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# Blanquiando: My Mother's Passing

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**Blanquiando:**  
**My Mother's Passing**  
By  
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A culminating thesis submitted to the faculty of Dominican University of California in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Humanities

Dominican University of California

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## Abstract

This thesis is an attempt to heal the wounds of my family's matrilineal line left behind by the effects of our racialized world. It is a depiction of how life's twists and turns ultimately created a collision of race and cultures within a single family. My mother, Violeta Estel Garcia Putterman, was born into poverty in the Dominican Republic to a black woman from St. Kitts and a Chinese man. This vivacious, and exotically beautiful girl's life took a positive turn when an older, married, white American sugar plantation engineer took a romantic interest in her as a 15-year old teenager. That relationship supported her entire family – mother, sisters and sisters' families – spawned two children, and brought my mother to the United States where I was born; the same United States where the clear distinction between black and white persuaded her to learn the art of passing for white.

This project is a reimagining and reconstruction of certain events in my mother's young adult life in the Dominican Republic in the 1930s. Interviews from living relatives shape my mother's story. Memories of my summers as a child and teenager in the Dominican Republic fill in the sights, smells, tastes and feel of the Caribbean.

While the challenges of Violeta's journey provided a better life to all her family members, they nonetheless hardened her soul by the time this writer came to be. Through the lens of a conceptualized memoir, my presentation reflects upon the secrets that the circumstances of my mother's life generated. This is my attempt to finally know who my mother really was.

## **Acknowledgments**

I want to thank Associate Professor Thomas Burke for his amazing skill and the freedom and courage he inspired in me to let this story come out. I also want to acknowledge Dr. Laura Stivers for anchoring me in this process and being my friend.

I dedicate this project to my son, Sam Naranche, for his noble request that finally lifted the curtains that had hung so low for so long. Soon after serving at his grandmother's wake, Sam came to and said, "So, Mom, we are black. We need to meet the family." And with that, we did.

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## Chapter One / Born into a Dilemma

I was nineteen when I left home for good. Leaning out of our sixth-story living room window, my mother hissed like a snake as she watched. I just kept walking to her surreal send off without changing my pace. My mom, Violeta Estel Garcia Putterman, had spent a lifetime ‘changing her skin’ to accommodate the external world and in the final analysis, sadly, it hadn’t worked out for her. My mom had finessed the art of passing for white. But, as an unwitting victim in this world where value is measured in skin tones, she lost her Self in the process. This is my mother’s story, the one she couldn’t tell me and one I couldn’t begin to tell until she made her graceful exit. Recent family interviews and bits and pieces of stories collected along the way of my life inform this story. Memories of the sights and smells, the taste, the sounds and the feel of my childhood summers in Santo Domingo color this reimagining of my mother’s young adult life. I offer this narrative to make her real so that I can know her.

Years after I took that walk down 111<sup>th</sup> Street and after much therapy, I came to understand that my mother had never once looked me in the eye. When I became aware of this strange fact, I had to test it. So, when she came to San Francisco to visit me in the 1990’s, I tried getting her to look me in the eye - and sure enough, she couldn’t or wouldn’t and didn’t.

Violeta was a difficult mother to grow up with. She was mercurial, irrational, flared up in anger easily and beat me unmercifully as a young child. Looking back, I can see that I dropped in on her life in a most inopportune time: just as she had neatly pressed out all her problems. Her daughter, Tica, was working and had a nice boyfriend. Alberto, her beloved son, was attending Pratt Institute studying chemical engineering. She had a perfectly presentable Cuban fiancé, Ramón, and most importantly, her sister and sprawling black extended family were at a safe

distance to the north in Connecticut. Violeta was a beautiful and vivacious woman in her late thirties, and she was finally back in control of her life.

It was about ten months before I was born. She and her Dominicana girlfriends were squeezing fresh lemon juice into their eyes to make them sparkle for a night of dancing at Casa Galicia. Little did she know she was preparing to welcome her whited-out problems right back into her life. You see, when I arrived, my mother had already transformed. Denying her blackness, I would not be tainted by the psychological warfare of blackness, but I wouldn't be made aware of it either. Violeta chose the side of whiteness because white is what got her out of poverty and into the world of possibilities.

Consider this a cautionary tale about the crucial value of self-love and acceptance. This is a love story to a woman who sacrificed her authenticity in order to pass and instead lost her Self in the process. Hardening to a stone, she gave her daughter the blinders of white privilege. Violeta's narrative of her life was trapped inside her denial. I didn't know these things as a child. I only knew an angry, hypercritical, hard working woman who I could never please. These are the resurrected pieces of my mother's story gathered from her nieces and suffused with the experiences of my childhood summers spent in La Republica. This is how I can finally braid our lives together, by making sense of her unspoken past.

I can see now that it was hard work keeping all those secrets from me and harder still for my mother to present herself to me as someone she was not. Self-loathing is an evil twin to pretense. I no longer blame my mother for her actions. She has given me a great story to tell. My mom was an extraordinary person who got emotionally and psychologically derailed by the effects of this, our black and white world. Violeta had experience with both sides and by the time

I, her third child, came around, she was going to do everything she could to make sure I ended up on the right side. I am telling my mother's story to make her whole again. Not for her, for me.

When I was an adolescent 'know-it-all' I would laughingly tease (prod, actually) my mother that she really did love me. I would be sitting at the kitchen table working on a *Daily News* crossword puzzle surrounded by the loud orange and yellow, vinyl, flowered, kitchen wall paper; it would be a school night. She, harried and tired after a long day at the factory pushing fabric through a sewing machine, would be preparing dinner. I would try to convince her that she loved me, that there had to be love because I needed it and I would get it out of her if I had to. "Mom" I would claim, "You just don't know how to show it, but I know you love me." I do believe my mother loved me. The problem was that by the time I came around, the Truth was in the closet and I had been born into a dilemma. My mother had to die before I became aware of and met my relatives, who resided just a short two-hour train ride from where we lived. Yes, just hours north of 111<sup>th</sup> Street in Manhattan was a large extended family of warm and loving souls that might have intervened in the many beatings and shouting arguments that punctuated my mother's parenting style. What follows is how it all began.

## Chapter Two / Donde Esta el Bebé?

Violeta was breathing but she was still under water as if she had grown gills overnight. She could hear the shuffling of feet, the hush of secrets being pushed into dark corners. Everything was muffled. She tried opening her eyes but they were stuck together. She knew she was not supposed to see or hear or know. She clearly didn't know - anything. She was still under water, caught in a wave that lasted for two days but now the water was calm. Everything and everyone had finally left her alone.

Violeta's young adolescent body was curled into a tight 'G'. "Heh" she sounded out the letter softly: A, BEH, SEH, DEH, E, EFE, HEH<sup>1</sup>.... She realized she had been repeating the alphabet to herself over and over. How long had she been doing that? Wailing sounds and searing pain memories seeped into her consciousness, as she held tight as the letter 'G'. Maybe if she didn't move.... but it was too late. She was remembering it all now. It began with the stream of water that sprang from between her legs as she was feeding the chickens. The sight of her peeing on herself sent her into gales of laughter as the pail of chicken feed fell and her hand went to her oversized belly. And then the pain of a hot knife and the howl of every mother in labor surged through and out of every pore in her body.

For two days Violeta's 15 year-old-body worked hard to birth a child while her spirit hovered above watching. Doña Emilia and Elena, trying to keep the dignity of the family intact, handled the labor themselves while Violeta's mournful shrieks lifted the roof off the house as if to announce a horrible crime. Violeta was not interested in keeping any secrets. A screaming, wet thing eventually made its way out of her body, finally giving her a peace she would have willingly died for. She was so relieved. With the problem finally out of her, she fell into a deep,

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<sup>1</sup> A, BEH, SEH, DEH, E, EFE, HEH... – A, B, C, D, E, F, G ...

sticky sleep where she continued to be caught in a wave of confusion and torment, but no pain. Deliciously, no pain.

A year ago, she was a carefree coquette who held her small world of Quisqueya en la Republica Dominicana, by the tail. Her beauty charmed the old and young and her wisecracking wit melted hearts with her carefree laughter. Unrestrained by any boundaries in her heart and mind she had a voice that sang sweet and strong with her convictions and her love for all things natural. Violeta had a keen appreciation of beauty in all its forms and a *joie de vivre* that was infectious. Every eligible bachelor had his hopeful eye on her.

¡Ay Violeta!! She was the middle child of Emilia, a proud and careworn seamstress from the small island of St. Kitts, who provided wise counsel and reassurances with her psychic sensitivities to many of the town folk. Elena was the oldest daughter and Sylvina, the baby, was special; she needed extra care. Each child was born of a different father, each representing a dream of an easier life. Elena, the big sister, was shy and obedient to Violeta's bossy and mischievous manner. The family doted on docile Silvina who never quite grew up, but did, in the end, have a family of her own. Doña Emilia was an independent woman, tall and elegant in stature with long tapered and knowing fingers. She provided for her girls with the money she made from the advice she offered her customers by reading their coffee cups and the men's suits she fashioned sitting at her old Singer sewing machine, day and night. The clack-clack of the machine pedal, usually a comforting metronome to the buzzing female household, was silent while Emilia tended to her daughter.

“Ah, beh, seh, deh, e, efe, heh...” Violeta was famished. She had had a baby. How long had she been sleeping? Why was it so quiet? She forced her eyes open. Lace curtains rippled gently in the hot breeze of the open window. She was changed. The visit to the watery

underground had changed everything. She could hear a quiet murmuring, the soft scraping of a chair on the floor and the smell of coffee on the stove; familiar sounds and smells that no longer soothed. She wanted to get up but her legs rebelled so instead she slipped back to her watery world. She wanted to stay there forever now, if she could only breathe.

The sun was making its way down through the branches of the Manzanilla tree, momentarily setting the house on fire. Doña Emilia tiptoed into the room where Violeta lay motionless, with a bowl of her favorite soup. She sat down on the bed and gazed at her daughter. Every mother makes the same mistake: thinking they can protect their children from the evils of the world, keeping them innocent. How do you explain that the minute you are born, you begin to die? Doña Emilia put her hand on her daughter's, leaned in and kissed her.

Violeta's eyes opened to her mother's wise and knowing face. Two women gazed at each other. Doña Emilia was struck by the years suddenly etched on her once naive middle child's face. She offered her the soup. No words were exchanged. Violeta pushed herself up with an elbow, ate gratefully and asked for water. She was so thirsty. She missed her watery world where the colors were muted and the sounds were muffled and nothing could get to her. But that world was receding fast as the void of silence roared in her ears. Why was it so quiet?

