

Inheritance

My sister, Alejandra, called me from Florida to tell me about Mami's cancer. Pancreatic. She had been diagnosed two months ago, and now she was in a morphine-induced coma at Good Samaritan Medical Center. Nothing could be done.

"Why didn't you tell me before?" I asked.

Alejandra was four years older than me and still lived with my mother in the same house, the same room where we had grown up. Since leaving home about a decade ago, I had been living in different places—Gainesville, North Carolina, Chicago. For the past four years, Baltimore was where I had been.

My sister's voice was thin, but unwavering.

"We would have told you, Erica, if you ever bothered to call."

I took a breath and envisioned all of my anger as a ball of light that I could release into the universe. I could never tell if it helped because the anger eventually circled back like an obedient satellite. But at least now I could speak.

"She's my mother," I said.

"Well, we got used to not having you around."

She didn't wait for me to respond, which was good because I had no response.

"You know now," she said. "When can you get here?"

The rental car agency in Miami wanted to give me an SUV.

Behind the counter was a young man who looked like he was in his early twenties. Someone probably did his laundry and cooked his meals. His name was Carlos. It was inscribed on the badge clipped to his shirt.

"You sure? You don't want to try it out?" he said.

“I’m sure. Can I please just get the economy?”

“Okay. I feel you.”

As he glanced over my driver’s license, he paused to look up at me.

“Erica Ruiz?”

I nodded.

“You Latin?”

I nodded again.

“You don’t look it.”

“I know.”

“Where you from?”

“Argentina. But I grew up here.”

“For real? You grew up in Miami?”

“Yeah.”

He held my license as if it was a card ready to be shuffled into a deck.

“So you live in Baltimore? Why did you move?”

If Mark had come with me, we would have already been on 95. But I had told him to stay home.

I didn’t tell him that my sister and mother didn’t know about him. I didn’t want them to know.

“Did you say that you had the economy?”

“It’s cool. We got it.

He turned towards his computer, but kept talking.

“I’m Cuban. *Bueno*, my parents are from Cuba. I was born here. Grew up in Hialeah. How about you, Argentina? What part of Miami you from?”

“North Miami.”

“Yeah, you don’t even sound Latin. You sound like you’re straight up from Massachusetts or something.”

“I was really young when we came here. I never had an accent.”

I don’t know why I said that. I had an accent back then, but I lost it eventually. Not sure how. It wasn’t a conscious effort. Yet, I couldn’t remember the last time that I spoke Spanish in Baltimore. Maybe this blank state of being had become my culture.

But in Miami, an accent was part of who we were.

I tried to absolve myself.

“My parents had accents.”

I didn’t mention my sister who didn’t have an accent either. I didn’t mention that none of us had spoken to my father since he left us for *esa puta* as my mother called her.

Carlos had already turned back towards his computer. He typed up my information, and we waited for the printed copy of my receipt.

“So you here for business or pleasure?” he asked. “You seem pretty serious, Argentina, so I’m gonna say business.”

“Business,” I agreed.

I took my receipt, left him to his youth, and drove to my hotel.

In the days after Alejandra had told me about Mami, I wanted to tell strangers—the people on the phone, behind counters and cash registers—all the officials who had brought me back to Miami—that my mother was dying.

Would they give me comfort? Indifference? A discount?

I couldn't pretend that the money wasn't important. I was working as an adjunct, Mark was waiting tables. As I had booked my flight online, I asked Mark if people got free plane tickets in these situations.

"Only when you're going to a funeral."

I put my head down on the desk. Almost immediately, Mark stood behind me with his hand on my back. He was applying for his master's in social work. He did Tai Chi in our living room, an internet activist. I never knew what to do with his steadfast expressions of comfort. I hadn't been with a boy since high school. I didn't know what we were, what I was, but we had been together for six months.

"I don't want her to die," I said.

"I know."

I let him hold onto me even if my body wasn't fully there.

