel special by telling her she was mature enough to watch those movies. The divide between us kids became larger when I tattled to Mom about the scary movies Dad showed us when she was away. She praised me for

confiding in her and reassured me that he shouldn't be doing that, but that didn't make Dad's "Well now you've ruined it" sting any less. I felt bad for fracturing his trust and ruining his game. But for some reason breaking the rules just didn't excite me in the way it did him. Leah confided in Mom too, years later when he showed us *Jumanji* in House #3. Dad's anger and bitterness rose up again, casting a dark shadow over the one activity he relied on to bond with us.

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One month before my 20th birthday, Mom walked me through check-in at the Los Angeles International Airport (LAX), waving to me as I went up the escalator to security. As I spent the next 16 hours in the air on my way to Seville, I covertly recorded the details of the date I had the day before with a guy from my swim team. I contorted in my seat and folded the pages of my notebook so the older lady next to me wouldn't see. The air of mystery surrounding my hosts also occupied my mind. *Is it wrong for me to be excited about getting assigned a Spanish family?*

The homestay matchmaking process had been equal parts nerve wracking and thrilling. After filling out a questionnaire about being a collegiate swimmer, writing professionally about aquatic sports, and having no dietary restrictions, CIEE emailed me my housing information. They laid out my host family's information in a neat little box that made it clear my host mom organized this. Her name was listed first followed by "other members of the house: marido Paco, hijos Jorge 14 años, Helena 13 años y Ana 20 años."¹⁷ Their professions and hobbies section included that they were canoeing and paddling athletes who enjoyed biking, walking, and reading; I hit the athlete's jackpot. Their contact information was attached so I emailed the family to introduce myself the next day, with the meek subject line "Hola!" I felt sheepish because her

¹⁷ "Husband Paco, children Jorge (14 years old), Helena (13 years old), and Ana (20 years old)."

response was sweet but brief, saying they all were excited to meet me tomorrow and to let her know if I needed anything.

After the flights, and getting bussed to La Plaza de Cuba, I waited briefly outside the bus stop with the ten-or-so Los Remedios students before I heard an animated voice.¹⁸ “Annie!” a beautiful woman with wild, black curls and smile lines decorating her face, greeted me loudly. She put the emphasis on the “Ahn” which sounds strange, but she said it with so much love that I didn’t mind. Helena spoke quickly as she helped drag one of my purple suitcases across the cobblestones. She told me that her husband Paco was a three-time Olympian in canoeing and her three kids were all canoeing champions of Spain in their respective age groups. I pictured Paco as an athletic, macho version of my friend’s dad who startled me once when I slept over at their house as he walked around the house shirtless. I felt bad for Mr. Oltman because clearly nobody told him I was there; he was nearly as scared as me. *Hopefully Paco at least knows I’m coming.*

As Helena explained the city and how our meals and my house key would work to me, I sheepishly replied, “Ok!” “Ok!” and “Ok!” with a smile.

“Vale,” she corrected me quickly, “aquí decimos ‘vale’ y no ‘ok.’”¹⁹

“Ay!” she exclaimed and quickly pulled me out of the green bicycle lanes that flank the sidewalks. We continued down the streets lined with orange trees and tall apartment-style buildings (*pisos*, I learned.) The first level of each building was a shop; there was a pharmacy, a bakery, a Pikachu merch store, a grocery store, and many clothing and jewelry shops. When we entered her building, there was a beige-tiled ramp and stairs to a small red elevator. It barely fit Helena and I despite our slender statures. “Annie es como yo,” she later told Paco, “Come comida

¹⁸ Los Remedios is a commercial and suburban neighborhood in Seville, across the bridge from the city center.

¹⁹ “Vale, here we say vale instead of ok.”

de flacas.²⁰” The tiny death box chugged up to floor three while Helena made sincere small talk with me. I felt incompetent as my nerves limited the Spanish vocabulary that I had spent six years cultivating. I started to panic as I realized that I was 5,855 miles away from home and the entire North Atlantic Ocean separated me from everything and everyone I knew. *This is where I’ll be spending the next 3-and-a-half months.* Those statistics of distance and time gave me a feeling of both overwhelming anxiety and safety. Here, I wouldn’t have to look over my shoulder or open the front door a crack to make sure Dad wasn’t hiding behind our minivan, waiting to pounce. *I’m finally out of reach.*

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Wednesday night. Post-swim practice. Dad’s new red Ford F-150 truck was parked a few houses down, crouching in the shadows. Mom ushered us—about 11 and 12 years old—into House #4 which was dark except for the eerie Christmas lights we had left strewn around our stair railing. She quickly locked the door and corralled Leah, Doug, and I in the corner of the living room, the farthest space from the front door. She was our protector—standing tall at five-foot-eleven with a crown of wild blond curls—but her voice wavered as she tried to convey our danger to the 911 operator. I hugged our two dogs as Dad’s large figure approached the door. The sound of his fists banging on the door cracked through the silence that blanketed the house. We held our breath and tried to hush the dogs who had begun barking, but it was no use, he knew we were in there. Dad was incessant; his fists drummed on for 20 minutes. He began yelling, and his voice layered over Mom’s, our screams, and Tillie and George’s howls.

We had changed the locks, but Dad’s 200-pound, six-foot-five frame was being piloted by a narcissist with no realistic sense of the limits of his physical body. *He’s going to break down the*

²⁰ “Annie is like me. She eats ‘skinny people’ food.” I didn’t tell her that this isn’t entirely true.

door. The police will never get here in time. Bang! I begged for it all to stop. Dad had been spending time with favorite child again, alcohol who turned him into a creature I could never understand. After 5'o'clock he'd come home as either oppressively happy or ready to pick a fight and win. Because he always won. Sometimes, his return came with the promise of spankings if he found out we had misbehaved. There was a certain psychopathic enjoyment he derived from planning violence against his children and carrying it out. He egged my sister on at the dinner table, goading her into fights so she would put a toe out of line and he could hit her. The threat of his violence was enough to silence me. And even if I had figured out which side of Dad was walking through the front door at night, my sense of safety was fleeting. He could turn at any moment.