She had been in homes where babies had just been born; joyous homes filled with happiness and cheers and brindes.<sup>12</sup> This house was cold and silent. Where was the baby? My baby! Doña Emilia shuffled around the room picking up this and moving that, swaying like a specter in the night. Violeta put her soup spoon down noiselessly in the bowl studying her mother.

“Mamita”

“Yes”

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<sup>2</sup> Brindes – a congratulatory toast

“Donde esta el bebe?”

“Mija” Doña Emilia slowly turned to her daughter.

“Where’s the baby!”

Doña Emilia walked over to the bed where her daughter sat, immobile.

“Mija...”

“**Where** is the baby?”

Doña Emilia began to sob. Elena came rushing into the room, wringing a dish towel.

“El bebe, Viola mia, el bebe murió” Elena said in a wet whisper, tears streaming down her face. Violeta didn’t understand. She went back under water. The sounds were muted, the colors streamed together. “Ah, beh, seh, deh, e, efe, heh...” Violeta descended one more time into the heaven of sleep. It was too exhausting to make sense of all the work and nothing to show for it. Meanwhile, Elena and Doña Emilia moved through the tiny house wordlessly; sweeping, stirring pots on the stove and folding clothes, making neat work of a difficult secret. Sylvina, sucking on a strand of hair and Coquito, the foot-pecking rooster, watched silently from under the kitchen sink.

Violeta’s watery dreams turned to her murdered love. She had not seen Príamo for months. Once she and her mother discovered she was pregnant everything turned upside down. She could not understand why Mamita was so angry. She knew she and Príamo were meant for each other. Why was this wrong? The attraction was so impossibly strong. Príamo was dashing, popular and always made Violeta laugh. Their friendship was an innocent daily childhood adventure. Whenever Violeta raced past on her blue bicycle, Príamo was never far behind. His parents owned the local bodega where the stuff of life and the news of the day were gathered and disseminated. Emilia and Josefina, Príamo’s mother, were good friends who bartered food and

household items for Doña Emilia's fine tailoring and coffee cup reading services. The two mothers took comfort in Príamo and Violeta's friendship. After all, these two self-possessed children never caused trouble but instead helped keep the neighborhood children in order, allowing the adults to stick with the arduous task of survival.

The two children grew independent, self-directed and emotionally reliant on each other. They managed the gaggle of children - their friends, cousins and siblings - as if they were given the job to do so. They were the power couple in their innocent comunidad of barefoot, happy children. When there was a disagreement between siblings or a fight brewing between two bullies, Príamo and Violeta were summoned as judges. When it was time to pick sides for a game of patear pelota<sup>23</sup> and the sides were uneven, Pri and Vi insisted on fairness. They supported each other in being leaders and good to their families. They reveled in their combined strength. When Violeta got her first period, it was Príamo's shoulder she sought for consolation. Their filial love and trust for each other grew and expanded with their age and eventually moved them to experiment with nature.

It was a typical, scorching summer day. The air was heavy with the hot fragrance of jasmin azul and the caoba<sup>4</sup> flower. It was high noon and so hot the birds sought relief in the cool shade deep inside the quaking manzanilla bushes. Tree trunks crackled with the undulating heat waves. Streets and homes were stilled of movement in the swelter. The heat captured the day in a series of still frames with some frames lasting longer than others. Sleep overcame most things that were alive. Even the humming of flies and bees quieted. Bellies full of the day's main meal placed the town into a temporary drowsy stupor. The drip-drip of a leaky faucet into a grateful tin cup was all that could be heard. Violeta had finished her meal with her mother and her two

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<sup>3</sup> patear pelota - kickball

<sup>4</sup> caoba – Mahogany; it is native to the Dominican Republic

sisters as usual. They had laid down for their siesta. Violeta dozed for a few minutes then got up and slipped out of the house quietly. Príamo needed to talk to her.

Enriquito and Léo had put sand in mean old Don Pedro's truck because he had run over and killed their beloved dog, Peepo, and never even looked back. The two brothers and their family were devastated and Enriquito and Léo wanted revenge for this and all the mean things Don Pedro had done to their family and the town over the years. Throughout their young lives they heard their parents and Tía Louisa complain about how mean Don Pedro was. Something had happened between the two families that festered like an angry sore between them.

The two boys felt vindicated and laughed for the first time in days as they carefully poured the sand into the old rusty gas tank while the full moon looked on. Their mad happiness at their justified action was wiped out with one knock at their door the next morning. Don Pedro stood with arms akimbo, legs wide apart and dark mustache twitching demanding their father come to the door. He was sure someone in the family had damaged his truck and they were going to pay. Their warranted glee turned to cold murderous fear. Someone was going to die. After listening to the angry exchange between their father and Don Pedro, Enriquito dashed out of the house to find Príamo. He would know what to do. Príamo listened carefully and knew he needed Violeta. She would know what to do.

Violeta made her way down the dirt lane, her hand on her hip, wondering what Príamo needed her for now. She arrived at their usual meeting spot behind Príamo's family store in the large storage shed. Everything was still and quiet. The store was closed for siesta. Pancho, the donkey snoozed under a tree outside the shed, his ear twitching away a fly. It was too hot inside the shed so Príamo and Violeta walked out to the tree to share the shade and any merciful breeze with Pancho.

“Que’ esta pasando?” asked Violeta.

“Léo and Enriquito’s family are in danger. Don Pedro believes it was someone in their family who ruined his truck,” answered Príamo. Violeta’s eyes grew big. If he could prove it, who knows what he would do to the family? He was the meanest man in the whole wide world.

“How does he know it was one of them?”

“He doesn’t. But he knows that they hate him for killing their dog and for whatever horrible thing he did to them so long ago.”

“Odioso<sup>5</sup>, What an evil man! He’s so ugly too with that big bumpy purple nose! My mother says that the drink makes him evil.”

“Probably but I think he was born evil. Anyway, what should we do? Enriquito is really scared.”

Violeta thought for a while and then said “Nothing. Léo and Enriquito must never ever admit what they did. As long as no one saw them they must never ever admit it, not even to their parents. They need to tell their parents that Don Pedro is evil and probably someone in the town did it because they are sick and tired of how mean he is to everyone. Maybe it was Don Alfonso because Don Pedro never paid him back or maybe it was your parents because he never pays his bills...”

“What?”

“Don’t you see? All of our parents need to start talking about all the horrible things that Don Pedro has done to all the people of Quisqueya, it will create doubt that Enriquito and Léo’s parents are the only ones that hate him.”

“Ay Viola, how come you’re so smart?” Príamo crooned.

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<sup>5</sup> Odioso - Hateful

They were lying on their backs looking up at the tree branches. His arm reached out to her. She smiled proudly and smacked his hand back then moved onto her side to look at him. She always felt safe and right with Príamo. He was the dot to her “I” and the cross to her “T.” He reached out again and touched her face as she smiled closing her eyes. She knew that they would be together forever, that they were meant for each other. She felt warm and happy. Príamo pulled her close and kissed her sweetly. They had kissed before. This time their bodies met and became one with the kiss. The tree above them shuddered slightly as their bodies melted into each other and their young love for each other overcame them. Neither one understood what was happening; only that it felt supremely good and right. Their love for each other was immense and uncontainable. As Príamo penetrated Violeta, she opened herself to him, to his love and to this beautiful life that was absolutely perfect right then. When it was over, they dozed. The mewling of Pancho the donkey broke the spell and woke them. They straightened themselves and brushed the grass off their clothes and slowly returned to their homes. It was the most natural and wonderful act. They would spend the rest of their lives together. They were sure then but now it had been three days since the baby came and went and the silence was deafening. Violeta wasn’t sure about anything.

The sun rose and set one more time in a wordless sky as the fragrance of chicken soup stirred the silence inside. Violeta was finally sitting up. For three days there were only muted whispers, the lonely half swing of the screen door and the occasional shuffling of feet. Time stood still and waited until it could exhale and begin again. Violeta made her way into the kitchen and sat down into a world of secrets.

“You’re up, hermanita! Are you hungry? What can I make for you? Do you want to take a bath?” Elena asked solicitously.

“Stop talking like that Elena. What has happened? What happened to my baby? I remember hearing the crying. Was it a boy or a girl? Where’s the baby? Where’s Mamita?”

“You had a boy, Violeta, but the baby was very sick. Mamita did everything she could to save him” Elena broke down in sobs. “He lived for two days. We named him Pipíché.”

“Pipíche. Pipíche. Pi-pí-che” She liked the way it sounded. Where is he? Where is Pipíche?”

“Mamita took him away. She wrapped him up in a blanket and took him. I don’t know where....” Her voice trailed as she looked away. Violeta looked down at her empty hands; hands that needed to hold a baby. Her breasts, rock hard and heavy with milk, pushed her thin cotton dress out in front of her. As tears spilled hotly from her eyes, her breasts leaked milk soaking her shirt and flabby belly. She was going under again but this time into a visceral, hormonal, maternal mundo<sup>6</sup>, soaked in a shroud of secrets. She would never know more than that. The family shame of her pregnancy built a wall of lies that stashed bits of true love’s reality into its crevices, as well as bits of Violeta herself, lost in the name of Shame.

The arduous routine of daily life slowly returned. Pipíche was never mentioned again. Príamo and Violeta’s relationship cooled, tempered by their parents’ unspoken but clear humiliation and disappointment in them. Somehow, their very personal act of true love was processed through an arbitrary value system that did not deal in reality. Violeta’s teenage heart was broken. She was left mystified and confused as to the direction of her life. She had been so sure and secure in who she was and where life was leading. She loved her hometown of Quisqueya, her sisters, her tribe of friends and most of all, her beautiful brown-skinned Príamo. Their certainty together and their status in their little world had defined Violeta but now she did not know who she was or where she fit in. Young Violeta was invisibly redefined into a state of

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<sup>6</sup> mundo - world

quiet depression, insecurity and anxiety. Something very important was stolen from her - her trust and faith in life's natural beat. Doña Emilia and Príamo's mother, Doña Josefina, were now transacting in cash. Life had changed fundamentally and there was nothing to do but to change with it. Violeta's transformation happened inside. She held her head a little higher and her shoulders pulled back and a little wider pronouncing her chest as the shield it would harden into for the rest of her life. Meanwhile, the sun continued to rise and set in hot wavy lines, roosters crowed the morning up and the crickets continued to lull everyone to sleep. Life mercilessly marched on, leaving the shattered pieces of the brilliant vitality of love behind. Violeta helped Mamita with Sylvina and the housework, Emilia sat at her sewing machine and read coffee cups, Sylvina ran after butterflies while Elena fell in love with Carlton Edward Smith. She was soon pregnant.

