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Vida

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Engel: Vida

VIDA

Patricia Engel

She told me her real name was Davida, that she was named for four men who came before her in her family and that her older brother escaped the tradition because he was a diseased baby who Saint Anthony saved, so his name is Tony. She said she can't remember who started calling her Vida but that it happened here in Miami. In Colombia she was never called anything but her given name, but over here Vida stuck which she said was okay with her because that plane ride over the Caribbean broke her life in two.

I met her at my boyfriend's house, a small pink stucco cube in El Portal. He's Hungarian and has a cluster of compatriots that get together at his place for weekly barbecues in the backyard. I was one of the newer girlfriends, and Vida had been with her guy, Sacha, for at least a year or two. But when she showed up she always had those same skittish eyes, like a stray cat who knows it's about to be chased off. She hardly spoke to anyone. It was her man who did the talking with a fixed hand on Vida's waist, and you'd almost think she was his prisoner if it wasn't for the way she always dipped her mouth into the curve of his neck and marked him with kisses. Sacha never broke away from her except to hover around the grill with the other Hungarians, poke the steaks and talk in their language about the old days in Veszprem.

I didn't mind those barbecues. The boyfriend and I were doing well at the six month mark, and I beat out the other two girls he was sleeping with when I met him; a Mexican and a Nicaraguan. Didn't take a genius to see that the boyfriend and his friends had a thing for girls with a tan but I didn't care. I'd been living in Florida for three years already and only had a few ex-boyfriends to show for it. No female friends and a community college teaching job that always left me fearing for the future of our youth.

Vida raised an eyebrow at me the first time she heard I

was Colombian. The boyfriend said it when he introduced us, as if that's all we needed to become like sisters. I had to clarify that I was U.S.-born, it was my parents who were true Colombians, and Vida accepted that, even appreciated that I took the time to authenticate myself to her. She found my Spanish amusing. Said I talked like it was the seventies. That's the Spanish my parents left with, I told her, the Spanish I learned in our house mixed with the telenovela talk I picked up on Telemundo. The other girlfriends, a Russian girl named Irina and two Hungarian sisters named Valeska and Marina, mostly kept to each other. That left Vida and me to take refuge in each other those long afternoons around the picnic table.

Vida didn't work officially. I knew she was illegal like my boyfriend, most of his friends, and about half of Miami. But she was pretty: lean with high hips, dollar-green eyes, and bouncy black hair. I didn't see why she couldn't get a job in a restaurant or a store. She told me she cleaned houses sometimes, even offered to clean mine for cheap. She said she did makeup nice too, and if I had a party to go to I should give her a call. I asked her where she learned, and she got a faraway look in her eyes and said, "I used to do pageants."

I told her my mom was a beauty queen in her former life. She was a plain Bogotá nerd and deaf in one ear, until some guy pulled her off the street and into a pageant and she ended up a Miss Colombia finalist. The following year, she married my father and moved to Flushing and later to New Jersey where she traded in her tacones altos for driving shoes. Vida seemed to be doing me the favor of listening, and when I was through she only asked me where New Jersey was in relation to Florida.

One day, Vida moved past the usual light talk about the weather and food and asked me flat out what I was doing with my boyfriend.

"I don't see you with him," she said with such authority that I felt childish, which was absurd since I was five years older.

"I just like him," I told her, which was true. The boyfriend and I met at the gym where he worked out aging divorcees, sometimes

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sleeping with them to lift their spirits. He confessed that to me on our first date. We didn't have much else in common, that was no secret. And logistically it wasn't ideal because the boyfriend was in a green-card marriage to a Cuban girl that cost him ten thousand, of which he still owed five.

He was a boyfriend for the shadows, somebody my parents didn't know existed. A boyfriend I spent nearly every night with but with whom I didn't envision any other life. He drove me to the doctor when I had the flu. Took me to the movies and let me pick them. But once I found a text message on his phone from a woman named Gisela who said she was dreaming of his penis and something in me split. But I never told him.

Vida asked me if I still believed in love. Asked me as if it was something like Santa Claus or El Coco, an imaginary creature sent to taunt us as kids and inspire fantasies. I shook my head, and it hurt my heart a little to do so.

"Me neither," she said with a pride that I wanted for myself.

The boyfriend worked days at the gym but ran a little side business at night as a private driver. When they wanted to get fucked up on South Beach, the clients called and he'd drive them around in their own car. The boyfriend and Sacha were partners and they rotated jobs, but on some nights they'd both get stuck working. On one such night the boyfriend suggested I hang out with Vida. Told me she was lonely, had no friends and couldn't drive herself anywhere. I picked her up at her apartment complex, which I'd never been to because she and Sacha always met us when we went out together.