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As Helena and I entered the apartment, I was surprised by its modest size. We stepped into the living room where the wall was decorated with Paco's Olympic certificates, medals, and his oars. Helena led me down the hallway that connected the entire apartment to my room. I barely had the chance to set my luggage down before my host sister Ana greeted me politely. Then, to everyone else's quiet dismay, my youngest host sister Helena (nicknamed Bimba) ran up to me and kissed my cheeks. Helena coaxed her off me apologetically. "Lo siento," she laughed, "Es el saludo normal, pero por el COVID..."²¹ she trailed off and mimed the germ-friendly elbow tapping that she had clearly told Bimba to give me. It's not that I had forgotten about the pandemic—I wore a mask on the plane—but in the moment, I felt special to receive the normal Sevillian greeting. I learned that Ana had just gotten her first COVID vaccine dose, about a year and a half after I had mine (Spain rolled out their vaccines later than America and Ana postponed

²¹ "Sorry. It's the normal greeting but because of COVID..."

it longer to avoid soreness and symptoms during canoeing competitions.) *Why would they let a stranger stay with them during a pandemic?*

Helena had a gift for explaining everything with sounds to traverse our language barrier. The first morning—after I slept for 10 hours and only emerged from my room when my bladder threatened to burst—she showed me the small washing machine that was tucked into the corner of the kitchen. It was stationed by the toaster and the huge jamón²² leg resting on the counter, hoof and all. “La lavadora come todo,” she said with a laugh as she put her hands up to her mouth in claw shapes and made a *schlep-schlep-schlep* sound, as if imitating a mouse eating cheese.²³ “¿Tienes una bolsa? ¿Para tus calcetines?”²⁴

Later, Helena took me up to the roof to show me how to dry my laundry on the clotheslines. The small red elevator made a clanging noise as it reached the top floor and then we climbed up a few extra stairs before opening the heavy door to the roof. The view of staggered stucco city rooftops, powerlines, and blue sky was captivating. Deep red bricks lined the outer wall of our roof, acting as a sort of guardrail about as high as my waist. I followed Helena to a grid of metal chain link fences that enclosed our square of lines and separated us from our neighbors. She showed me a white plastic box full of pins, some plastic, some wooden, some chipped. Their assorted colors reminded me of sprinkles.

Helena then reached into the stiff laundry basket and pulled out my oldest pair of faded Hanes underwear. I was mortified. Some of the pairs were ridden with holes, others were stained by time. My siblings and I had been doing the family laundry as part of our chores from a young age. *I can do my own here*, I thought, mentally begging her to stop. I unclenched my fists and

²² Ham.

²³ “The washing machine eats everything.”

²⁴ “Do you have a [garment] bag? For your socks?”

grabbed a clothespin to speed up the process. But even when I jumped in, she kept going. As she continued to pin up my old underwear, one by one, I had one thought: *I'm glad I lost my virginity two nights before. Otherwise, this would be the most vulnerable moment of my life.* Helena smiled sweetly at me, probably asking me about my family and my home, as she pinned up my underwear, bras, and sweaty airport clothes and let them dry in the wind for every rooftop to see.

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"You look just like her," Dad told me as I sat in his lap in the living room of House #4. I, age nine or ten, cringed at his soft-spoken voice. *Where exactly was this going? And how far, this time?* My dad saw the spirit of his beautiful, brunette mother, Cheryl, in me. She was a kind and gentle woman who loved riding horses and knew how to speak to animals. She died when Dad was seventeen and became the inspiration for my middle name. He then told me I would never be able to be a fast swimmer because I'd have big breasts like her soon. "And you see those girls on TV in those tech suits," he said, motioning how flat their chests are with his hands. My sister, however, who resembled his grandmother, would be an Olympian one day, he said.

"I feel my mom watching over me," Dad continued, "I know she's there." I perked up at this, confused. We weren't religious, we didn't believe in God.

A year later in House #4, Dad came into my room and interrupted my clarinet practice, an oddly recurring action for the person who bought me the instrument. My body tensed as I laid my clarinet across my lap. The house was empty and everyone else was at swim practice. *Was he sober?* After a long pause he told me, "I'm a man and I have needs," trying to justify his affair. "And your mom's sex drive...do you know what that is?" It felt wrong. I didn't want to talk about it. But he did. He painted Mom as a pathetic, helpless figure who could never provide him what he deserved; what women were supposed to do. *Just stay quiet and this will end soon.* My silent nods seemed to suffice for the approval he was looking for. After about 20 minutes, he said, "You'll

understand one day,” and left. I closed my door, let out a sigh of relief, and sat back in my lilac room unsure of what to do.

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One Friday morning, I slept in late. The Sevillian sun was awake, but its harshest rays were blocked by the tall buildings, resulting in a soft glow that floated into my room and nudged my eyelids open. It felt like the calm before the storm if the storm clouds were the raging 99-degree September heat. Our piso was shaped like a vertically oriented rectangular prism with a square-shaped hole going all the way down. This placed my bedroom window in line with the kitchen, so I could peer into it from my bed. It was now nearing lunchtime and I could see Paco in the kitchen, cooking and listening to the radio. He was singing along to “Umbrella” by Rihanna. His ruffled gray hair reminded me of a cockatoo as he swayed along and stirred the pan on the stove. I chuckled before smushing my face back into the pillow sleepily.

“Ahníe?” He called down the hall a few minutes later to get my attention. “La comida está lista, si tu quieres,”²⁵ He told me politely, gesturing with his hands that I could come eat it whenever I’d like. Now, in twenty minutes, whenever.

“Vale!” I responded quickly with a smile, but I stayed in my room a few minutes longer to quell my nerves. I felt inadequate at small talk with him. Helena and I could chat about anything, but I never knew what to say to Paco who was quieter than his wife. My awkwardness was especially frustrating for me because Paco and I were home alone together most days since Helena went to work and the kids had school and canoeing practice. I eventually learned that he could always talk to me about food. One night, Helena showed me the huge canister of gazpacho Paco

²⁵ “The food is ready, if you want.”

made in the fridge—saying he makes it too salty and spicy for anyone else—and welcomed me to eat it. He seemed pleased that I liked it too.

I slowly made my way to the kitchen where Paco handed me a plate of salmon and warned me to be careful of its spiny bones. He told me how he used to make his paella with mariscos,²⁶ head-and-shell-on, but after his kids complained about having to take the shell off, he put less of them in. And how he knew they would never eat this bone-riddled fish. I accepted the plate and sat down at one head of the table, my designated seat where they often left my lunches and dinners under a plastic, microwaveable cover.

