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Pieces of Me

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As I'm walking down Rosecrans Hall, I extend my neck to see if my room is bolted or not. If it's bolted then my roommate's, there but if it's locked then I have the room to myself. It's been quite different living with someone else. I've noticed her habits, like putting a stuffed animal over her face while she sleeps, or leaving her mascara by the mirror. Those are some of the habits I don't mind, but there are certain others that I don't understand, such as opening the blinds as soon as she wakes up and turning on the lights for added "brightness." I will never comprehend this habit because I see it as wasteful. In the time of environmental crisis, I was taught to conserve electricity and not waste energy. I open the bolted door—Oh great! The lights are on AND the blinds are open. It's almost blinding; my eyes need some time to adjust. I cannot believe how much energy this is wasting. It does not need to be this bright.

I worry too that maybe her habits have rubbed off on me. Over winter break I shared my old room with my little sister, Camila. My room became conditionally hers when I moved into college. However, she thinks it's funny to claim that everything is hers including the chair I sat on at the dining room table. I am not gone. I'm just away. It's still my room because my posters of The Kooks and Sleeping with Sirens still hang on the ocean blue wall, and my black and white bedspread is the same. Camila has left her print: Her Dora and Boots stickers are taped next to my first lottery ticket. Her "Very Hungry Caterpillar" book lies next to my Harry Potter collection. One lazy day at home, I left my room with the intention of going back but got distracted watching my sister Angela play Just Dance 4. I was surprised at how much older she looked and—"Camila! You left your lights on!" my dad yelled across the house. Camila who was already sitting on the couch, jumped up, put her hands on her hips, and said "You left the lights on!" and ran to my room to turn them off.

I guess I was picking up new habits at college. This did not mean I was wasteful, I just forgot. This was how it started though. I remember when I was around seven, my dad came home and was telling me about how we have to save the environment. "Don't waste paper." "Only open water bottles if we are leaving the house." "Turn off the lights when you leave the room." He even went as far to say, "If it's yellow let it mellow, but if it's brown flush it down." My mom didn't like the last one and abolished that disgusting rule.

I never knew why my dad was all of a sudden worried about the environment. He never used to pay much attention to it. I suppose humor was his way of covering up the real reason: my dad had lost his job. It was a good paying job as the manager of a newspaper distribution center. He started working there in his early 20s and climbed his way to the top. He knew nothing else. We weren't rich, but we had enough to cover bills and a little extra. I never questioned why my dad was home before I returned from school or why he didn't leave at night for his overnight shift; I was just happy he was home. I saw more of him and he

played with me more. “Turn off the lights” was one of the harder rules for me to follow because I would easily forget. It wasn’t until a couple years later that the rule really sunk in. Now in college, I prefer the darkness over brightness. I take one look around my dorm room, sigh, and turn off the lights.

* * *

I’ve always liked the door closed. That’s probably an understatement because I am physically uncomfortable and anxious when the door is open or even left ajar. Maybe it’s the mentality from where I grew up. Inglewood has the infamous stereotype of being dangerous. But Inglewood is my hometown, from the Dollar Tree on Century to the newly opened Forum. “Take care of your stuff” “Did you lock the door?” “You can’t go out the door alone.” “Who’s going with you?” Having grown up in Inglewood, my dad never wanted his family to live there. What a surprise it was to end up buying a house in his childhood neighborhood. When I would tell people I was from Inglewood, I would sometimes get, “Aye, you live in the hood!” or “Inglewooooooooooooood.” I never understood either. I remember asking my dad, “Do we live in the ghetto?” to which he would defensively reply, “No we live in a bad area. It’s not the ghetto.”

I considered myself blessed with all the things I had. I had no idea that people actually lived in houses with glass walls. I was lucky. I never took anything for granted—not my iPod, my laptop, my own room—because I knew how hard my parents work for their paychecks. “Take care of your stuff.” I learned to lock things away. I learned to hide my money, my valuables, and eventually myself. Privacy is all I wanted. Seclusion came as a result.

I closed the door behind me, and I instantly felt relief, alone, and most importantly safe. I was safe in my room, which soon became my comfort zone, but the more I secluded myself, the more my parents tried to force their way in—looking through my phone and then interrogating me about my text messages or pictures, taking my phone away for seven months when I did something they didn’t like, using everything I said as an excuse to tell me, “You’re wrong. You cant.” I am scared to be myself. I know they have good intentions, but I can’t seem to recover my parent’s trust. They don’t trust me. And I don’t trust them enough to tell them about my daily activities or the funny incidents that have happened to me throughout the week. I need to build my own values as an individual. Your way is not the only way. Your view of the world is not the only one. Your perspective is not the end of discussion.