The apartment was a shoddy place on upper Collins near the banged-up motels and right off of drug dealer's row. She was sitting on the front steps, smoking a cigarette when I pulled up, her hair pulled into a ponytail, wearing jeans and a pink blouse. Almost looking like a private-school girl who got lost in the wrong neighborhood.

I thought we'd go for a drink or maybe get dinner, but Vida

only wanted to go the beach, even started begging me to take her there like I was her mother or something.

We bought some media noches at a little Cuban place and parked just before Haulover Beach. Though clouds covered the moon and the shore was dim with night, Vida pulled off her sandals and ran towards the water, went in up to her knees, and splashed around in the foam. I sat on the sand and watched her lose herself, shouting things at the clouds. When she came back to my side on the sand, she ripped into her sandwich and told me she still couldn't grasp the immensity of the ocean, that until last year she'd only seen it on film and on the plane ride over.

"I thought you've been here for years already," I told her. Which was true. She'd told me she came to Miami at twenty-one, and I knew she was already twenty-three.

"That's true," she said, rubbing the sand off her ankles with her free hand. "But they didn't let me out of the house the first year."

"What house?"

"Where I was working."

I imagined a horrible employer. A family who hired her as a muchacha. I saw tons of young girls in white maid's uniforms all over Miami, pushing strollers at the park and grocery carts at the supermarket. Maybe she had a boss who locked her away. I'd heard of that. My mom's muchacha was full of terror stories.

Vida faced me, but all I saw was the outline of her hair and the car lights flashing in the distance behind her.

"Una casa de sitas."

If my second-generation Spanish was correct, she said a brothel. A place where they take appointments with women. I didn't know how else to say it, so I asked her as plainly as I could what she was doing there. And just like that, she said, they'd made her a puta.

She pulled her hair out of its tie and wrapped it back up again.

"You think differently of me now, don't you, Sabina?"

"No, of course not."

"I was a nice girl once. Nice family. Everything."

There were so many things I wanted to ask her. Did her family know? Did Sacha know? How did she end up in there and how did she get out? How long did she stay?

"I'm so sorry," I said like an idiot.

We started talking about other things. She told me that Sacha agreed to pay for her to go to beauty school to learn how to do hair and nails, and that he knew a Russian lady in Aventura who would give her a job off the books. Her eyes shone as she told me that her dream was to open her own salon one day.

On the walk back to my car she told me it was her hairdresser who brought her over to Miami. A transvestite named Fito who always did her hair and makeup for the beauty pageants gratis because he said Vida was the best investment in her town, Usme. He told her family he had contacts in Miami and would get Vida auditions at all the Spanish networks so she could be a presentadora on Sabado Gigante or something.

"And your parents let you go, just like that?" I was so used to the overprotective pair I'd been dealt. Couldn't imagine how they could just send her off.

"Oh, my mother had me drinking water from the Flower of Jerusalem. It was supposed to bless me and send me on a journey, so, when Fito offered to pay for my ticket, Mami thought it was the work of God."

I had to ask. Flower of Jerusalem?

"She kept it in a glass bowl next to the television, and we had to feed it fresh river water every week or it would curse us. It's was only when I went to an American grocery store for the first time that I realized I'd been praying all my life to a shitake mushroom."

I was laughing, but Vida just shrugged it off and went on with her story. Said that when she and Fito landed at Miami International he disappeared, and some other guys ushered her into a car, stuck a gun into her stomach, informed her that Fito had sold her for seven thousand dollars that she had to pay off starting now.

I couldn't sleep that night. The boyfriend returned from work exhausted, rolled around next to me, pulled the blankets off of me, pulled me close and asked if I want to make love, but I feigned indigestion. I couldn't stand the night or his touch. I'd sworn myself to silence, not wanting to betray Vida's confession. If I told the boyfriend, he would tell Sacha who I was certain would then reject her, as I'd known many a man who loved to hold a girl's past against her.

The boyfriend grew up in a two-room house on a dusty patch of land with chickens that became dinner. His father left his mom when she was pregnant with him, and the lady never remarried. They had a cat that was constantly pregnant, but the kittens always disappeared within days of their birth. When the boyfriend was seven he caught his mother drowning them in a bucket, something that still caused him nightmares. When he took me to the winter carnival that year, we spotted a cat stranded in the middle of the Palmetto Expressway, crouched against the highway divider. The boyfriend stopped the car, nearly causing an accident, and ran into the darkness to rescue it. The cat lived with him now and often left decapitated mice on the kitchen floor. "Because he loves me," said the boyfriend. "He knows I saved his life."

