

"What sticks out the most?"

I'm not sure why I'm not ready for that question. I don't have anything against remembering our time in Phoenix, but it's always felt like the same narrative getting told over and over. I haven't thought about it as its own thing. It just is. It just was.

"I'm not sure. There's nothing really special about it."

I shift my weight on the couch. The leather makes an uncomfortable noise, the kind where you hope those in the room know you didn't just pass gas. But my leg was falling asleep, so I had to move a little.

"There's nothing special about your first few years in the states?"

Claudia looks at me through her thin-rimmed glasses. They're silver, and match the streaks of chrome in her hair. She feels motherly, but stern at the same time. I feel watched by her. Not quite judged, but definitely evaluated. She doesn't have a notebook like I expected her to, but she is wearing a cardigan.

"They were new, but I'm not sure about the word special."

I run my hand along the pillow next to me and think back to those years in Arizona. So much was new, different, foreign, unsteady. I remember being intimidated by the roads and the street signs I could barely understand. Shapes and colors I recognized, but words that meant nothing. I remember calling Roberto and asking him questions about what certain phrases meant, or leaning into him so he could read the menu with me at lunch. I think about all the times I thought about calling but didn't. He was always so understanding, so kind and gentle and patient. No matter how often he told me I wasn't bothering him, I still felt like a burden. I should be able to speak and read for myself.

Claudia shifts forward in her seat. It's like she can hear me thinking. Her armchair doesn't make faux-farting noises. It's a much nicer piece of furniture than the couch, but I understand why: she spends a lot more time sitting on it throughout the day than her patients will spend on the couch.

"That's a fair distinction to make. I guess I'd like to hear more about the details of your time in Phoenix. Tell me more about the things you remember."

I can feel her studying me. It feels like a strange thing to be self-conscious about, seeing as I'm choosing to be here and to let her study me, but I still feel judged. I know her job isn't to judge me. I know she isn't actually judging me. I know the point of being here is so I can talk about things that I find difficult to talk about. It's just... actually difficult to talk about.

"There was honestly a lot going on. Between settling into the house, and getting Angie into school, and helping Roberto through his master's, there was just always something to do. There's no small detail that 'sticks out' to me, per se."

She gives me a look. I felt my voice quaver at the use of the phrase "per se," and I think she noticed it too. I've gotten better over the years at using words

confidently and trusting in my ability to know what they mean, but I don't know when that confidence will stop being fabricated.

Barely anything changed about Claudia's expression as I spoke, but I saw her eyelid shift a little bit. She's deciding how to approach me. This feels like a game, a back-and-forth tug where both parties are trying to figure out how much the other will give. I feel like she can tell that I'm filtering what I say. I can sense her moving to call me out on it.

"That's understandable," she says. I pause internally, a small jolt like that of a scratched record. I wasn't expecting her to validate me. "You did have a lot to do. I can imagine your plate was always full."

I turn my ring, fidgeting with the stones and feeling their texture, not knowing what to say next. "Yeah, I guess I did. It's not something that bothered me though."

"Did Roberto help with the transition?"

I tilt my head a little bit. I felt a strange urge to say no. "He was always very busy. His program was very intense and he had a heavy workload, so he always had a lot of work to do and would usually be working in his office late into the night. He'd come out for dinner, and a few moments here and there to say hi to me and Angie, but that was it."

"So you were the one doing most of the housework?"

"Yeah, I had to. Roberto needed the help and support, and Angie needed to get settled in for school and everything. It was my job to be helpful."

"Being helpful was your role in the family, yes?"

"Absolutely. My daughter was struggling initially with English because it wasn't a language that we enforced much at home. Roberto spoke English because he studied here, but he really only spoke it for work. At home we always spoke Spanish. She needed a lot of extra support at the beginning because she didn't feel welcome here."

"Was the language barrier challenging for you?"

I catch my words in my mouth. I was ready for this question to come up, but I was expecting it to be one of the first questions that got asked. By this point, I had put it out of my mind in terms of myself. I'm used to people asking me where I'm from, as my thick accent identifies me quickly as a foreigner. But even though I've been thinking about the English language throughout the entire session, and now about my daughter's struggles with it, the question still catches me off guard.

"I'm sorry?"

"Was it difficult to handle and manage all the new challenges of moving to Phoenix, helping your daughter and your husband, while you yourself were also learning English?"

I let out a small chuckle. Half-hearted, slightly embarrassed. "I mean, yeah. It wasn't easy. It was very hard at first. But I managed to learn and I got everything

done." I sigh a deep breath, trying my best to hide the anxiety behind my smile. I felt some tension well up between my eyes.

"I'd like to hear more about that. What was it like to have to learn the language while you were already here?"

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"So last session, we were talking about your experiences in Phoenix, right?"

"Yeah, we were."

"What were some things that you left thinking about?"

I don't want to think too much about what the session left me thinking about. It was painful, in ways I wished it wasn't.