### Chapter Three / A Slip of the Tongue

Now that Elena had her baby, most of the household chores had fallen on Violeta. This included keeping a watchful eye on Sylvina who tended to follow chickens and butterflies out of the house. Typical tropical summer days were so hot, the crickets couldn't muster the energy to make music with their scratchy legs and the only sound in the still-dead air were the few flies that had the will to do their annoying job. In minutes the parched blue sky would gather its clouds in billowy grayness and burst into rain, unannounced. Violeta was the only one to ever see it coming. Everyone else was slowed to a stop in the cruel heat. She would often dash outside, running from dirt floor to the ground outside, to pull the sheets and clothes off the drying lines, always managing to get the clean laundry down, arms full with the smell of sunshine, before the first fat drops of the five-minute tropical rain fell. There were some days when Violeta could smell the rain coming and she would have the shampoo and chair at the ready to wash Sylvina's hair in the torrent of water. It's what Sylvina lived for - those moments of whimsical amusement that only Violeta could conjure up in their life of communal poverty.

On this particular day, Sylvina had not wandered off and Violeta had gotten all her chores done. She had also managed to race up to the sugar plantation on her bike - after dropping Sylvina off with her mejor amiga, Gisela. Violeta was going to apply for one of the telephone operator positions that had just been posted at the ingenio.

Since the sixteenth century, sugar plantations or ingenios formed the engine that fueled the island's fledgling growth. The plantations were the life's blood of la Republica Dominicana and those who were lucky enough to live near them managed an easier life. So it was on this day that the residents of Quisqueya felt the prideful luck of their fortune to be living in the shadows

of the large, burping ingenio<sup>7</sup>. It was expanding again and there was plenty of work available. Word spread fast. Violeta pedaled up the hill, jumped off her bike and leaned it against a tree. It was late in the afternoon. A donkey in the field twitched its long ears as it made its way to sit softly in the shady spot under the tree. She scratched the donkey's ear and thanked her ahead of time for watching over her bicycle.

Violeta rushed up to the glass door where she was pointed to, her heart pounding in her chest. This was the chance of a lifetime and she had been waiting for a sign. Ever since Príamo was taken away from her she was agonizingly and secretly adrift. She yearned for something that would fling open a door of opportunity to the much bigger world outside. Over the last six months she had been observing the shiny black cars glide along the rutted roads of her beloved hometown; the men in their dark pants and matching jackets, hats pulled down importantly over their brow, sitting tall in the back seat of their chauffeur-driven cars. She smelled power in their tracks. Distinctly unfamiliar but alluring nonetheless, it left her in a wanderlust at the dust left behind.

She wiped the sweat off her face with her shirt and tucked it in carefully as she shook her curls and mind into place. Violeta tapped on the door and opened it gently.

“Buenas tardes señorita, ¿cómo te puedo ayudar?”<sup>8</sup> Oh my, how lovely she was! The woman behind the desk was cool and crisp, not a hair out of place.

“I understand you are hiring operators. I am perfect for the job!” Violeta announced. La señora regarded her carefully. Violeta went on nervously, “I am a fast learner! I can do many things! And I can start tomorrow!”

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<sup>7</sup> ingenio – sugar factory

<sup>8</sup> Cómo te puedo ayudar? – How can I help you?

She realized suddenly she hadn't given a thought to what she would say, and she couldn't believe what had just come out of her mouth! Who would help Mamita with the house and Sylvina? Doña Emilia didn't even know where she was. But something bigger had taken over. A wave of cool, fresh air filled her lungs with the promise of shinier, dust-free possibilities.

"How old are you? What is your name?" asked Señora Valdez as she motioned Violeta to the chair in front of her. Violeta sat down carefully as she pulled her wits about her.

"Me llamo Violeta Garcia. My mother sews the finest men's suits. She is Doña Emilia. Do you know her?"

"No, no, querida" Sra. Valdez smiled. "Y, cuantos años tiene?"<sup>9</sup>

"Eighteen!" sixteen-year-old Violeta announced. Sra. Valdez examined her carefully and didn't argue. She knew she was younger but she had a spirit and a presence she hadn't found in any of the women that applied for the position earlier. Sra. Valdez needed at least one who could think for herself and act on her own initiative. She perceived an intelligence in this proud young head that she thought she might be able to tame and cultivate. Valdez offered her a job on the spot. Violeta didn't know what to say. Her spirit left her body momentarily as she heard herself say "Yes!" Could she start tomorrow? "Oh Yes!" she gushed.

Violeta floated out of the office. Her feet didn't feel the ground until she found herself pedaling wildly down the hill, hair blown straight out behind her. It was happening. Her life was about to start. Somehow, she knew this. But what was she going to tell Mamita? Pebbles, leaves and dirt flared up behind Violeta as her blue bicycle streaked down the hill from the sugar plantation site. Gulping mouthfuls of air, she realized she hadn't been breathing and there was a loud buzz in her head.

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<sup>9</sup> Y, cuantos anos tiene? And, how old are you?

Suspended in wide-eyed exhilaration, she reviewed the strange and wonderful experience in her mind: the tick-tack of women's high heels on the marble floors - marble! She'd heard of such a thing, but she'd never seen floors gleam like that, nor shoes make such music, and the ceiling seemed to disappear into el cielo<sup>10</sup>. The walls, the lighting, the whirring of the fans, all echoed with significance. Rarified. If she knew the word she would have uttered it. She thought about how she could get her hair into that tight little bun that Sra. Valdez had wound neatly at the nape of her neck. Could she control her curls? Who had bobby pins? She would try tonight. She screeched to a halt at Gisela's house to pick up Sylvina.

"What have you escaped from now *mujer loca*?" laughed Gisela as her best friend leaned her bicycle against the tree with eyes luminous and hair, a halo.

"You won't believe what I just did and what just happened!!"

Gisela stood and stared at her friend. Nothing could surprise her when it came to her best friend. Violeta was always up to something.

"I applied for a job and I got it! I start tomorrow!"

"Como! What are you talking about? You can't work. We are not old enough and any way, you already have a job. You have Sylvina!"

"I know, I know...I have to tell Mamita. I don't know how to tell her. I didn't think I would get it. I didn't think this would happen, but, Gisela, I'm so excited! I don't think I'll sleep tonight."

"So, tell me, *señorita*. Where is your job? What are you hired to do? Who would hire you, eh?"

"I got a job at el ingenio! As a phone operator!"

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<sup>10</sup> el cielo – the sky

“What’s an operator? Hey, where’s Sylvina? We better go find her. I hope she hasn’t snuck out the back door. Pepita had three baby chicks last night. I can’t keep her away from them.”

“Gisela, do you have any bobby pins? I need to put my hair up tomorrow.”

“I don’t but I’m sure my sister Elsa does. I’ll get you some after we find Sylvina.”

Sure enough they found Sylvina with the baby chicks, playing babysitter as Pepita pecked and scratched not too far away. With a hand on her hip, Violeta grabbed her sister, and raced out the door. Gisela came running with a few bobby pins, pushed them into her friend’s hand and squeezed her for good luck. She always needed it. Violeta stuffed the pins into her pocket, grabbed her bicycle with one hand and her sister’s hand with the other. As they walked home, Violeta wondered how she was going to break the news to her dear Mamíta.

The screen door hung open when they arrived. Standing regally in front of the stove, Doña Emilia hummed contentedly as she stirred a fragrant mondongo<sup>11</sup> in the outdoor kitchen. Tired and sweaty, Violeta shuffled in with Sylvina right behind her. Sylvina, who rarely talked and with one foot inside the threshold, announced at the top of her lungs, “Mamá, Violeta went to el ingenio today and got herself a job!” Violeta’s mouth formed a perfect ‘O’ in shocked surprise as she stared at her usually mute sister.

Well, that takes care of that, she thought, but Doña Emilia had not heard Sylvina’s words. She came rushing into the house from the outdoor kitchen wiping her hands with her apron, chickens scurrying in after her.

“¿Qué? Que paso Sylvina?”

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<sup>11</sup> Mondongo – tripe stew

“Violeta got a job today. She starts tomorrow!” Sylvina announced proudly. The earth stopped its rotation momentarily. The air got very still and once again, nothing was ever the same. For one thing, Sylvina never let on that she listened, and understood, until this moment.

“¿Qué tu dice?<sup>12</sup>” Emilia’s eyes moved from Sylvina to Violeta.

“Mamá” Violeta spoke up. “I went to the sugar plantation today,” she said tentatively. “They offered me a job.” Violeta looked dolefully at her mother as she spoke in a near whisper. Doña Emilia’s eyes betrayed her. She knew this day would come, just not this soon.

“Aye, hija,” she said as she put up her hand in futile protest, “You’ll have to tell me all about it over dinner. You girls go wash up. I’ll have dinner on the table in ten minutes.” Violeta felt heavy, her hand slipped from her hip. The ceiling seemed to lower itself to just above her head. What had she done? Her stomach rumbled as wafts of the delicious stew shook her out of her reverie. She darted towards Sylvina to wash her up as Emilia sank down slowly into a chair, awash in long forgotten memories.

Emilia was just fifteen years old on the island of St. Kitts when her sister, Helen, left for New York City with her grandfather, never to return. Emilia felt abandoned. Life on the island in the late 1800s was raw, challenging and unkind. On one of the many unrelentingly hot sunny days, while Emilia was walking through her village along the water, she observed, with a different eye, men and women with children crowding onto a row boat headed for the Dominican Republic, the land of milk and honey in el Caribe. She had never considered this option before but that day was different. It was difficult conjuring up hope on the tiny island of St. Kitts, let alone a decent life. She headed back towards her home that day and without a single thought or plan, announced that, since her sister was taken to New York for a better life, she would be getting on the next boat she could squeeze on to and head to la Republica Dominicana to create

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<sup>12</sup>¿que tu dice? – What are you saying?

her own. The next day Emilia got up to change the course of her life. After a sleepless night fantasizing about a kind husband, a home with a floor and more than plantains in the larder, Emilia arose to quietly gather a small bundle of her favorite things. She left the house without any despedidas<sup>13</sup> and headed to the water and towards her dream.

She arrived in the bustling colonial city of Santo Domingo and immediately went to work sewing for anyone who would let her. She darned socks, made button holes, opened and closed seams and hand crocheted doilies for food and rent. Eventually she met an elderly woman who taught her how to cut patterns to sew men's clothing and how to advise women through the grains and stains left in their coffee cups. Emilia quickly learned the art of both. Soon she was creating quality suits for business men and dispensing advice and premonitions. Pigeon English was her native tongue, a form of the colonialists' British English and a quick giveaway to her ethnicity.