The boyfriend was tall with enormous thigh muscles and a back that was wide and defined like the smooth ripples of the Sahara. He had stretch marks on his biceps from a few cycles of teenage steroids, and more wrinkles around his blue eyes than you'd think a guy his age should have. No matter how many showers he took he still had the musty smell of a workout, and sometimes I left bite marks on his shoulders and neck just to keep the other women away. I didn't used to be this territorial. The boyfriend thought it was cute; a Latin thing.

When he and Sacha convened and fell into their Hungarian slang, sounds and intonations reminding me that we would never really understand the other, I looked to Vida. She was sitting on the lawn chair with her knees curled into her chest, a cigarette

propped to her lips by her long red nails.

"They could be brothers," she said.

It was true. They looked like twins with their creamy complexion, shaved heads, and box-smashed noses.

She asked me how I met the boyfriend, and I told her the prepackaged story: I was sweating on the treadmill, and he picked me up. Most people laughed when I said that, but Vida gave me her still eyes, then offered a half smile as if to appease me.

"How did you meet Sacha?"

"You don't know?"

"No."

"The house. He worked there too. He was the guard."

We were speaking Spanish, so I know that he couldn't have known what we were saying but Sacha appeared within a second, pulled Vida up by the elbow towards the driveway. She seemed defiant as he talked into her face. She crossed her arms and looked away, at the ground, up to the sky, even to me on the other side of the yard. When she came back, I asked her if everything was all right, and she rolled her eyes as if she was bored with all this. "Such a big production," she said. "Just to tell me he loves me."

I was exaggerating before when I said that I had no female friends in Florida. I had one: Jessamy. A thin-lipped strawberry blonde. The kind of American white that doesn't know what it is but if you ask will probably say Scottish and Welsh. This is odd to me because my parents know our family line ten generations back and five ways wide.

Jess and I were new teachers together, but she couldn't stand it so she left after a year, got her real-estate license, and now all she talked about were interest rates. Usually we'd meet for coffee because she was only willing to break away from her new fiancé for one-hour blocks at a time.

She'd never ask about the boyfriend because she thought he was loser, and whenever she got on my case about him I avoided her for a month or two. I wanted to tell her about Vida because

Jess did a stint as a social worker before teaching, and I thought she might have something to say about it, but, when I started, she got that look like she wished I'd cut it and finally sighed, "I don't know why you hang around those people, Sabina."

I was pissed but held back. If not, the first words out of my mouth would be, "I don't want your life, Jess. I'm not like you."

And her next question would be, "Well who exactly are you trying to be?"

I wasn't ready for that either.

Later that night, when the boyfriend and I were eating pasta in front of the television, I told him I saw Jessamy earlier.

"I don't know why you hang around her," the boyfriend said as if his food had suddenly become spoiled. "That girl has the fear of life in her eyes."

I defended her. Said she was my friend, but the boyfriend wasn't listening. Flipping channels with his free hand, shoveling linguine into his mouth with the other. Afterwards, we smoked cigarettes on the balcony and then went to bed. We weren't one of those couples who fall asleep like intertwined roots. We kept to our separate sides of the mattress, only came together to fuck and to push each other out of bed in the morning.

Vida had many smiles. Careful ones, small ones. The harsh but sexy ones she gave Sacha that looked like more of a decoy. But sometimes a sunrise ripped across her face, and she smiled like it was going to save her life.

Like at the beach or when she spoke of her family. She smiled even when she told me how she worked in a flower shop in El Centro Andino only to give her money to her father who would then gamble it away, and how her brother Tony worked as a mechanic and a messenger for gangsters, ate every meal with a gun next to his plate, which is why she had no problem with cleaning Sacha's gun for him. She said she had a little sister named Justina who worked in the kitchen of a diplomat's house, and they were training her to serve dinner for dignitaries and maybe

one day she'd get to work for one of the overseas ambassadors.

Her mom, she said, was a gentle woman who worked as a companion to an old scientist who was going senile. She had to sleep in the old man's house most nights because he had a habit of wandering into the street and had once been lost for two days before Vida's mom recovered him on the steps of the gold museum talking about Bolívar to anyone who would listen.

It was Vida's mother who encouraged her to be a beauty queen and made Vida's competition dresses herself. And Vida had paid off, winning Reina de la Primavera, Reina de Azucar, Reina de las Flores, and even Reina de Usme. People said she had a gift; even her priest said she had been blessed with beauty to bring money to her family. Back then, she said, all she hoped for was a regional title. But then Fito, el pato peluquero, put it in her head that she needed to aim higher: Miami. "The Jerusalem for Colombians" is how she put it. Enter shitake mushroom.

We were at the beach by 41st Street. I was on a school break and the boyfriend was at work. I still didn't know what Sacha's day job was and gave up asking. Vida and I were stretched across towels in our bikinis, and she stared into the sky as if she could see her whole history projected into the clouds like a movie screen.