Then, Helena and Bimba joined us, but the younger Helena seemed glum, poking her utensils around her plate of *pescaíto frito*²⁷ and refusing to eat. Her mom told her in a disapproving tone that she had to eat what was on her plate, and to not even think about having the other snacks or junk food. Bimba eyed the leftover pizza resting on the stove but was met with a stern command. “No, pizza, no. Necesitas comer comida real,”²⁸ Helena told her sharply. Paco was sitting across the table, beside Bimba who responded to her Mom with little more than a grumble. She still refused to eat. At this point, I knew what was coming next: yelling, taking away her plate, grounding her, or even maybe a quick smack. I waited for her father to be the enforcer. *Please just take a few bites.*

Instead, Paco’s expression softened, and he asked her what was wrong. There was silence. He then grabbed a piece of pizza and added it to her plate. Helena protested and tried to stop him. “¿Qué?” he said, lingering on the last syllable and making a what-else-should-I-do gesture with his hands. “Puede comer las dos cosas, siempre que coma,”²⁹ he said.

²⁶ Shellfish. In his paella, this mainly referred to shrimp and clams.

²⁷ A dish of small, fried fish, typically anchovies, calamari, grouper, or mullet.

²⁸ “You need to eat real food.”

²⁹ “She can eat both, as long as she eats.”

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I was caught staring in the mirror a lot growing up, brushing my brown hair streaked with highlights from swimming in the sun multiple times a day. I'd often be the last one ready to leave the house because I'd check my reflection, just one more time, before we'd leave. *Was it anxiety? Was it self-obsession? Did the genetic components of Dad's narcissism trickle down to me? Or did the bristles of the brush scratching my scalp just feel calming?*

I'm not sure where this instinct of staring in mirrors came from. In public, I didn't consider myself to be anything special; I was a lanky and uncoordinated kid. *Almost* tall enough to be a model, my mom would say. I had an overbite and wore braces to correct my absurdly crooked teeth, so I smiled with my mouth closed from 4th grade through 8th grade. I wasn't smooth socially either; I attended speech therapy to improve my pronunciation. But other times, I felt gorgeous. One day, my kindergarten teacher Mrs. Green took us outside one by one to take photos for our end of year slideshow for the parents. She posed me up in front of a tree and brushed out my long, caramel-brown, wavy hair and fanned it out over my light-blue long sleeve shirt. I blushed when my photo came up on the slide show and all the parents gasped.

My ego managed to coexist with my feelings of insecurity as a teenager. Physically, I had acne, cap and goggle tans from swimming, and was often sunburned. While dermatologists prescribed benzoyl peroxide and clindamycin solutions, I felt like my acne corresponded with how I was behaving. Whenever I got into fights with my sister or said ugly things—like yelling at Leah in the car for belting out and butchering a way-too-low-register song by Panic at the Disco while she drove me to school—I felt my physical insecurities grow. I would look into our bathroom mirror at home, my face red and raw from my picking, and saw my own monstrosity—my

impatience, my jealousy, my ego, my attention-craving—reflected on my face. I hated it, but I couldn't stop, so every few weeks I declawed myself with nail clippers to reset.

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Each week I expected an explanation for the Bareas' gracious hospitality. Their home was relatively small with the one long hallway connecting the master bedroom, two small bedrooms, a living room, and combined dining and lounge area where Helena often fell asleep while watching *la télé*.³⁰ Ana and Bimba shared one room which was packed with two beds, a desk, and dressers, while I slept in a small room next to them with my own bed, desk, dresser, and closet. My desk became cluttered with school papers, postcards and stamps, and some Spanish knick knacks I picked up, but I made sure to keep the floor clear for Helena who came in about once a week to mop. I was especially fond of the small fake plant that Helena placed on top of the bookshelf that acted as my headboard. The apartment was sprinkled with these plastic plants, Helena said, because she always kills the real ones.

All five of them shared one small bathroom so that I could have the other, a closet-sized space with a toilet and a sink. Knowing how difficult it is to share a bathroom with five people, I opted to shower at the gym after my morning pool workouts. One day, I came home from school and greeted Paco who was sitting on the couch. I soon learned that he had a heart condition that prevented him from doing much else other than cooking and hanging out in the living room. He had been on the waiting list for surgery for 12 months. But this was good news, Helena told me, because the maximum he would have to wait is 15 months. And at least this meant it was nothing so bad that it would require immediate surgery.

³⁰ Television or TV.

“Puedes usar nuestro baño para ducharte, ¿vale?”³¹ Paco told me hesitantly after I was halfway down the hall. I paused. *I know it was a 40-minute walk home, but do I smell that bad?*

“Vale.” I responded with confusion. He seemed to be starting to understand my level of anxiousness and worried that it would somehow lead me to forego showering for three weeks. Two days later, he told me again that I was allowed to use their shower. “Vale,” I repeated and then explained, “A menudo, me ducho en el gimnasio después de nadar.”³² He looked visibly relieved.

One night, I noticed Jorge sitting in the kitchen alone wearing his standard attire of shorts and nothing but a chain around his neck. I approached him and he tore his eyes away from the loud YouTube soccer video he was watching, looking a bit sheepish and startled. “Tengo una pregunta,” I said, “Estoy durmiendo en tu cuarto?”³³

“Sí,”³⁴ he said nonchalantly. There was a pause.

“¿Estás bien?”³⁵

“Sí, duermo por el sofá”³⁶

I know that. I routinely saw him sleeping there when I came back late at night from tapas bars with friends and I had to sneak past him. Other times, I crept past him in the mornings to go to the gym and swim. I had to stifle many laughs when I noticed him contorted in an odd position with his face smushed into the pillow. “Lo sé, pero, ¿estás bien? ¿Estás cómodo?”³⁷ I asked, pushing further. He seemed confused about why I was still asking. He was comfortable in the

³¹ “You can use our bathroom to shower, ok?”

³² “Often, I also shower at the gym after swimming.”

³³ “I have a question. Am I sleeping in your bedroom?”

³⁴ “Yes.”

³⁵ “Are you okay?”

³⁶ “Yeah, I sleep on the couch.”

³⁷ “I know, but are you okay? Are you comfortable?”

living room, he insisted, and kept snacking on the Manchego cheese Helena stocked up on when she noticed how much I liked it. Still confused—I knew that Doug despised sleeping in our living room back home—I headed back to my room.