I was quiet for too long. "I can tell you're thinking about something, Irene. What are you thinking about?"

I shake my head a little. The thoughts aren't shaking out though. "I'm just remembering some of the tougher moments in Phoenix."

"Do you want to tell me about some of them?"

I don't know what Claudia is doing. I'm staring down at my hands now and picking at my cuticles. I should stop doing that. I don't know what else to do with myself right now. "It was difficult to do everything, like you said last time. I felt like I couldn't ask for help."

"Did you not feel supported?"

"No, not at all." I look up at Claudia. That came out stronger than I meant it to. "I just mean that throughout our time in Phoenix, I felt very cared for and supported. Roberto wasn't doing anything wrong."

Claudia angles her head down a touch. "I never said he was. But you seem to react strongly to the idea of him not supporting you."

"Because he did."

Claudia nods. "Okay, I'm glad he did." There's something more she isn't saying, I hear it at the end of her sentence.

"You don't believe me."

"I do believe you, Irene. I'm just curious about why you feel the need to emphasize so strongly that your husband did support you."

I feel my head getting tense. "I just don't like the implication that my husband wasn't helpful."

"I understand that. Have you been told that before?"

"Not really."

"Then why do you think it is that you jumped so quickly to defend him?"

I'm picking at my cuticles again. I sigh for a moment, not knowing what I'm going to say next. "I just... don't want to depend on him too much."

Claudia sits back in her seat. I'm looking at my hands, but I hear the click of her glasses being set on the table. "Why is that, Irene?"

I feel my head shaking again. "He just had so much going on while we were in Phoenix, I didn't want to be something that was holding him back from getting his degree."

"And why would you be holding him back?"

I quickly wipe a small tear from my left eye. I'm sure she noticed me doing so. "There were such basic things that I couldn't do well because I didn't speak English. If I had been able to, Roberto could have focused entirely on his studies and on his work without needing to translate every little thing for me."

"Did Roberto ever tell you that you were bothering him?" Claudia's tone has softened. I feel like she's babying me, but for some reason I don't mind.

"No. Never. He was, and still is, the kindest and most patient man I've ever met."

"Yet you still feel like you're burdening him."

"It's stupid that I can't function properly without him. I feel stupid."

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On the walk home from therapy, I feel a soft breeze running along my neck. My sweater tails behind me the slightest bit, and I curtain my eyes the slightest bit to keep dust bits out. My ankles feel chilly where the wind is hitting my legs just above my socks.

I'm thinking about everything I talked about. Pain I haven't dealt with or thought about in years. I should talk about the things that bother me more, but I never know where to start.

A soft guitar song starts playing in my earbuds. The gentle plucking makes me take a deep breath. I look up a bit, waiting for the crosswalk to give me the light.

Suddenly, I feel a gentle tap on my shoulder. "Excuse me miss, could you help me?" a thick accent asks me.

I turn to face a young man and who I think is his partner, two young men, probably in their early twenties. One has a dark complexion and a very confused face. The other is tan and looks annoyed at his companion. "Hi there, what's the matter?"

"We're trying to find this place," he shows me a screenshot on his phone, "but I speak little English. Where do we go to get there?"

"That restaurant is on Dean St. You're not far from there. Go four blocks that way and then left. You'll see the big blue sign."

I can see him processing every word I'm saying. "Four and left." He gestures gently with his hand in the direction of "left," confirming he understood me. "Then a blue sign?"

"Yeah, you will see it clearly."

He nods a bit. "Okay, okay thank you miss! Thank you." He turns and says something to his partner in French quickly, who nods his head at me in thanks, then they turn and leave.

I missed the light for the crosswalk. I feel okay about it though. Trying not to sob in public, I shake my head and hear the soft plucking in my ears. I pull my phone out and dial Roberto.

"Hola, preciosa," he greets me.

I smile and feel a couple tears fall down my cheeks. "Mi amor, guess what?"

Note to feedback group:

My intended audience for this piece is any immigrant or family member of an immigrant who has dealt with the difficulties of moving to a foreign place, seemingly unprepared. Really, though, this story is meant for anyone to read so they can understand the difficulties of living outside your home country. Language was developed over years by people wishing to communicate, but if you don't speak that language and are in the minority, it's easy to feel isolated from your new community very quickly. That isolation can be debilitating.

This piece is important to me because it's my mother's story. She's often felt less intelligent or less capable than my brother and I, or than my father. The truth is, in some ways she's the most capable of us all. She's a force of nature, but she doesn't see herself that way because of her struggles with expressing herself in English. She often quotes a line that Sofia Vergara said I think in *Modern Family*, "Do you know how frustrating it is to have to translate everything in my head before I say it? To have people laugh in my face because I'm struggling to find the words? ... Do you know how smart I am in Spanish?"

I'd like to know what parts of my writing are clear in this piece and what parts aren't. I want to know if there's anything you think could be developed more or if there's something that you feel is taking away from the main focus.