Emilia, tall with an elegant bearing and beautiful smooth skin the color of mahogany, the island's native tree, was no longer feeling hopeless or abandoned. She was empowered by her independence and her abilities to scratch out her own livelihood. It was a meager but satisfying life. Amy, as she liked to call herself, was attractive, gregarious and intelligent. She enjoyed her freedom. Soon enough and típico, Emilia found herself pregnant. Over the next seven years, she had three daughters from three different fathers. Over her lifetime, Emilia would have a total of 13 pregnancies and three live births. Such was life on the islands in the early 1900's. She never found the kind husband she once dreamed of, but the nomadic and fearless Emilia created a happy and good enough life for herself and her three daughters, Elena, Violeta and Sylvina.

Emilia had been satisfied with life and it was about to change, again. She was looking down at her hands as her mind returned to the present, her kitchen and the situation at hand.

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<sup>13</sup> despedidas - farewells

Violeta and Sylvina quietly set the table and sat down with their mother. They ate solemnly. Violeta broke the silence. “How are you feeling Mamíta?” she whispered as they finished cleaning up the dishes.

“What do you mean, mija? I’m fine. I’m happy for you.” Doña Emilia hadn’t asked why or what or how. This daughter was different and made for another world. One she could not fathom. “I know you have big dreams and this town is small ...”

“No, no” Violeta protested as they sat back down at the table. “I love my home, my town, most of all you and my sisters, but I need to know if you are unhappy with me. Can I have your blessing? I’m worried about Sylvina. Who will take care of her? How will you get your sewing done? And the housework?” Tears streamed down Violeta’s face. She was always disappointing someone as she tried to help herself. Sylvina listened impassively from the kitchen while she fed scraps to Coquito, the rooster who lived under the sink for the pleasure of pecking at people’s feet

“I am selfish. I was just thinking of myself. Oh! Mamíta, can you forgive me?” She wrung her hands in her shirt. “What was I thinking? When I went to el ingenio<sup>14</sup> I didn’t expect the very nice lady with the tight black skirt and high heels to offer me a job on the spot. I didn’t know what to say but Yes! I’m so sorry Mamíta. Tomorrow, I can tell them I can’t work there because I lied about my age”.

“Aye mijíta, stop carrying on” Doña Emilia patted her daughter’s hand lovingly. “We all grow up and leave home one day. Mija, you have been such a good daughter - the best a mother could have. Tu eres mi querida,<sup>15</sup> so much like me, so fearless and full of love. Mija querida, all children leave home eventually, she said knowingly.

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Ingenio – refers to the sugar factory

<sup>15</sup> Tu eres mi querida – You are my sweetheart

“Mamá! I am not leaving home! I’m just going to go to work in the morning.”

“Si mi angelita, but the world will open up to you now.”

“And I will be home every night and on weekends I will clean the house! Mamíta, I will never leave you.”

“Si, hija linda, si. Yo se, yo se. Pero,<sup>16</sup> you must understand that it is natural and right for each of us to make a life for ourselves. Look at your sister Elena. She has a husband now with her own baby and ---” Sylvina came crashing into the room, chasing Coquito, the belligerent rooster. She slammed into Violeta, who had just started painting her nails. The nail polish bottle flew across the table, spilling its mean, glossy lacquer.

“Ay! Ay! I couldn’t help it! I’m sorry!” wailed Sylvina as she shoved a strand of hair into her mouth and sucked loudly. Violeta, hot tempered and easily enflamed, started screaming. Sylvina fell in a sobbing heap and Doña Emilia patiently picked up a rag to clean up the mess. Violeta tried to help but each of the women quietly and instinctively dispersed into their own private sense of loss and impending change.

The quick flames of anger receded. Confused and struggling with the incessant anxious gnawing, Violeta dragged her feet to her evening shower. The cool water running over her head and down her shoulders released a sweaty tension. She was relieved to get a moment to herself. Drying herself, she opened the small closet where they kept the few items of clothing they owned. To her surprise the dainty white eyelet dress with pink ribbon weaving in and out around the collar and down the front hung completed and ready for her to wear. She’d been waiting for this dress! It was so beautiful and just the way she imagined. The pink ribbon was a gift and her mother had been working on the dress off and on between suits for weeks. Well! This was an

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<sup>16</sup> Yo se, yo se, pero – I know, I know, but

auspicious day after all! She would wear the dress to her first day at her new job. For now she reached for her blue gingham dress, a little frayed at the hemline, but clean and pressed.

Doña Emilia finished cleaning up the nail polish off the table and floor as she considered her steely daughter's daring visit to el ingenio. She smiled to herself. She knew Violeta better than anyone and understood her vibrant nature would spirit her away one day. She just didn't think it would be this soon. Her reverie was interrupted by her middle daughter holding up a pair of shoes for her to review.

"I can't wear these shoes tomorrow!" Violeta was talking animatedly as she attempted to cover her guilt and shame. She chattered about how she would be bringing money home and they would be able to buy anything they wanted at the bodega. Doña Emilia patted her daughter's hand knowingly. "Si, miija." She wished her luck at her new job and told her everything would be fine at home. For now they worried about what shoes Violeta would wear for her first day at work.

The next day, Violeta donned her new dress. It fit perfectly. Doña Emilia had borrowed a pair of black patent leather shoes from her friend, Doña Anísia. They had cleaned them up with Vaseline and now they shined like a brand-new penny. Violeta wound her hair nice and tight at the nape of her neck and secured them with the bobby pins Gisela had given her. She slipped her feet into the shiny black shoes. She was ready. Her big sister Elena arrived with her baby on her hip after hearing the news of Violeta's new job. They sipped coffee quietly while Violeta choked down a piece of toast. Her throat was dry and Sylvina was nowhere to be seen.

Finishing her breakfast, Violeta grabbed the lunch her mother had prepared for her and jumped on her bicycle to head to her first day of work. Sra. Valdez greeted her warmly and walked her to the phone operators' hall where five women sat busily leaning into a wall with

strange projections coming out of them. The women were talking into them while plugging cables into the wall. She'd never seen anything like it! She was placed between two women, Miriam and Letty. A mouthpiece protruded from the wall and she watched, fascinated, as the women leaned in and talked into theirs. As they spoke they plugged cables into different holes. It was mystifying but she learned quickly and soon she too was redirecting calls from all over the world to her beloved little world in Quisqueya.

## Chapter Four / Working with Men

The day moved along quickly. After a few hours learning her job, a whistle blew signaling the lunch break. Two of the women continued taking calls while the rest, including Violeta, stopped to take their break. The girls grabbed their bag lunches and walked out to a small courtyard outside the operators' room. "¿Como te llamas?" Miriam asked.

"¿Que lista, eh!<sup>17</sup> You sure picked up your job fast!"

"The young ones always do," grouched Olga, the oldest operator, "one day they'll have all our jobs," she complained as she lit a cigarette. Violeta mumbled a gracias and opened her lunch. Accustomed to having the last word, this time Violeta took her cue and sat silently listening and eating. This was a new and different world. She sat invisibly as the women recounted their evening before with their cheating husbands, disobedient children and difficult mothers-in-law. Life was no different anywhere else she sighed to herself. There were always problems.

The days progressed seamlessly one into the other and Violeta was soon redirecting calls without a thought except for the anticipation of lunchtime and the warm camaraderie she had developed with her coworkers. She had become closest to Letty while they all steered clear of Olga who was always in a bad mood. Her breath smelled really bad every morning and some of the girls said she stayed up late drinking with the men. Who ever heard of such a thing!

Things smoothed out at home as well. With the income Violeta brought home, they were able to hire Balina. the young, skinny Haitian girl that Violeta loved. Balina needed a home and was more than happy to help out with Sylvina and the housework. Eventually, she would become the fourth daughter that never left la doña's side.

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<sup>17</sup> ¿Que lista! – How quick (you are)!

One day, Sra. Valdez came to the Operators' Hall to fetch Violeta. The plantation engineer's secretary was home sick and she needed someone to cover for her. Violeta had never been inside the air-conditioned sanctum where the men with the pants and the matching jackets worked. The female workers there distinguished themselves with high heels and up-dos - a very different world she wasn't sure she cared to get to know. She loved her comadres<sup>18</sup> in the Operators Hall. They knew each other's secrets and spent the day trying to solve them while they managed the river of communication that created sugar for North America.

Sra. Valdez walked Violeta into the chilled sanctuary of the corporate office and introduced her to Arthur Garlinghouse, the head engineer. She showed Violeta her desk and told her she just needed to do whatever el Señor 'Galinghow' asked her to do, and with that Sra. Valdez left Violeta sitting in a cavernous room with tall ceilings at a large desk with a telephone, a pad of paper and a jar of pencils. She began to open the drawers inquisitively when the large door to the engineer's office opened and a mature man in his 40s stepped out. Mr. Garlinghouse was a stout man of average height, he had graying hair and wore wire rimmed glasses. He was a Texan who spoke some Spanish. With his head down and a file of papers in his hand, he asked Violeta to step into his office. Could she take down a letter for him, he asked in his precarious Spanish.

"¡sí, como no!"<sup>19</sup> Violeta grabbed the pad of paper and a pencil and hurried into his office. In a soft voice, Mr. Garlinghouse dictated who the letter was going to. Violeta was having trouble understanding him. She asked him to repeat the name in English. Mr. Garlinghouse looked up in surprise.

"You speak English?!"

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<sup>18</sup> comadres –close girlfriends

<sup>19</sup> ¡sí, como no!" – Yes, why not or of course

“Yes” Violeta said shyly, my mother is from St. Kitts. We sometimes speak English at home” Violeta admitted, revealing a family secret. Islanders from the West Indies, Cocólos as they were derisively called, were the poor Black people who came to the Dominican Republic in search of relief. Doña Emilia spoke Spanish, but she much preferred Pigeon English at home. Her girls, typical of all immigrant families, preferred to blend in and spoke the language of the land, Spanish. But, in this moment, Violeta’s English was suddenly a huge advantage. Mr. Garlinghouse’s face lit up. This young girl could speak English which was going to make his days run a lot easier. Violeta smiled with satisfaction as she took down the letter Arthur Garlinghouse dictated, moving between English and Spanish, to get his thoughts across.

It did not take long for Violeta to become an important asset to the plantation engineer. Her bilingual abilities eased many of the challenges Garlinghouse was facing with the workers. Once Mr. Garlinghouse’s secretary returned, Violeta was promoted to a job created for her - liaison between the engineer and the contractors. Violeta’s headstrong, bossy tendencies came in handy in her new position; she was ideal for it. She loved getting out of the office and into the big black car with the driver and Mr. Garlinghouse to visit the fields and work with the men.