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[Trigger warning, mention of self-harm]

I learned to love packing over the course of my childhood as my idea of home became spread out over six houses, each smaller than the previous. We went from hosting neighborhood gatherings, poker nights, pool parties, and Swedish Christmas festivities in House #2 to never inviting friends over once we reached House #4, a mint green abomination whose size we referred to as “cozy.” We lived in House #6, a back house, before we became legally homeless and moved in with my grandpa, where my mom and I shared a room and had to climb torturous, steep stairs to get to it. My sister’s room was across from us and my brother slept out in a room detached from the house in the backyard.

I remember sitting in that room alone one night. It was dark and I was wrestling with my clarinet scales. Nothing good ever happened at night in that house. One time my Dad sat in the driveway with Leah for an hour pretending to sympathize with her while demonizing my mom. Other times, my mom, sister, brother, and I would argue in circles for hours—about not receiving equal punishments or sneaking extra food—with no resolution. These experiences made home draining. We were out of the house 14 hours a day during the week—between morning swim practice, a full school day fueled by our high school’s free breakfast and lunch program, another swim practice, and the freeway traffic on the way home—and when we were home, I felt like we were fighting half of the time.

But that night I was alone with no one to blame for my frustrations other than myself. *I’m not a good clarinet player. I’m not practicing enough. I don’t have time. My teacher is going to be*

able to tell that I'm forging my practice logs and I'm never going to get better. I saw the sharp edges of my metal music stand and had an idea to quiet my frantic thoughts. I knew people who cut themselves. They said it felt freeing, like a release of the adrenaline that coursed wildly through their body. I grabbed the scissors, and they weighed heavy in my hands. *If I do this what if I can never stop? Addiction is genetic and this might just be my thing.* I sobbed at the idea, alone in my room with no one knowing how low I was feeling. I angrily threw the scissors down and made a promise to 13-year-old me: *I will never do this.* I'm lucky that I had the choice.

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"How's that?" my sister asked, adjusting my laptop on a metal folding chair a few feet from my trundle bed. Normally we kept as much distance from each other as possible in the small room we shared. But tonight, she climbed into my bed so she could lean over and watch.

"A little higher—can you bring it closer actually?" I replied.

It was the fall of 2020, and we were back in my grandpa's house. We were setting up for our movie night, complete with Hot Cheetos from the 99 Cents store. "This looks creepy," Leah said, astutely picking up on Guillermo Del Toro's signature dark, fantastical nature from the thumbnail of *Pan's Labyrinth*. I agreed and had been scared to watch, but it was homework, so we portioned out the Cheetos and pressed play.

Right away, the antagonist Vidal reminded me of my father. The moment Ofelia and her pregnant mother Carmen arrive at the camp, he forces Carmen into a wheelchair despite her refusal. I remember Dad guilt-tripping us into doing chores at an early age by saying, "If you don't, then your mom will be in a wheelchair in just a few years." While she did suffer from extreme pain caused by chronic illnesses, he painted her as incapable. This seemed to be part of a plan to make us easier to manipulate as he discredited and broke down our only other adult. Still,

Dad exempted himself from chores, locking himself in his home office to play Civilization on his PC.

Likewise, Carmen reminded me of my mom. Throughout the movie, Carmen was motivated by the survival of herself, her daughter, and her unborn son. At times, Carmen tried to reason with Ofelia, telling her that the mythical stories she reads are filling her head with nonsense. But Carmen also asks her to tell a fairytale to her unborn son to calm his kicking. It was the same survival mindset my mom had when she stood up to Dad to keep us safe, worked multiple jobs despite chronic pain, and gave up our childhood dogs to keep a roof over our heads. Mom also kept us practical, reminding us we would need to be great students and swimmers to have a shot at going to college. And stories bonded my mom and me together too; she was the best writer I knew.

As Leah and I sat in the dark, the ominous, shadowy lighting of the movie cast strange shapes onto our wall. The audience was supposed to be disturbed by the traditional monsters like the pale, naked, humanoid creature with sagging skin who holds its eyeballs in the palms of its hands. Its bloody mouth is full of sharp teeth and—as if we wouldn’t get the message—there are images of it feasting on children painted on the ceiling. Yet in the end, I was more disturbed by the actions of Capitan Vidal who executes and tortures members of the Republic or “The Reds” and is celebrated by his nationalist followers for actively exterminating The Reds. Even scarier is his visible happiness when Carmen dies while giving birth to his son, because his son is alive. His desire for genocide was fueled by his wish for his son to be “born in a new, clean Spain.”

“These people hold the mistaken belief that we’re all equal,” Vidal said to his senior officials over dinner, “but there’s a big difference: the war is over and we won.” He vows to kill them all.

By the final scene, Captain Vidal has physically transformed to show his internal monstrosity: his face sliced open at the mouth, stab wounds in his gut and leg. The captain chases Ofelia—as she runs away with her baby brother—through a maze with a lumbering, monstrous gait and heavy, huffing breaths. He is the monster, and we, through Ofelia’s point of view, knew it all along.

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October brought me many surprises in Seville. For one, I began to realize the amount of English my host family secretly knew despite telling me they spoke none. One Sunday morning, I overheard Jorge talking to himself in the living room. “This T-shirt is mine, motherfucker,” he said in a faux Italian, mafia boss accent. *Is that from a movie?* The presence of American music also surprised me as Ana and Bimba recited TikTok sounds and belted songs in English while Paco sang American rock while cooking. Helena laughed with me once when Ana was singing an off-key rendition of a Katy Perry song in the bathroom. The walls were thin so the entire apartment building could hear her. “Significa que ella es feliz,” Helena told me, “y eso me trae alegría.”³⁸

The Bareas were surprisingly comfortable with my presence, except when they ran into me in the mornings in the dark hallway. “!Ay! Tienes que hacer un sonido la próxima vez! !Me has asustado, Ahnie!” Helena told me with a laugh, “Necesitamos comprarte una campana como una vaca.”³⁹ They were very energy conscious because electricity was so expensive, so we often kept the lights off. I made an effort to have heavy footsteps going forward.

³⁸ “It means she’s happy and that brings me joy.”

³⁹ “Ay! You need to make a sound next time! You scared me, Annie! We need to buy you a bell like a cow.”