I envy those who have trusting relationships with their parents—the kind where they don’t have to hide behind the mask of a perfect, studious, quiet girl. I am the biggest accomplishment and the biggest disappointment. It sucks that it has to be this way, but I know they want what’s best for me. My parents are not

horrible people. I love them very much, and I will never be able to thank them for all the sacrifices they have made for me. I have to accept that everything my parents have done for me has been because they want to see me succeed, even if it means hurting me along the way. I know they think I don't care and I'm selfish, but it's only because I've never been able to articulate how grateful I am. Actions speak louder than words. I still plan on buying them a house and a car one day, but I never tell them that. I'll show them one day. I owe them everything.

Maybe I'll get that relationship eventually, but as of now I stay quiet and close the door. I'd almost prefer communication to this constant fear, but I know I'm better off staying quiet and secluded. I don't want an argument: I don't want any problems. Seclusion is my peace. My door is the means of achieving it.

Today, I live with a roommate who is the opposite of me. She leaves the door wide open even when neither of us is in the building. I check my things constantly to make sure they're not gone. I have to take care of my stuff. My door needs to be closed. I told my friend Ravynne about how I wish my roommate would lock the door if she left the building. Coincidentally, she grew up in Inglewood too. "Lock her out!" she would say. "She'll learn soon enough." I can't do that. That's mean. I don't want to complicate her day. I'll take extra precautions to take care of my stuff—hide my laptop in my desk, lock away my Quinceanera ring, the small things that mean the world to me. I wonder if this is normal, and I wish I possessed her openness, but I know that I can never be that way.

* * *

I am the first. The first child. The first grandchild. The first to graduate high school. The first to go to college. Because I was the first I got the most attention from family members, and all the love was focused on me—the first baby in the family. It wouldn't last for long of course because I was lonely. I wanted a baby sister. My wishes were granted, and at the age of six I became the big sister to Angela, the most curious and mischievous person I know. It was the first time I experienced jealousy. Suddenly I was not the center of attention anymore. Adults started treating me differently; instead of babying me, they held me accountable for Angela's happiness. "You're a big sister now. Take care of Angela."

These words would follow me throughout the rest of mom's pregnancies: Gabriel and Camila. By the time Gabriel was born I was eight, and being a big sister was my main role in the family. I would give up little things for the happiness of my siblings: the last piece of candy, the bigger slice of cake, the pizza toppings I want. What happens when my younger siblings give up something they desperately need, for me? I always got new clothes; they got my

hand-me-downs. I am the first to graduate high school. The first to go to college; all the money goes to my tuition.

These firsts come with major guilt. All of this privilege was by accident of birth. It just so happens that my tuition money could have gone towards Angela's promised dance classes, or Gabriel's much needed tutor, or Camila's eye glasses. The money is not divided up equally, and my parents are trying to give everyone the best opportunity. It's not working.

My mom calls me to ask me if I've applied to any scholarships because my financial aid will determine if Angela will go to the best, but more expensive private high school—the private high school I went to. It's like I'm denying my baby sister the best education. Instead of a tutor, we all take turns trying to teach my brother as best we can. But he still doesn't understand sometimes, and I don't want for him to give up on himself. Camila has always had trouble with her eyesight, and I see my parents putting off buying her glasses. "She's only five. When she really needs them, we'll get them for her." Everything is put on hold for me, and it's not because I deserve it; it's because I was born first.

* * *

It's amazing to look at someone and wonder how we got to this place; a place where he can be my best friend, my supporter, my encouragement, and my love. I can see the judgment in their eyes. I can see them all wait for the day it ends or the day he breaks my heart. I see they notice the skin color difference when we walk by hand in hand. They think, "Oh it'll never work out." It's more than the differences; it's about the similarities despite the differences. The differences never bothered us. Why does it bother other people?

I have more hope. I confide in him everything. Every detail of my day. Every thought that has crossed my mind. He is a part of my life because he makes me happy. The disappointment I have faced comes from my family members when they say things like, "You're too young to be in a serious relationship." Then why do I feel this way? I grew up seeing the women in my life deserted by selfish men. They pray I won't do something stupid and mess up my future. I have bigger plans for myself than what others expect. It's as if they want me to succeed but expect me to fail because that's all they've ever known. I'm not going to throw away the sacrifices of my family and their hope in me. He's not there to take everything away. He just makes everything better, more exciting, more meaningful. He's alongside me as I achieve my dreams.

I want something more for myself. I want success, the feeling of accomplishment, to be a positive role model for someone else and the chance to say, "I made it." I don't want to choose between my love life and my future because I want both. I know I will succeed, but my path is a different one, a

unique path I carve out for myself, my own path filled with achievements and love.

I look at him and I know he makes me happy. The past two years have meant so much. I look at him and see his curly eyelashes, the times he's made me laugh, our incredibly fun dates, the times he absentmindedly searches for my hand, the late night talks on the phone, the vulnerability, the strength, the trust. I look at him and say, "*Te amo.*" He gives me a puzzled look as he tries to decipher my Spanish words and carefully says, "*Te amo Alex...my name is Alex?*"