Violeta would often be spotted out in the middle of the sugarcane fields, a hand on her hip, communicating with the men effortlessly between Garlinghouse and the field managers. The workers loved her. Of course, many of them knew her, after all, she was one of them. Violeta knew many of the sweating, machete-slinging men in the fields as fathers and brothers in her community. Her presence unwittingly quelled tensions between the layers of management. While she ensured she communicated Garlinghouse’ needs, she also made sure that the engineer understood the workers’ needs. With Violeta’s help, the American engineer was drawn up and exposed to the challenging conditions of the field workers. The expanded level of awareness

prompted Garlinghouse to establish improvements and efficiencies for the plantation as well as for the men.

The engineer was impressed with Violeta's maturity, spunk and incisive mind as she handled herself among the workers. He also noticed that things were running smoother with the clever young lady on his team. She was now seventeen but seemed older than her years. Violeta stood with her shoulders back and head held high, a bearing that conveyed strength and understanding. She was indeed older than her years. The experience of the birth and disappearance of Pipiche lay achingly dormant inside her. It grieved her, it aged her and it woke her.

Arthur Garlinghouse was from Arlington, Texas. He was married to kind-hearted Margaret who became despondent after accompanying her husband to the Dominican Republic with their son, Arthur, Jr. A few short months after setting up a household, she abruptly left, taking their son with her. Quisqueya was no place for her. She missed her extended family, the food, Texan people and the English language. The Dominican culture was foreign, almost savage to her. She had never seen such poverty. It was no place for an unprepared southern belle.

Unlike Mrs. Garlinghouse, Quisqueya brimmed with vibrant life for Arthur. He didn't mind the tropical heat, relished the savory comida criolla<sup>20</sup> and the cold Presidente beers but most of all, he loved the Caribbean spirit. Dominicans are indomitably happy people. Greetings are for real, laughter bubbles up in every conversation, doors are left open and there is always enough food for one more. Invariably, there is music playing and children learn to dance in the kitchen with their mother as meals are prepared. Dominicans are a fun, joyful bunch and Arthur reveled in their easy-going nature. The island suited him, so did his work. When his wife left he was lonely for someone to talk to.

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<sup>20</sup> comida criolla – Caribbean cuisine

Violeta's ability to converse in English began to fill the void. Their rides out to the fields were peppered with personal information and preguntas,<sup>21</sup> mostly from Garlinghouse. There was a nervous eagerness he felt each time he entered the warm intimacy of the big black car with Violeta. Arthur wanted to learn as much as he could about island life from the vivacious and scintillating young lady. Long forgotten sensations tacitly thrummed throughout the aging man's body as he sat next to her trying to discuss the business of sugar cane production.

Violeta was overcome by the unfamiliar and invigorating experience of the affection growing between her and this older white man. She had no experience with people from outside her village of Quisqueya and this man was as different from her people as he could be. For one thing he was soft spoken and kind. The tough and unbreakable Violeta felt fragile in Mr. Garlinghouse's presence. He was twenty-three years older than her, but she was the only one he could communicate with freely. A familiarity developed seamlessly, creating a bond between them before Violeta realized it. Arthur, being a mature man, saw it coming. He was besotted by Violeta's beauty, her ability to make him laugh and her moxy. He looked forward to each of his trips to the fields with his associate and friend, Violeta.

The job with el ingenio provided immediate relief to Doña Emilia's little family. There was more food on the table, more chickens in the yard, and Balina was now a member of the family, helping Doña Emilia with the house and Sylvina. As the liaison to the field workers, Violeta was able to get Elena's husband, ese inútil<sup>22</sup> de Antigua, Carlton Edward Smith, employed as a plumber. And, after a few months of employment, Doña Emilia got a new Singer sewing machine.

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<sup>21</sup> preguntas - questions

<sup>22</sup> Ese inútil – that useless one

Mr. Garlinghouse and Violeta spent a lot of time together during their workdays. There were hours out in the field talking with the workers and time spent traveling to and from the sugar cane fields. The growing fondness seemed to narrow the twenty-three years that separated them. Violeta enjoyed Mr. Garlinghouse' company. No, she was fascinated by it. She had never spent much time with a man, really, let alone a white man. An older white man. An older, educated, married white man. Arthur Garlinghouse was a gentleman, gently raised by an English mother and an American Father. He was not very tall, and he was stout in body type. He spoke softly and carefully. He was forty-one years old and, after 3 months of working together, he was in love with seventeen-year-old Violeta Estél Garcia. Arthur, married and her employer, was consumed with passion. Violeta, old beyond her years, could feel Arthur Garlinghouse' growing heat when they were together. She understood these things and she was flattered. She enjoyed his company and was taken by his stature, his title, his suits, the cigar he lit at the end of the day. The special attention he bestowed on her made her feel delicate and protected. In his presence and with his attention shining on her, she felt light and powerful. These were feelings she never felt before. She didn't think this was love but it felt good and it felt safe.

Violeta's head was swimming. This was not something she felt she could discuss with anyone, not even her best friend Gisela. When she was with Arthur, she felt worthy and deserving – of what she did not know - and she felt elevated. He respected her thoughts and asked for her advice. He asked about her family, showed interest in them and even delighted in stories about Sylvina and her pet rooster, the annoying foot-pecking Coquito. Arthur shared bits about his life in the states; of how his native blood came over on the Mayflower. He spoke of Texas and of his wife and son. Her stomach tightened when he would speak of them. She had nothing to be ashamed of but somehow, she was. Shame. There it was again, always lurking.

She remembers seeing Mrs. Garlinghouse and their son, Arthur, Jr., come by the office every now and then. Mrs. Garlinghouse seemed very nice but so shy. Violeta wished she could make her feel more comfortable, but she did seem like a fish out of water. She wasn't surprised when she heard she had left. Violeta was used to women making their own choices. An independent woman raised her, and Doña Emilia didn't put much stock in romance. Relationships were transactional as far as she was concerned. They needed to be good for something.

Doña Emilia noticed shifts in her daughter since she started working at el ingenio. Violeta was more self-assured, and she seemed happier. She had been concerned about her unflappable daughter. The changes in her after the delivery of Pipíche were profound. She never neglected her duties at home, but Violeta's effervescence had disappeared. She no longer sang as she helped her mother around the house and the laughter that was always burbling in her throat was gone. Something had died deep inside Violeta, but she worked hard to hide it. She felt shamed by her mother and Príamo's family. That the baby was never discussed created a schism of uncertainty and distrust. And, she had lost her special friendship with Príamo. This was a loss that would never be replaced and an ache that would eventually cleave her heart.

But now, Doña Emilia allowed herself to feel hopeful for her daughter. This job seemed to be reviving her. She actually heard Violeta sing as she was hanging sheets and towels on the line out in the yard the other day. Yes, Doña Emilia thought, she is going to be okay. She had been worried that she would not recover and la Doña was stricken with guilt. She had done the unspeakable with the unfortunate creatura<sup>23</sup>. Pipíche had been born healthy and black as an asabache.<sup>24</sup> Doña Emilia had a much different plan for her lighter skinned daughter than

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<sup>23</sup> creatura - creature

<sup>24</sup> asabache – black onyx

allowing her to follow in her mother's footsteps. She felt strongly that Violeta could do better, better than her other two girls. Doña Emilia had endured thirteen pregnancies and three live, healthy births and she had to work very hard to support them. She harbored no regrets, but she knew that her middle daughter was destined for much more. Doña Emilia didn't have anyone to read her coffee cup, but she was sure of it and she had the stealth not to let anything get in the way of it.

“Mamá, there is a big black car coming up the road!” exclaimed Sylvina. Violeta wasn't home from work yet and it was about the time she usually arrived. There weren't many cars in Quisqueya in those days. Donkeys, horses and bicycles were the common modes of transportation. In the late afternoons los panaderos<sup>25</sup> walked their donkeys door-to-door delivering piping hot pan de agua<sup>26</sup>, fresh out of the oven. Children eagerly waited for their warm pan that came in the thin brown paper bags. They would slather aguacate<sup>27</sup> like butter on them to go with their cup of hot cocoa - it made the perfect evening supper.

Doña Emilia heard the crunch of the tires as it approached their house. She went to the door with apprehension. A car had never made its way up their narrow lane. Sure enough, it was a big black car. Sylvina pushed herself between her mother and the door to watch the spectacle. The car slowed to a stop in front of the house. They could see a driver and two people in the back. The driver got out to open the back door and out stepped Violeta. Doña Emilia gasped.

“Viola” (Violeta's nickname) whispered Sylvina.

Then, a stout white man with graying hair and glasses stepped out of the car.

“Ay Dios mío” said Doña Emilia, although a non-believer, she made the sign of the cross.

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<sup>25</sup> Los panaderos – the bakers

<sup>26</sup> Pan de agua - baguette

<sup>27</sup> Aguacate - avocado

“Hola Mamita, Sylvina. This is Señor Arturo Garlinghow, el ingeniero del ingenio.”<sup>28</sup>

“Arturo, this is my mother, Doña Emilia, and my sister, Sylvina”

“Hola, Doña Emilia, es mi placer de conocerte<sup>29</sup>” Garlinghouse said in his stilted Spanish.

Doña Emilia stared at Violeta in confusion. Why is this man here and why did he bring her daughter home in his big fancy car? Violeta and Arthur walked into the house with everyone following in a disorientated state. Doña Emilia didn’t know what she was supposed to do. Violeta suggested that un cafecito<sup>30</sup> would be nice. She walked Arthur into their modest living room and sat down with him. Sylvina, sucking on a piece of her hair, went to get Coquito for support. Doña Emilia wondered if there was trouble at the plantation, but it didn’t feel like that’s what was going on. Her mind raced to make sense of the uncomfortable situation. She’d never been in the presence of a white man.

Doña Emilia coló el café<sup>31</sup> and poured the hot, black bitter liquid into small demitasse cups. She sweetened each cup with a heaping spoonful of sugar and in a bit of a trance, stirred and placed each cup and saucer on a small serving bandeja,<sup>32</sup> as was the custom. She entered the living room with the tray of coffee. There sat Violeta with the doughy, squat man who was old enough to be her father. Emilia noted the easy intimacy between them as they chatted amiably. Violeta touched Mr. Garlinghouse teasingly and she made him giggle like a young boy. “Well, what do you know?” Doña Emilia placed the tray down carefully, handed them each a demitasse of coffee. She took one for herself. Sylvina, still sucking loudly on a handful of hair, crouched in the corner clutching Coquito. They sipped the hot sweet liquid quietly.