I still couldn't understand why they were hosting me. *What did I add to their dynamic, besides forcing the five of them to share one bathroom?* My study abroad friend Birdie and I investigated how much our program compensated our host families. The unconfirmed number we found was only enough to cover our food and utilities. My guilt grew as I watched Helena juggle two jobs while Paco's heart condition had kept him from working at the canoeing club. I made my presence as small as possible, always remembering my key and waiting two weeks in November, when the temperature inside dropped to 50 degrees, before asking for extra blankets.

One Friday night, I expected to come home to an empty house because Paco and Helena had a party at their sports club and the kids had parties to attend as well. But there were lights on in the kitchen when I walked in. Jorge was standing in the middle of the hallway wearing nothing but a white bath towel. "Hola," he greeted me with a sheepish smile and a nod before walking into the bathroom to take a shower. I waved back and planted myself in the kitchen to eat the pasta and seafood salad Helena had left me.

Then, I heard Jorge rapping a Spanish song to himself. I stifled a laugh, picturing how he was probably mimicking "cool" body language in the bathroom mirror. I continued picking out the imitation crab meat, the best part, and popping it into my mouth. Then, I heard high-pitched giggling and the sound of lips on his body while he kept rapping. My thirteen-year-old host brother had brought a girl home. My mouth fell open in shock and I froze. Sure, he was bigger and more athletic than most other young teens—he could carry an entire canoe on one shoulder, like his dad used to, during competitions—but he was still clearly a child. *With a stranger living in his home! Does he not care that I'm right here? How does he know I won't tell his parents?* Suddenly, the rapping stopped. I hurriedly finished my dinner, speed-walked to my room, and put headphones in.

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My least favorite scene from *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984) is when the villain Mola Ram sacrifices people by magically ripping their grotesquely beating hearts and casting their bodies into the lava. Dad loved showing us these movies, but I closed my eyes at that scene every time. I felt not unlike Mola Ram in my dating life, breaking up with my first boyfriend when I realized attraction doesn't develop over time, ending things with my second because he was manipulative and I wasn't patient enough to wait for him to emotionally mature, and friend zoning a total of four guys since my freshman year of college. The most recent heartrending moment before I went to Seville was on Valentine's Day when my friend Leo drove 30 miles from Long Beach to Newport to surprise me at the sushi restaurant I worked at.

Leo is one of the hardest-working people that I know. We connected because he also grew up young; he understood my need to make money—sending half his paychecks home to his mom and sister in Mexico—and my issues with my dad. After Leo and I met through my ex, we texted goofy, emoji-filled messages back-and-forth, shared our traumas over Facetime, and occasionally hung out in Long Beach. We were friends. Sure, the level of deep respect I had for him felt like almost enough for me to develop feelings. But I couldn't gamble on "one day's" and "maybe's" and I was tired of hurting people. I set things straight with Leo with the barbed phrase, "we should just be friends," and we slipped back into texting about our managers and hectic work lives.

Five months later, I chose to extend a flirtation to my current boyfriend, Walter, because finally there was no confusion; I was so sure the attraction was there. And for the first time in my dating life, I wasn't scared about being the monster and breaking his heart. I only had two boyfriends in high school, and I knew neither of them were ever going to break up with me. (*An egotistical mindset to have, but it was true.*) But, with Walter, I felt like if we ever broke up, he might be the one to end things with me and that was relieving. He showed me the reassurance,

stability, and respect I craved, and he taught me how embracing my desires was not selfish or wrong. I had dealt with a lot of men touching and commenting on my body when I didn't want them to. It was a trend that began when I was five and resurfaced at the restaurant and lifeguarding. I was excited to finally experience these actions when I wanted them to happen which made "You're so strong," "I really want to kiss you right now," and "is this okay" feel even sweeter coming from Walter a few months later. I found more comfort when I saw how cooking and mixing cocktails were artforms to him. *He has self-control. He's not like Dad.*

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The morning of my sixth-grade graduation, my siblings, my mom, and I were living in House #4. It was a bit smaller than the first few homes, but I still had my own room. That morning, I woke up and rolled out of bed to check on my hamster, Rodney, whose cage was set up on the white IKEA table in my closet to keep him away from our two boxers. Rodney was curled up in the corner and his caramel fur was poking out of the burrow he made in the bedding, but he was eerily still. He was dead. And even worse, I found his water bottle was empty and I couldn't remember the last time I had filled it. A pit sank into my chest.

I had killed him.

I cried and cried until I couldn't breathe. I sat in that suffocating feeling for a while. *Is this how he felt as he starved to death?* I went to my mom to confess what I had done and for her to help me bury him properly. "Oh sweetie," she said, hugging my head into her chest. "It's okay." She consoled me as my tears and snot dampened her shoulder. In the midst of all this, I heard my dad's voice. He had been living with his mistress for the last few months. I wandered down the hall to the living room.

“Surprise!” Dad said when I noticed him, “I’m moving back in!” My face was still stained with tears and my eyes were puffy. I felt preoccupied, confused, and anything but excited. But he clearly wanted a reaction. It was like he was excited about his own presence. *“Look, I showed up! I’m here to support my daughters!”* I imagine he told himself. *What a “good” father.* Suddenly, I, a newly minted murderer, did not feel like the monster in the room.

My anger at Dad’s nonchalance, his lack of awareness, and his self-absorption left me seething, but I played nice and put on my flowy, knee-length dress painted with peach-colored flowers. I felt pretty but awkward in my one-inch-tall gold Steve Madden sandals. Mom led me over to the bathroom mirror for the final touch: one pretty, little braid resting on the left side of my face. My neck began to hurt from craning and the lights made my head hurt, but I stayed still while she intertwined the strands.

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City and boat lights twinkled on the dark surface of the Guadalquivir River as I sat on a bench on the main bridge between Los Remedios and the city center, right next to the Plaza de Cuba where the CIEE bus first dropped me off. The night was cold, and I had my back turned to the heavy foot traffic of hundreds of people that were crossing back and forth. I began to shiver. I relaxed my body so the twitching stopped, but the cold continued to seep up my arms and legs. I let my fingers turn blue; I didn’t care. I could sit there until morning and nothing would change how lonely and useless I felt. *Nothing feels real. What do I add to this world, this simulation?*

As I sat there mesmerized by the shimmering water—my tears blurred the boat lights and made it all look like an illusion—a lady sat down next to me. I jumped, seeing as the last time an old man sat next to me on a bench, he interrogated me about my sexual history. She was gentler.