I had always been *la mala*. *La porfiada*. Maybe I did want her to die sometimes. After my father left, all we did was fight. Clothes, friends, learning to drive, getting a job after school. Every one of my decisions, always wrong. Even when I was younger with both of my parents around, all it took was a torn dress, a broken toy, a sandwich I didn't want to eat. Years later, she said it was nothing. When she was a child, she got it worse, so I should stop complaining. Yet, I didn't want her to really die. I ended up not telling any strangers about my mother because if I said it out loud, then that meant she was actually dying. I kept thinking that Alejandra had made it up. She wouldn't do that, unless she had completely lost her mind. But maybe the past ten years had made her lose it. Alone with our mother. I would have lost it. The last time I spoke to Mami, we had the usual conversation about how she must have done something wrong because I was a lesbian. She said she would pray for me to find a man.

At the hospital, Alejandra and I sat on opposite sides of my mother's bed. It wasn't a private room. There was a woman on the other side of the curtain. We didn't know her name. She didn't ask for ours either.

I had been there for a couple of hours, and my sister hadn't let go of Mami's hand.

"You're teaching at the same place?" asked Alejandra.

"The community college."

"Do you like it?"

"No."

Alejandra sighed.

"I don't have to like it," I said.

"You're right. You don't."

"Are you still working at the real estate office?"

"Yes."

"Well, do you like it?"

"It pays the bills."

"You don't like it."

"It's not about liking or not liking it. Some of us don't have a choice, Erica."

"You have a choice. You have choices."

Mami's leg twitched again. When it first happened, I thought maybe she was trying to move.

Alejandra said it was probably a reaction from the morphine.

Even in the hospital, I wasn't ready to admit that my mother was dying. I couldn't stop thinking that she would get up from this hospital bed. She would grab my arm, tell me I was too skinny, ask me *tienes hambre* and did I want her to make me something to eat.

When the doctor came to check on my mother, Alejandra let go of Mami's hand. She stood up as he approached.

"It's okay," he said. "Stay where you are. You're fine."

But she got out of his way to take her place at the end of the bed, across from me.

He looked over her machines, rested his hand on her shoulder for a minute, and gave us a sympathetic look.

"Your mother—she's a very nice lady."

Then he left the room.

My sister took my mother's hand again.

"I don't think I would use the word 'nice,' " I said.

"Erica."

"He doesn't know her. He doesn't know if she's nice. He didn't even ask us—is your mother nice?"

I couldn't stop myself even as Alejandra let go of my mother's hand and stood up.

"And how could you say that about someone you don't even know?" I said.

My sister walked over to me and gripped my arm—hard, the way she used to do when we were younger.

We went into the hallway where our mother was no longer between us.

Alejandra's glare locked into me, into the years of silence between us.

"Why are you even here?" she said.

“She’s my mother. And you asked me.”

“It’s always about you.”

“You asked me,” I repeated.

My sister took a step forward.

“If you start on that abuse bullshit—you can leave right now.”

“It’s not bullshit.”

“You can leave. We don’t need you here.”

She pushed me against the wall—not hard, not this time.

I stayed there even when she went back inside. I needed the wall more than I needed my sister.

We watched the nurses turn my mother over in her bed as they changed the sheets.

When they turned her towards me, she opened her eyes. So green. Her jaw stayed slack, but this momentary brightness rushed through me as if we could speak to each other again.

“It’s okay, Mami,” I said.

My sister watched me from the other side of the bed.

“She opened her eyes,” I explained.

I moved towards my mother but the nurses told me to step back.

My sister walked towards my side of the bed with her arms folded across her chest. But my mother’s eyes were already closed.

We divided the cost of the cremation, divided the ashes. My sister inherited the house. We were concerned with fairness. We were also fragile. During the first few months without her, we would call on the phone to hear ourselves breathe. But eventually the old concerns took hold

again, or at least they did for me, and we left each other behind, the way we always had. Mark gave me a book on grief and told me to trust the process. I had cried but not in front of him. My mother's ashes lived in a ceramic urn on top of my dresser. I had no plans for what to do with them.