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<sup>28</sup> el ingeniero del ingenio – the engineer of the factory

<sup>29</sup> es mi placer de conocerte – it is my pleasure to meet you

<sup>30</sup> Un cafecito – a little coffee

<sup>31</sup> Coló el café – strained the coffee

<sup>32</sup> bandeja - tray

“El Senor Galinghow wanted to meet my family, mamá.”

“Oh?” asked Doña Emilia, staring at her daughter with interest.

“Yes, I’ve been telling him about you and your sewing business and Sylvina and how she loves chickens and butterflies...”

“Mija” Doña Emilia said gently in Spanish, “Why is this caballero here? Is there something wrong, has something happened? Did Carlton take off again? ¿que ha pasado?”<sup>33</sup>

“No, Mamá. Nothing bad has happened. El Senor Galinghow and I spend all day together in the car and in the fields talking to the men. We have become friends. He asks me about you and my sisters all the time. He is here because he wants to know if he can help us in any way. Arturo, I mean, el Senor Galinghow runs el ingenio. He is a very good man, Mamita.”

“I see” she answered, not quite sure what she was seeing.

Arthur Garlinghouse sensed the discomfort and spoke carefully in his stilted Spanish. “Señora Emilia,” he began. “Your daughter has become a very important worker at the plant. She is very good at helping me with the workers. She is very kind and a hard worker. I value her tremendously”

I bet you do, Doña Emilia thought to herself. She understood now what was happening. The old man was interested in her daughter! ¡que bendición!<sup>34</sup>

“Bueno, gracias, Sr. Galinghow. We are very grateful for the work you have given my daughter and it makes me happy to know that you value her. She is very precious to me. The money she makes at your factory is enough. It has helped us tremendously. Look at the new sewing machine she bought me with her pay!” Doña Emilia proudly indicated the Singer sewing machine in the corner of the room. A neat pile of clothing waiting for her hands next to it. Arthur

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<sup>33</sup> ¿que ha pasado? – what happened?

<sup>34</sup> ¡que bendición! – What a blessing!

Garlinghouse surveyed the modest simplicity of their home, neat as a pin and bare of much furniture. He had never been in any of his workers' homes. It was eye opening. The house was tiny, sat right on the ground and was capped with a corrugated tin roof. He could see that the kitchen was separated from the house and closer to the well water yet the delicious food cooking on Doña Emilia's cook top wafted all the way in, full of loving security. He felt a tug in his heart, but Doña Emilia was tired and had had enough for the day. It was time for dinner, and she needed to digest the new circumstance she had just been presented with. Emilia began to collect the cups and saucers. He stood up graciously and reluctantly and took his leave.

“Well, what did you think of mi patron<sup>35</sup>?” blushed Violeta, her eyes bright.

“He is a very nice man, querida. You seem to be in good hands.”

Sylvina went outside to feed Coquito. Violeta set the table while Doña Emilia ladled out a fragrant pumpkin stew over bowls of steaming rice.

“What is it like sitting in that big black car, Viola? Asked Sylvina.

“Oh, Sylvina! You would like it. There is a lot of room in the back and when you roll the windows all the way down, the breeze blows your hair back and dries the sweat on your face and neck. The car can go really fast too.”

Arthur Garlinghouse so enjoyed the delight Violeta took during those rides out to the fields that on days when they got their work done early, he would have the driver take them out onto the newly paved highway that connected Quisqueya to San Pedro de Macorís and race the car to the larger municipality just to hear her squeal with laughter. Then they would stop at El Capri for a bowl of ice cream with the special galleta<sup>36</sup> pushed into the sweet delicacy.

“Would you like to go for a ride in the car someday, Sylvina?”

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<sup>35</sup> mi patron – my boss

<sup>36</sup> galleta - cookie

“Oh, do you think I could? I would love that! Yes!”

Violeta resolved to take Sylvina with them on one of their special trips to San Pedro for ice cream. She considered just how much fun that was going to be and she couldn't wait to see her little sister's face when the car took off and the wind blew her hair back. She thought about Sylvina's first taste of the creamy sweet concoction called helado<sup>37</sup>. It came in four flavors: vanilla, chocolate, strawberry and something called Neopolitano which had all three flavors together in fat stripes of pink, brown and white. Each time Arthur brought her to El Capri, she tried a different flavor. Neopolitano was Violeta's favorite and she always looked forward to the wafer cookie that came sticking out of the top of the scoop. She had never tasted anything so delicious. Arthur's joy was the pleasure he took in indulging Violeta. She was keenly aware of it and knew he would enjoy taking Sylvina along.

“Como no, hermanita! The next time we go to San Pedro, we will come by to pick you up and we will take you for a wonderful bowl of helado,” answered Violeta.

“Helado? What's that?”

“Oh, hermanita, it is so sweet and delicious. You will see,” smiled her big sister. Ice cream was an unheard-of delicacy. The closest Quisqueya had come to ice cream were surprisingly delicious frozen cubes of water, sugar, cream and vanilla, offered on rough sheets of brown paper. Doña Emilia ate quietly while she listened to her two daughters. She was considering how things were changing once again. Change, the only guarantee.

Arthur Garlinghouse, 41 years old and a descendant from the Mayflower, had always done the right thing. He followed his fathers' footsteps in becoming an engineer and married his mothers' choice for a life partner. He never questioned his circumstances and was content with his lot in life. The flat line quality of his life felt normal and contained. He used to be able to see

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<sup>37</sup> helado – ice cream

clear through the beginning, middle and end. But now he felt like a different person. He was alive, happy and, for the first time, spontaneous and in the moment. Where there was once a consistent order to each of his days, now there was delight in anticipation of what the day would bring. Arthur Garlinghouse was verging on giddiness.

Most of the engineers that flocked to the small island to work in the sugar factories felt violated by the in-your-face intimacy that epitomizes the Dominican culture. The discriminating posture of white American superiority prevented most of them from associating with the incurably warm and cheerful Dominicanos. Instead, most American engineers would retire in privileged isolation to their apartments, away from the incessant music, laughter and jokes that infused the island spirit. They shied away from the neighborly invitations to their employees' homes and decided they didn't like the food before even trying it. They missed out on arroz con habichuela, platano frito y aguacate con ensalada<sup>38</sup>, insisting instead that their assigned domestic boil potatoes and fry a piece of steak for their dinner. Most of the temporarily transplanted Americans maintained their separateness. While they did allow the crispness of a cold Presidente beer to quench their parched throats, they, more often than not, maintained their misplaced distinction.

Not so for Mr. Garlinghouse, who upon his arrival to la Republica, woke up to what was a dormant thirst for the lively and affectionate hospitality of los Caribeños. The unpretentious Dominican way of life and the casual familiarity of its people almost immediately transformed the engineer's black and white world to Technicolor. The rustling of the palm trees in the ocean breezes, the glorious taste of coconut water sipped from a just picked coconut, the sweet perfection of a bite into a stick of a freshly peeled cane of sugar, oh! and the comforting sounds

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<sup>38</sup>arroz con habichuela, platano frito y aguacate con ensalada – rice and beans, fried plantains and avocado with salad

of the incessant scratching of the crickets at night, all these things and more enchanted him. It saddened Arthur Sr. when Margaret didn't take to the breezy personality of the tropics. He had hoped that the sultry island air might bring a spark to his wife's otherwise unhappy demeanor. However, it was not meant to be so when Mrs. Garlinghouse left with Arthur Jr., Mr. Garlinghouse was relieved.

He wanted to be free to explore this unfamiliar light heartedness. He was feeling younger and more energetic than he had in years and his yearnings for his wife of 10 years were soon consumed by thoughts and feelings for this all too young and spirited Dominican woman. For her part, Violeta reveled in her boss' affections and attention and found herself looking forward to their special adventures together. His pleasure was indulging his new special friend. Her pleasure was in receiving it. Their feelings for each other came from distinctly different needs, and their needs began to be fulfilled in each other's company.

Violeta was still riding her bicycle to work every morning, but now she was returning home in the big black car every evening with Arthur in tow, as the driver. He would dutifully remove her rusty blue bicycle from the cavernous trunk in the back of the car, lean it against the tree by the door, remove his hat and enter the house, as if already a member of the family. Violeta would breeze into the house without a care of the powerful wind at her back. Doña Emilia, shaking her head, wordlessly began placing a fourth plate on the table. This house of secrets was alive and well. The burgeoning relationship was never discussed but fully accepted.

Doña Emilia developed a fondness for Arthur. Every afternoon she found herself sending Balina to the bodega for two cold *Presidéntes*, timing it so that they would still be sweating in their frostiness when Garlinghouse and Violeta arrived from work. Both Emilia and Arthur

looked forward to that cold cervecita<sup>39</sup> and their end-of-the-day chat. They enjoyed the adult company, and, with their mutual love and admiration for Violeta, this unusual pair bonded in the comfort and privacy of Emilia's humble home. Arthur would arrive respectfully each evening with his hat in his hand, entering their home like the benefactor he would soon become. Notwithstanding his grand stature in the unpretentious little town of Quisqueya, Arthur Garlinghouse was a man of simple roots who was hungry for the warmth of family. Emilia always enjoyed the company of men and this easy friendship was a balm to an aging woman's lackluster life. Their conversations traveled all over the trials of her island life - from the challenges of keeping track of Sylvina and collecting service fees from her impoverished clients to the leak in their red corrugated roof. Arthur would sit back, listen intently, laugh with her companionably and sort out solutions. Arthur relaxed deeply in the arms of Violeta's family.

The engineer and his assistant continued their platonic friendship for six months as a passion blossomed between them. Arthur became a constant at Doña Emilia's dinner table, even on Sundays when Elena, Carlton and baby Rosita would join them. Arthur's was an uncommonly easy male presence. He showed Emilia respect as the head of her household and never attempted to usurp her but instead supported her in any way she needed. He was handy and didn't mind hammering a nail or fixing a hole in the tin roof. He graciously held the baby when an extra pair of hands was needed. Arthur Garlinghouse, the head engineer and manager of el Ingenio de Quisqueya became a trusted friend and fixture at Doña Emilia's house. On one of their many end-of-day visits over their cold Presidénte beers, Arthur finally addressed the obvious, his love for Violeta.

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<sup>39</sup> Cervecita – a little beer

“I have to take a trip to Santo Domingo to take care of some business with the government. I’d like to take Violeta with me.”

“Oh?” answered Emilia, “How long are you planning to be gone, Arturo?”

“I have a series of meetings over three days. We would be back in five days with the travel time.”