“Estás bien?”⁴⁰ she asked me, inquiring about my feelings. I didn’t have the patience to explain that my boss was always demanding more from me, or how my Seville friends weren’t able to go out that night, or how I was getting text messages of my swim friends back home having fun, or how I felt like my boyfriend was getting tired of our nine-hour time difference. Getting to really know someone—how they love and want to be loved—through screens was tricky, it turned out.

“Sí, solamente me siento sola.”⁴¹ I replied concisely, explaining how I was a study abroad student from America. She took me into a hug and encouraged me to cry, to let it all out. She then pulled out an orange blossom leaf, held it to her nose and inhaled deeply.

“Ah, es un orgasmo para mi,”⁴² she said in a satisfied tone. At this point I had let all my tears out and had to hold back a laugh. She seemed very serious and I didn’t want to offend her.

“Sí, es tan bonita,”⁴³ I said with a nod, unsure of what words to use for pleasant smells. Pretty seemed to do the trick and then she held the flower up to my nose for me to try.

The Orange Lady quickly took over our conversation, telling me how her entire family disowned her and she was living on her own. She had nothing, no one. Her sister was the golden child and she was the family disappointment. Her speech was long and rambling, but I took away two main lessons: you just have to keep going no matter what and emotions are meant to be felt. I checked the time on my phone as the night grew longer, remembering that she was a stranger.

“Es muy tarde. Necesito venir a casa, estoy cansada,”⁴⁴ I told her. But the Orange Lady continued to walk with me across the bridge to Los Remedios, at one point telling me I must go flamenco dancing with her right that second. I maintained that I absolutely must return home and

⁴⁰ “Are you ok?”

⁴¹ “Yeah, I’m just feeling lonely.”

⁴² I assume she meant “it’s *like* an orgasm to me.”

⁴³ “Yes, it’s so pretty.”

⁴⁴ It’s very late. I need to return home, I’m tired.”

she settled for giving me her WhatsApp number and telling me to call her anytime. I said yes of course, with no intention of ever doing so, and returned home with a strange sense of comfort. *At least I still have my family, and maybe now I have two.*

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When I was growing up, Dad was big, hairy, and smelly, and there was always something off about his grin. He reminded me of those loveable monsters in *Where the Wild Things Are* with his ugly, unkempt feet with misshapen, narrow toenails from ingrown toenail surgeries that were always on display in his black sandals. While I had no wolf suit to wear, I used to feel like the protagonist Max every time he carried me up on his shoulders. Up there, my grubby hands became a helmet strap around his bristly, unshaved chin. He was holding my shins tight, but I still wouldn't let go. He was six-foot-five and it was a long fall. He seemed bent on teaching me to trust him. "I would never let anything happen to you," he would say, marching through the aisles of Home Depot. He saw himself as our protector, especially of my sister and I. He couldn't wait for us to grow up so that he could sit on the porch polishing a gun to intimidate our dates.



Illustration by Maurice Sendak

"You my...brown-eyed girl," Dad used to sing to me at the summer concerts in the park when they played this song. He swung my arms side to side and then pulled them forward and backward into a twist, the only dance moves we knew. It was summertime in Orange County and we stood in the middle of a grassy park filled with people. I wore a pinkish red cotton dress with white flowers on it. And I felt so special. I could smell the freshly cut grass, the grills barbecuing hot dogs, the popcorn, and sweat. Cover bands of Van Morrison and the Red Hot Chili Peppers controlled the stage. "Brown Eyed Girl" was one of our things alongside the scariest roller coasters, eating fancy foods, and having dark hair and dark eyes.

Dad seemed to delight in creating a rumpus, breaking Mom's rules, and showing us scary films, giving us sweet treats, or telling us things he didn't want her to know. He would rub his stubbled chin on us and tickle our feet, grabbing our ankles so we couldn't escape. Once, he held Doug upside-down by the ankles, tickling him and talking about how big and strong he'd be one day. Like him.

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My longest class days in Seville were Tuesdays and Thursdays. One morning in Novel and Cinema class, we were discussing the adaptation of Dulce Chacón's creative nonfiction-esque novel *The Sleeping Voice*. The film follows the brutal treatment, torture, and execution of Spanish women in prison during the Franco dictatorship. One student suddenly piped up: "My host mom loves Franco." The classroom was stunned into silence. "Yeah she had all this pro-Franco memorabilia and when we were watching the news she told me how everything was better with him."

This opened the discussion of how some people, those who took advantage of the social mobility created by the regime in the 1960s, benefited economically under Franco.⁴⁵ I had never asked my host family what they thought of the deceased dictator or the transition to their current system of a constitutional monarchy. I was scared of the conversation. *What if Helena views his reign favorably? What if she would be insulted by my prying?* I ultimately took Helena's kind heart to mean that she could never support someone so violent, no matter how much she could have benefitted.

I returned home from school that afternoon and I noticed that the living room couch and the kitchen were empty. I heard Ana and Bimba talking loudly about school in their room.

⁴⁵ "Franco's Spain, 1939–75." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., <https://www.britannica.com/place/Spain/Francos-Spain-1939-75>.

“Ahníe?” I heard Helena call as I closed the front door.

“Sí!” I responded and started walking toward my room, meeting her halfway down the hallway.

“Ahníe, todo está bien, pero quería avisarte. Paco está en el hospital,”⁴⁶ she said very calmly and nonchalantly. My heart dropped.

“¿Qué? ¿Por qué? ¿Está bien?” I asked quickly. *Why is she being so calm? Did he have a heart attack? Was it for the surgery they’ve been waiting for?*

“Sí, sí, está bien. Está teniendo su operación.”⁴⁷ She explained, moving to start a load of laundry in the kitchen. I was so confused by her “no pasa nada” mentality. Everything little thing felt like such a big deal back home. A low grade on a test and doing poorly at a swim meet were both grounds for a meltdown in my household. I couldn’t understand Helena’s calmness and trust that the surgery would go well. “Pronto regresará a casa,”⁴⁸ she told me in the doorway with a hand gesture that said “everything will be fine.”

“Vale,” I said, unable to shake my feelings of worry. I tried to take my siesta⁴⁹ that afternoon, but ended up tossing and turning for an hour instead. *When is “soon?”*

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“It’s not their fault, you know that right? Alcoholism is a disease,” the Alcoholics Anonymous lady told my siblings and I when we visited the center to support Dad. I had some faith that this was true for others, but not for my dad who had tried to get sober many times before. I shifted in my seat as she showed us an AA commercial and tried to get our hopes up.

⁴⁶ “Annie, everything is ok, but I wanted to let you know. Paco is in the hospital.”

⁴⁷ “Yes, yes, he’s ok. He’s having his surgery.”

⁴⁸ “He will return home soon.”

⁴⁹ The Spanish tradition of taking an afternoon nap. I found it especially helpful to escape the heat.

I remember visiting Dad at St. Jude Hospital in Fullerton when I was 12, three months after he had been diagnosed with NPD. My parents weren't speaking at the time, but he made the situation sound dire over text. The thought that he might never see us again convinced my mom to bring us up to the fourth floor of the hospital with her. And what I saw was seared into my brain; Dad looked pale and emaciated in the bed compared to his large form before, and he looked weak hooked up the IVs and monitors. He could barely speak so he croaked at us, "Hey kids," in a pained, dramatic voice. I didn't know how to feel. Finally, the monster was vulnerable and perhaps paying for all the pain he caused us. While I didn't want to go near the bed, I felt pity; it hurt to see what alcoholism and pancreatitis had done to him. *Is he going to die?*

Dad vowed to take better care of himself after this hospitalization, but we weren't surprised when he kept drinking. A few years later, he requested to follow me on Facebook and his profile photo of his new wedding hinted at his further deterioration. It was a cruise wedding, of course, and his bride was beaming, but I couldn't understand why. Dad looked hollow and unrecognizable—pale, skinny, balding—and his face was narrower than ever. His only feature that remained the same is his empty stare when he smiles. They had dressed him up in a dark blue suit, light blue dress shirt, with a white boutonniere flower, but I could now see the monster he was inside more than ever. Like Captain Vidal, his monstrosity finally showed on the outside, and that picture continued to haunt my dreams for years.

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When Paco returned from the hospital, his chest was bandaged, and he had strict instructions to sleep on the couch. He was tired and had a groggy voice, but he was okay and that's what mattered. After a week, I began to see him return to his pre-heart-condition self,

cooking and going on short walks. “Gordito! La cena está lista,”⁵⁰ Helena would call to him to announce dinner. She had taken over cooking duties for the time being. I was surprised to hear Paco chuckle in response; fitness can be a sore issue for retired athletes.

That week, my journalism homework was to interview someone in Spanish and write an essay about them. *This is my chance to finally ask Paco about his canoeing career.* I slowly worked up the courage to ask him. My heart was pounding, and I had to countdown from five in my room to force myself out to the living room. He politely said yes.

We sat down at the living room table, and I sensed Paco was as nervous as me; I stressed about finding questions that he hadn’t answered a million times before while he likely had no clear idea of what was going to come out of my mouth. It was one of our few one-on-one conversations in three months. I pressed “record” on my phone, and he told me how he first snuck into the Real Círculo de Labradores sports club at age twelve with his friend Miki Puig who was a member at the time. Paco took to canoeing quickly and earned a spot on the Spanish National team in 1979, a position he held for eleven years. With them, he trained 14 times a week for about six hours a day. He earned his first international gold medal in 1982 and in 1984, he clocked national records in solo events for the 500-, 1000-, 5000-, and 10000-meter races. After all this—the international medals, national records, and three Olympic Games—I asked him what he was most proud of.

“Son mis tres hijos,”⁵¹ he replied immediately. “Practican la misma disciplina que yo. Practican en el club, en el mismo club, y eso me enorgullece mucho.”⁵² Ana and Jorge have won national championships while Bimba and Helena have earned medals in the sport too. Paco tried

⁵⁰ “Fatty [endearing nickname]! Dinner is ready!”

⁵¹ “My three kids.”

⁵² “They practice the same sport as me. They practice at the club, at the same club, and that makes me very proud.”

to turn the spotlight to Helena who was bringing us snacks. “Ella era una gimnasta, sabes?”⁵³ he said.

“Sí, como Simone Biles,”⁵⁴ she said sarcastically and laughed when I asked if she also competed for Spain in the sport. “No, de este barrio. Del bloque, del *edificio*, Annie,”⁵⁵ she said. I asked if she met Paco through sports and Helena laughed again. They lived near each other, she explained. I sat on the edge of my seat, hoping to hear more of their love story, but she left us to it.

Paco opened up to me about being nervous before the 1990 World Championships final in Poland. “Yo pensé que nos pasa a todos los deportistas cuando nos encontramos en un momento crítico en que vamos a competir. Todos decimos ‘¿Qué estamos haciendo *aquí*?’”⁵⁶ he laughed. “‘¿Qué *hago* yo aquí? ¿Por qué estoy aquí?’”⁵⁷

“Y luego bueno. Lo que pasa, se empieza a competir.”⁵⁸ He placed ninth in the 500-meter event with three teammates. During his last years of competition his coach approached him and told him that he was retiring from coaching and that he wanted Paco to take his place and continue his work. “Me lo repitió muchas veces,”⁵⁹ Paco remembered.

I sat in awe as I learned about the man who started this canoeing dynasty of five. His humility and hard work, his clear love for his family strengthened by canoeing but not dependent on it. And now, post-surgery, he would be able to return to coaching at the canoe club where he could watch them enjoy the sport that he also fell in love with on a daily basis.

⁵³ “She was a gymnast, you know.”

⁵⁴ “Yeah, like Simone Biles.”

⁵⁵ No from this neighborhood. From the block, from the *building*.”

⁵⁶ “I thought something that happens to all athletes when we find ourselves at a critical moment before competition. We all say, ‘What are we doing here?’”

⁵⁷ “What am I doing here? Why am I here?”

⁵⁸ “And later it passes, and the competition starts.”

⁵⁹ “He repeated that many times.”

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“This just isn’t my little Annie,” my mom said in a soft voice, throwing her hands up in exasperation as we sat on my bed in House #6. As the two writers of the family, we were close while I was growing up. She encouraged me to write down all the wild stories I came up with and I was in awe of her worldly knowledge when she introduced me to *Little Women* and The Chronicles of Narnia series. But, as a teenager with a developing sense of independence, I felt like I was becoming a monster in her eyes. I was no longer her little angel because I began to question things, not taking “because” as an answer anymore. My cry for respect, trust, and to be included in big decisions, came out quite poorly and at a bad time when I shared a room with Mom. I fought back tears to win these types of “conversations,” but she always won in the end.