“Does Violeta want to go?” asked her mother.

“I haven’t asked her yet. I wanted to talk to you first. You know how I feel about Violeta. I love her very much. I would marry her if I could...”

Emilia’s jaw clenched almost imperceptibly. “Mmhmm.”

“I love your daughter, Amy.” Pause. “And I want to help you and your family. You have been very kind to me and you have become a dear friend. I want your blessing, Amy. As much as I love Violeta, I will not ask her to go with me if you do not want me to.”

There it was. She could see how El Señor Galinghow made her daughter’s cheeks glow and her eyes shine. In fact, everyone in her family seemed to shine in his presence. Sylvina saved the eggs from her favorite chicken for him. Elena always placed the darling Rosita in the safety of his arms, kissing his cheek upon entering the house for her Sunday supper. Elena knew a good man now that she was stuck with Mr. Smith. Doña Emilia didn’t miss any of this and Arthur was pleased. He loved Violeta; there was no doubt. He had also come to love her family. Amy had become a confidant, an important friend for him in a strange land where he was a big fish in a small incomprehensible pond. Amy and Violeta helped him immensely in understanding the world he found himself in; a very different world from the one where he came from. In this world he found love. Warm and earthy love. He couldn’t wait to invite Violeta to go to La Capital with him.

## Chapter Five – A Certain Kind of Entrapment

They were driving back to Doña Emilia's after a long day in the office. She knew he had to travel to La Capital the following week. While Violeta had feelings for her boss, she was satisfied with the way things were. Knowing that he was married, she took comfort in his genuine affections for her but was most gratified by his friendship with her mother. She saw how it buoyed Doña Emilia and she took quiet pleasure in delivering him to her table each evening for their shared cervecita. She enjoyed hearing them laugh together and for this, she had come to care for him deeply. His kindness, his gentility, all foreign to her, made it all the sweeter.

Violeta knew to never expect to love anyone like she loved Prìamo. A love like that could only happen once and she had locked her love for Prìamo deep inside her for fear that that too could be taken away if exposed. Immediately after the pregnancy was discovered, Prìamo had been painfully wrenched away from her by Doña Josefina, his mother, and sent to La Capital to live with her sister. There he lived for two years learning construction under the tutelage of his uncle.

They were almost to the house and Arthur was feeling anxious. "Viola", as he liked to call her, "Would you like to go to Santo Domingo with me?"

Silence. Of course, she wanted to go with Don Arturo, but what did that mean? How would she explain this to Mamíta?

"I've already asked Amy for her permission" he said, reading her mind.

"Oh?" Violeta took immediate offense, but then relaxed, realizing it was all taken care of from here on out. She was considering where they would stay and how that would work. Arthur was afraid he was about to be refused. A stain of sweat began to spread under his arms. He pulled the car over and stopped. Then he reached over and softly took her hand. She gazed at him

with half closed eyes and she understood. She waited a few moments then she leaned towards him and kissed him lightly, smiled and said “Arthur, I would love to go to Santo Domingo with you.” It was all very clear. She would take this trip to be with Arthur Garlinghouse as man and wife. Arthur reached over and kissed Violeta passionately. She let him and she enjoyed it. This was for her, but it was also for her family.

“You know how much I care for you, don’t you?”

“Yes, I do, Arthur.”

“I will do anything for you, Violeta. I want to help your family and I want to give you a good life, the life you so deserve.”

“Yes Arthur. Thank you, Arthur.”

Arthur put the car in drive and they continued home in silence. A few days later, during their trip to the capital city, Santo Domingo, Arthur professed his undying love to Violeta by explaining that he could not marry her, but he would care for her like the queen she would always be to him. He was madly and passionately in love with the beautifully young Violeta. Things moved quickly once their conjugal entanglement began. She was impassive but receptive. He was kind and respectful. He treated Violeta delicately, wanting to indulge her every whim for his passions ran strong.

Violeta understood the advantage Mr. Garlinghouse represented for her entire family, so, it was in a spirit of gratitude and naïveté that she accepted the inevitable. Garlinghouse found a large white house on a hill that had a wrap-around porch and enough land around it for chickens and a garden. He offered it to Violeta for her and her mother and sister to move into. Emilia refused, preferring to stay out of the way of their relationship and in the comfort of her tiny tin roof house with the outdoor kitchen, which upset Violeta to no end. She was, after all, doing this

for her mother who had encouraged her to let Arthur Garlinghouse sweep her away and provide for her in ways no one else in the entire town of ever could.

Violeta's loving heart had sunk deep inside her - along with the trauma of the tragic birth - where it would remain buried. This was a transactional relationship. Violeta, now eighteen years old, made up her mind that it was her responsibility to take on the relationship for the sake of her family. She embraced kind Arthur's love and generosity.

The house was staffed with a cook/ housecleaner and a driver, for the big black car he placed in the driveway. She no longer went to el ingenio to work with him in the fields. Instead Violeta spent her days going back and forth between her mother's house and hers with Sylvina in tow. Elena would come by in the morning with Rosita, now a toddler, and sit at the dining room table that overlooked the front porch and the tall wisteria tree, sipping coffee for hours. Elena was pregnant with her second child and Violeta doted on Rosita, the first grandbaby in the family, who she adored.

Life became a double-edged sword. Violeta had enough money to buy food for her entire family so she and her help didn't have to work the land like most of her neighbors for their onions, tomatoes, potatoes carrots, lettuce and beans. Instead she would send Valéria, her cook out to the weekly mercado to pick up the fresh produce for her home as well as that of Emilia's and Elena's. Given her privileged status, she grew roses and herbs instead. Oregano, perejil, tomillo, y mejorana<sup>40</sup> grew fragrantly along the front steps of the house. Gisela, her best friend, would come over every afternoon to listen to la novela, sometimes Elena with Rosita too, and they would arrange themselves on the porch, swinging back and forth on their mesedoras<sup>41</sup>.

Violeta would call out for Valeria to bring them un cafecito to sip while they listened to the latest

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<sup>40</sup> perejil, tomillo, y mejorana – parsley, thyme and marjoram

<sup>41</sup> Mesedoras – rocking chairs

episode. *Destilando Amor*<sup>42</sup> was a favorite. Every afternoon at two, the young women could be heard giggling at the outrageous life circumstances of the latest novela blaring on the radio, their bare feet pushing their rocking chairs back and forth, dramatic music pulsing in the hot air waves. Once the novela was over, Valeria would pick up the cups and dishes and Violeta's mind would turn to the evening. She considered it her work. She didn't mind seeing Arthur regularly. She didn't mind his sweet lovemaking. What she resented was the 'show'. Violeta was a very proud woman.

When Mr. Garlinghouse first revealed his affections and favoritism for Violeta at the factory, it instilled in her a tacit self-confidence, as if a crown had been placed on her head. She felt respected and valued, not just by Arthur but by her co-workers and the community at large. When it came to love and marriage, the island's culture was informal. It was perfectly acceptable that Mr. Garlinghouse would choose the beautiful Violeta as his *mujer*<sup>43</sup> when Garlinghouse's legitimate wife left. No Dominican expected Mr. Garlinghouse to remain single. Once Violeta was elevated and installed in the big white house at the top of a hill and provided for by el patron, she felt exposed. Violeta was a prideful woman and because Mr. Garlinghouse was a married man, he maintained a separate and permanent residence. Now, his arrivals to the white house at the top of the hill at sunset were an announcement of their intimacy in a way that felt vulgar to Violeta. She absolutely hated it but there was nothing she could do about it. Because Arthur loved her there was plenty of food on the table for three households, their modest needs were met without difficulty, she lived in relative luxury, and, she was pregnant.

Through Arthur's generosity, Violeta provided for her mother and Sylvina as well as Elena and her children- because of Elena's husband's proclivity to take off. For this, Violeta was

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<sup>42</sup> *Destilando Amor*- Distilling Love

<sup>43</sup> *mujer* - woman

content. Arthur was kind and they enjoyed stimulating and intellectual conversations apart from the details of the factory. However, when she found herself pregnant, she became conflicted. It was a big price to pay. It seemed reasonable and right to trade her youthful beauty and vitality so that she, her mother and sisters could live comfortably. But she hadn't bargained to create an image of love with this older man with the graying temples. How could she have a baby with anyone but Prìamo? Violeta fell into a depression. Refusing Arthur's company for several days, she feigned illness.

Tender memories of Prìamo flooded her being. It had been two years since the mysterious birth and disappearance of Pipíche and almost three years since she had seen Prìamo. The new life inside her was just a flicker but she couldn't share the news just yet. She had to wait until she could be happy for it. This, she understood, was the beginning of a certain entrapment. It took her a few days to absorb the reality of it, to prepare her tortured heart to accept more of the unacceptable. Arthur Garlinghouse could never marry her and would leave her eventually to return to the states, to his wife and son that waited for him there. She would end up with countless children as she looked after her mother, her sisters and their families. This would be her life now. She was taking the necessary time to accept it and make the best of it: big white house, black car, domestic help, status, relative wealth, jealous neighbors and a gnawing heart.

Time heals but when it doesn't heal it convinces. Violeta accepted the new reality by leaning into a pregnancy that, this time, she could protect. She was able to push her lovelorn melancholy aside and delve into the joy of preparing for new life. This time she had plenty of help. Doña Emilia was beside herself with alegría. Almost immediately, she abandoned the pile of work beside her beloved Singer and began sewing baby clothes for the coming príncipe<sup>44</sup>. Psychic Emilia was sure it was a boy. This child would be light skinned, maybe even white,

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<sup>44</sup> príncipe - prince

dreamed the calculating Emilia. She secretly prayed it would be so. The currency of whiteness was unspoken but valid. Violeta's stock had immediately gone up when she caught the eye of white Texan Arthur Garlinghouse. Never mind that in his hometown of Arlington he was a *hibaro*<sup>45</sup>, a *cualquiera*<sup>46</sup> who somehow managed to get through college by the skin of his teeth. In the dark-skinned realm of la Republica, Don Garlinghouse, with his gleaming white skin with visible blue veins so sensitive to the sun, might as well have had a gold crown of jewels on his head. In Quisqueya, he was a very important man and, truth be told, he enjoyed the stature. And by association, so did Violeta and for this there was a cost.