I got my pesky fierceness from Mom who always held strong for us. After her court case got fumbled by two lawyers, she began representing herself in court (not a typical, or generally successful strategy, but it was a necessary one.) I picture how my mom stood up to Dad and his expensive lawyers on her own, armed with only her “war purse” of evidence and documents and makeup from CVS. Mom had some background knowledge going in—she majored in Philosophy in college and aspired to become a lawyer before finding her calling in nonprofit management—but she was up against lawyers who knew the loopholes. Eventually, she got Dad sent to jail after he accrued 12 charges of contempt. It’s been her only victory against a legal system that has not only failed to enforce his child support payments, but also failed to grant Mom disability payments for her chronic illnesses.

Mom always fought for us, even when we fought her and each other in House #6. I wasn’t a hitter or a biter, but I knew how to quietly rile my siblings up and poke into their insecurities. If Leah got the last word on Friday, I would ever so slightly invade her personal space in the car or

make a passive-aggressive jab at her height or her crush at school. It felt like my only defense, although sometimes it was a means of revenge. But these days, my fierceness is scarcely used and focused on protecting my loved ones, including her.

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Uncle Hector, Paco's older brother, walked through the front door and announced his presence with the deepest grumbling laugh. Jorge dashed into the living room with excitement. Hector commanded attention and was a natural-born storyteller, using guttural exclamations and wild hand gestures. He was very physical too, grabbing Paco by the shoulders to remind him who was older. Hector spoke with such exaggerated emotion—almost like a comic book character—that I couldn't understand what he was saying at times, only the reactions of Paco and Helena. I sat next to Paco at the table, which would have felt awkward two months ago, but this time I was glad. Hector was explosive and unpredictable; he reminded me of Dad in how he dominated the room. But, I knew if this strange man were to do anything bad, Paco would protect me.

After we sat down at the lunch table, I could tell Helena was getting upset with him, so I tuned in. Hector was talking about Ana and her canoeing career. "Ella es una chica emocional," he said, "será difícil para ella tener éxito. Pero Jorge es realmente el hijo de Paco."⁶⁰ He bellowed Paco's name, holding out the "o," as he painted Jorge as big, strong, and destined for his father's greatness.

Helena snapped back at him before Paco could respond, listing out Anna's accomplishments. Then, the room calmed surprisingly quickly. This pattern of Hector saying something offensive, Helena arguing with him, and the conversation turning to something more enjoyable repeated. Hector, like my father, disregarded all other points of views, on healthcare,

⁶⁰ "She's an emotional girl, it will be hard for her to succeed. But Jorge is truly Paco's son."

politics, everything and I sat there anxiously wondering why Helena and Paco tolerated him. They all clearly disagreed, but at the end of the day Hector was family, so he was welcome in the house.

Should blood be enough though?

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December 15th was my last day with my Spanish family. I couldn't stop crying as I gifted my host siblings water bottles from Disneyland and a Huntington Beach surfer towel; they were delighted. Then, as Helena and Paco were setting up lunch in the living room for my mom, who was visiting to pick me up, Helena showed me framed photos of little Jorge and Ana on the wooden hutch. "Aww, que linda,"⁶¹ I said, noticing the teenage girl standing behind them. Helena explained that this was one of their first American study abroad students. My heart sank. Obviously, I knew they had hosted students before—Helena told me a new girl was coming in two weeks—but I didn't realize how many students the kids had had enter their family for four months and then leave. Helena estimated twelve but had lost count. I felt a pang of jealousy and an overwhelming hope that—even though I was in a long line of host siblings—I made a lasting impact on them.

Soon, I welcomed my mom into the building and accompanied her up to the third floor in the tiny red death box. Helena exclaimed with glee when she saw her, complimenting how tall she was and then quickly switching into bragging about me, telling her how I fit into their family instantly and how caring and lovely I'd been. She turned to me lovingly and said I should visit anytime. I cried again. We all sat down to the table laden with Paco's gigantic paella pan, my favorite Manchego cheese, aceitunas⁶², and a few different kinds of alcohol. Paco proceeded to get

⁶¹ "Aww, how cute."

⁶² "olives"

everyone drunk on chupitos⁶³ until my mom had to physically block him from her shot glass. His face grew reddish and he let out gruff, mischievous chortles and I marveled at the sight of my mom enjoying alcohol. It had been a while since I'd seen her drink because we always kept alcohol out of the house.

Bimba, Jorge, and Ana had all left for canoeing practice by that point, so I had already said my goodbyes. But the youngest of the three forgot something and came home, poking her head into the living room and sheepishly asking if I was leaving soon. I had hugged her already, but my eyes welled with tears, and I got up again to give her another hug. "Hasta luego,"⁶⁴ I told her, maintaining the idea that I would indeed get to see them again.

⁶³ "No, Paco, no more shots!"

⁶⁴ "See you later."

AFTERWORD

It's now spring and I catch myself anxiously checking the CIEE Seville student takeovers on social media. My embarrassingly possessive heart pangs with jealousy anytime I think I see a student in that small, white-walled kitchen. I still struggle coming to terms with the fact that someone else is sleeping in Jorge's old room, eating almuerzo with them, and receiving their love. *Will the kids think she's cooler than me?*

But everything is different now. I'm 21. I can legally drink. I have two new cartilage piercings. I have a gray hair that sits prominently at the front of my head. I'm an NCAA-level swimmer and I even get paid to write now, Dad. I see you have a grandson now; I can't tell if I'm happy he can give you redemption, or if I'm inclined to rescue that baby out of your arms.

Some things have remained the same though: I still smile when "Brown Eyed Girl" comes on the radio. Leah, Doug, and I keep up with every new Marvel show and movie. I'm still dating Walter, a man who could never turn into you. And...I still haven't picked up the phone, touched your Facebook friend request, and I can never remember if you spell your name with a 'c' or a 'k.' Sometimes, I thumb through my old voicemails to the one you left on September 25, 2019. It's as pitiful as the first time I heard it.

My pointer finger hovers over the little blue circle, the call back button. *Do I want to? It seems the polite thing to do for a dying man.* And there are so many questions I want to ask, ignoring the fact you will likely give illogical and angry answers. I don't really know what I want, and that level of indecision, the panging in my chest at the thought of talking to you, is always enough for me to exit out of my voicemail and put down the phone. Maybe I will call, one day, but if I do, it will be from many miles away.

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