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<sup>45</sup> *hibaro* –hillbilly

<sup>46</sup> *cualquiera* – anybody; a nobody

## Chapter Six / This Was Her Life Now

Elena was thrilled to have a cousin on the way for her Rosita and her second baby that was due any day. Three-year-old Rosita had always favored her Tía Violeta and once Elena's belly grew to disable her once again, Rosita casually moved in to the white house with her Tía where the radio was always on and the perfume of roses and herbs wafted in to mingle with the aromas of the day's meal in the hot afternoon sun. She loved her afternoon siestas best when she could curl up with her tia<sup>47</sup> under the mosquito net, the buzzing and her tia's gentle breathing soothing her to sleep. For Violeta, Rosita was her touchstone. With Rosita keeping her company at the top of the hill, she could remember who she was and where she came from. There was still *joie de vivre* in Violeta's nature in those days. The stripping and strident effects of Violeta's life will not have taken effect for another 20 years. In the end, Rosita would get the best of the as-yet undamaged Violeta.

Violeta gave birth to a beautiful, pale skinned baby boy. Alberto Arthur Garlinghouse was the pride of Quisqueya but mostly the pride of Doña Emilia. She could barely contain her excitement and joy at holding her white grandson. She almost felt accomplished. Mr. Garlinghouse was over the moon. He loved Violeta more than ever - more than his wife - and was overjoyed with his new family. He doted on his *querida's* every need and, for the moment, Violeta was content. She was surrounded by the aspirational thrill of new life that the unfortunate Pipíche was robbed of. Violeta never forgot Pipíche but did come to love little Belto, as he came to be known, who was a sweet and tender child. Her little household of two grew to three, Violeta, Rosita and Alberto. Arthur's visits continued with frequency but he never spent the night, creating an incessant loud and clanging insult that Violeta endured each time he left her house after he laid with her. It never ceased to infuriate her.

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<sup>47</sup> tia - aunt

Elena arrived every morning for her coffee and breakfast with her second baby, Susanna and her third on the way. And every morning the two sisters shared their aching grievances, each caressing the pains, woes and babies of the other. For a long stretch, each day melted seamlessly into the next. Rosita became Alberto's big sister, doting on him as Violeta doted on her. Arthur's visits, limits and generosity remained consistent. Violeta's family would never go hungry as long as she went along with the rule. Soon, Elena's third child, Minerva was born and a year later Violeta found herself pregnant for the third time in her life. Meanwhile, Elena's Carlton disappeared for months at a time only to return to get her pregnant, again and again. She and her children would go hungry, and even homeless if it weren't for Violeta and Arthur's generosity.

Carlton Evans Edward was an arrogant man that Elena mistook for important. He was tall and handsome and had avoided work most of his life. Like many islanders, he found his way to Santo Domingo, where there was promise of an easier path. It's what he always sought. Easy. When he met the beautiful, gentle and naive Elena, she fell instantly in love and she was immediately fooled by his swagger. Doña Emilia knew he wasn't right for her sweet daughter, or anyone else for that matter, but she was in no position to negotiate at the time. When Carlton married Elena, she was already pregnant with Rosita. By the time Susana and Minerva arrived, Violeta was supporting the entire family, having located them just down the hill from her home.

Carlton was gone more than he was home. He spoke often of driving jobs and responsibilities that he had back home in Antigua. No one knew Carlton to be responsible to anyone or anything. As for the driving jobs, he never returned with money, but instead with his hand out and an empty belly. It was after his return from one of these mysterious trips that Violeta confronted him about his absences and his lack of support for his ever-growing family. An argument ensued. Violeta angrily clarified what his responsibilities were as head of his

family. With one hand on her hip, she shamed him with the facts: “Carlton, what kind of man are you! I pay the rent for your house. I make sure there is food on your table. You are not even here for the birth of your children! Don’t you have any shame?” Violeta wanted to know.

Carlton stared at Violeta. He didn’t like her. She had had his number from the beginning. “What do you know about life, eh? Living in your grand house on the hill telling everyone what to do below you. What do you know about anything?”

Little did he know. It was time for Carlton to step up and take responsibility. Elena heard everything and slipped out of the house beside herself with embarrassment. She knew this day would come and she was afraid of what would happen next. She loved her husband, but she needed her sister for her security.

That night Carlton woke Elena up and told her they were leaving. They were going to San Pedro de Macorís where he had secured a job, he said. They were to gather what they could and leave in the dead of night. Elena, wanting to believe her husband and wanting more than anything for him to provide for them like a proper husband, got out of bed and collected their few belongings. Once she made their bundles, she woke Susanna and Minerva up and told them they were going on an adventure. Rosita, living with Violeta was spared the exodus. Elena dressed the girls and the four stepped out into the darkness and walked and walked until they got to the main road where, after walking along the highway for a time, a driver kindly picked them up and drove them to San Pedro de Macorís, three hours north of Quisqueya. There was no home or job waiting for them there. Arrogance and ego escorted the girls out of their home and away from security. The desire for a transformed husband compelled Elena to leave the safety of Quisqueya with her two daughters and arrive in a town where they knew no one and had nothing. It took Violeta two days to locate her sister and the girls. She sent the car for them and brought

them back. There were now four grandchildren: Rosita, Alberto, Susanna, and Minerva. Violeta was pregnant with her second. Soon there would be six children.

It was noon when the slap slap of Violeta's chancletas echoed loudly on the dusty road. A fine spray of iron-red dirt fanned out behind her like a long flowing cape. Her hips swayed side to side as her head of shiny black curls bobbed high and down to her shoulders. Violeta was feeling the weight of the responsibility of her family. She marched down to Elena's house with her hand on her hip and a pair of scissors still dangling from her other hand - she had been in the middle of cutting a pattern. It was so hot the platano<sup>48</sup> trees sagged heavily in the oppressive heat. The air was thick and still. Curtains hung limp in windows thirsty for a little movement. Nothing stirred, not even the flies. The lizards napped. As she marched down the lane to her sisters' house, she could hear the scraping of spoons and the raspy rumble of conversations while her neighbors ate their comida del dia<sup>49</sup>, the main meal of the day. Behind her, atop the hill in her breezy home, Belto and Rosita sat, legs swinging from their chairs in the kitchen, slurping their soup. Marisol, the nanny, Sylvina and Doña Emilia ate quietly with them.

Violeta needed to make sure la cantina<sup>50</sup> had arrived on time for Elena and her three hungry children. Balina, who had moved from Emilia's house to help Elena with the children, had left suddenly the day before yesterday because of some problem in Santo Domingo with her mother and brother. Could he really have stabbed his own mother? ¡que horror! But she couldn't worry about that now, she had enough to deal with. Elena was pregnant - again - and her good for nothing husband had not returned from Antigua where he had escaped to after leaving his wife and daughters stranded in San Pedro de Macorís. What a good-for-nothing! As far as Violeta was concerned, men were useless. Even the children they helped produce just created

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<sup>48</sup> platano - plantain

<sup>49</sup> comida del dia – main meal of the day

<sup>50</sup> La cantina – daily food delivery service

more work for her. Violeta had her hands full. Like Elena, she was also well into her second pregnancy. Once she arrived and saw Elena doling out la comida<sup>51</sup> for the girls, she headed back up the hill.

The afternoon gleamed after a quick tropical storm. Steam rose from the scorched earth, taking with it the dusty heat. At two 2 o'clock the stores would yawn open from their siestas. Ladies would stroll out under their parasols to complete their mandádos<sup>52</sup> to el zapatero<sup>53</sup> or maybe la bodega for a cup of rice, and then maybe to a friend's for un cafecito. Each day unfurled in this simple and straightforward routine. Slow movements through the drowsy heat of the day anticipated the cooling relief of the sunset when one could wash off the sweat of the day and apply powder for a momentary sense of dryness. It was Violeta's favorite part of the day. But right now she had other things on her mind. Elena was not feeling well with this her fourth pregnancy. She would probably need bed rest for the majority of the gestation. There would be four babies to feed now plus her household to manage. Elena's husband, Carlton, had not returned upon hearing of the pregnancy and Violeta was getting ready to give birth to her second child. Much rested on her shoulders.

A beautiful blond baby girl, Tica, was soon born to Violeta and Arthur. Named after her mother, the diminutive Violetica proved to be too much of a mouthful. All Belto could get out when he met his sister was Tica and it stuck, for life. Elena had her fourth child, a son, Eduarado. The sister mothers carried on with their daily morning ritual at the dining room table overlooking the front porch. The scents of the wisteria tree, roses and herbs wafted in from the open windows. Flies buzzed around gently in the still air. Their growing brood would be tangled in and around Valeria as she clipped herbs in the garden for the day's main meal while the young

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<sup>51</sup> la comida – the food

<sup>52</sup> mandádos - errands

<sup>53</sup> el zapatero – the shoe repairman

mothers savored their hearty mangú, a breakfast of mashed green plantains drizzled with olive oil and topped with a fried egg. The sisters eased through their days, caring for their brood with the help of Marisol, la niñera, while the radio played and the main meal of the day simmered under Valeria's knowing hand. Mealtimes would glide into siestas, into baths, pan con chocolate and then a friendly evening stroll to greet the vecinos.<sup>54</sup> Life's sweet rhythm seemed to flow uninterrupted. Arthur too, remained consistent with his love, his generosity and his habit of leaving after sex. It was an insurmountable indignity in Violeta's otherwise calm and steady life.

The other insult was more bittersweet. Príamo, who had returned from Santo Domingo a year earlier, took it upon himself to delight Violeta every now and again by galloping up to her house on his big white stallion, Valentino, and entertaining her with his gallant equestrian skills. Rosita was always the first to hear Valentino galloping up to the house. "¡aqui viene Príamo!"<sup>55</sup> she would exclaim laughing. Príamo would appear either riding Valentino backwards or sometimes standing on his back while waving his hat in the air. Greeted by gales of laughter and screams from the children, the help and the sisters, Príamo would smile widely and chuckle, asking after everyone as he stole glances at his beloved. Violeta would stand on the porch, her hand on her heart, keeping the pieces together. For Violeta, it would have been easier to never have to see Príamo again.

On an autumn evening, when the days were getting shorter, Arthur and Violeta rocked on the mesedoras<sup>56</sup> on the wrap around porch. The crickets had just started their serenade. Sipping their mint tea, Arthur explained that he had to travel to the United States on business. Violeta was immediately fine with it.

"How long will you be gone for?"

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<sup>54</sup> Vecinos - neighbors

<sup>55</sup> ¡aqui viene Príamo! – Here comes Priamo!

<sup>56</sup> Mesedoras – rocking chairs

“About a month. I have to go to New York and then to Texas to visit my family”

“I see,” Violeta was nonplussed. She actually looked forward to the break.

“Would you like to come to New York with me?”

Violeta’s eyebrow arched. “To New York?”

“Yes, I’d like to take you to The World’s Fair.”

“The World’s Fair? What’s that?”

Life’s wheel of fortune was about to take another turn.