Two or three times, guys wandered over to our spot of sand and tried to flirt, but Vida cursed them, inspiring some insults about how we were stuck-up sluts, to which she only laughed.

"I hate men most of the time," she told me.

I asked her how she ended up with Sacha, said that they seemed like a good couple, which was only a half-lie.

"There were four of us, and we each had a bedroom. Sacha sat in the waiting area most of the time. Collected money. Watched for police. Made sure that we didn't try to escape. But I could see that he liked me. I worked at earning his trust. It was obvious that he was lonely. It's wasn't so hard, Sabina. You can get a lonely person to do anything."

She paused, lit herself a fresh cigarette.

"It took a year but one day he said he loved me and that he

wanted us to be together like normal people, away from the house. He gave the other girls money so they could run away, and the two of us left together. We had to hide for months because his boss had people searching everywhere. But time passed. And now we are okay.”

My friend Jess would say it was the freak factor that drew me to Vida. That she was a novelty act for me, a living movie complete with exploitation of Latinas. There was also the vanity element, that in her I saw a parallel life, one that my mother always imagined aloud: the “What if we had stayed to live in Colombia?” narrative. She always said I would have grown up with better manners, been more feminine, and that probably I would have figured out how to be married by now.

And then there were the Colombian horror stories that my parents and their expatriate friends told each other whenever they got together for *ajíaco* and *vallenatos*, to appease their guilt for having left the motherland.

“Un país de locos!” The men would shake their heads in shame, repeating headlines ripped from *El Tiempo*. Headlines about the guerrilla and paramilitary infiltrating the cities. Political corruption, baby trafficking, child prostitutes. The land mine capital of the world.

“Qué vergüenza,” Papi would say as if talking about an alcoholic parent.

My parents and their friends all congratulated themselves for having American-raised kids who only had to see Colombia on vacation. The last time I’d been back was at nineteen, spending two weeks at tea parties with the old relatives who liked to speak French to each other for kicks, and the cousins who hung out at El Country and made it their mission to get me wasted on *aguardiente* in La Zona Rosa every night of the week.

And then there was my *tía*’s *muchacha*, a girl named Claribel who had a secret history we weren’t supposed to mention that involved getting raped by a half-brother at fourteen, resulting in a baby who was adopted by an Italian family. Claribel who had to put in a good two years of service before my aunt would pay

for her to get her high school diploma on Saturday mornings. Claribel who drifted through the rooms of my aunt's house like a ghost, making our beds and shining our shoes without our asking.

"Do you ever think of going back?" I finally asked Vida.

"Every day. But first I have to think of a story to tell my family, to explain what I've been doing here so far."

Dolor ajena is what they call it. Feeling pain on behalf of someone else. A pain that is not your own. No succinct way to say it in English. I suppose that's how we get by.

I'm not that charitable. Nothing in me said I should help Vida. Give her money from my savings so she could buy a plane ticket back home. Hook her up with a counselor at my school, someone to talk her through her dramas. Help her heal. None of that. I just wanted to drink her up like everyone else.

She asked me if I had some old clothes that I could give her. Hers were worn through so that the seams on her jeans looked as if they might give at any moment. I never wore clothes enough for them to disintegrate from wear. Always tossed them on a whim to make room for more. I showed up at her place with three shopping bags' worth, and she poured through my things like they were spun from gold, trying things on and modeling them in her crappy living room. Sacha was in the bedroom, supposedly on the phone with some client. They had a small balcony that opened onto a back parking lot, and the kitchenette smelled like grease.

She walked across the room like it was a runway, posed, and for a second I got a glimpse of that beauty queen. Her prize smile, lashes that fluttered their way into a judge's favorable graces.

She was wearing a blue dress with an arabesque print. A dress I bought in a Las Olas boutique and never wore. It sat in my closet for a year waiting for a party, a romantic summer dinner, nights that never happened. It looked like it was made for Vida, clung to her round breasts and the thin straps were the perfect length so that the fabric draped off her behind like the bows of

a palm tree.

The only way she could think to thank me was by doing my nails for me. She pulled out a plastic tub, filled it with water and soap and washed my feet for me in a way that made me ashamed. She was proud of herself, telling me she already knew how to do all the stuff that they teach at the beauty academy. She'd cruise right through it, she said, be their best student ever, just as soon as Sacha gave her the money to enroll.

She chose the color. A light pink because she said I struck her as a natural sort of girl. One who doesn't like to wear bold make up and who always wears solid colors.

"A natural nail varnish," she said, "because it's quiet and honest. Like you."

And this only made me feel like more of a phony.

The boyfriend slept with another girl. I asked him straight out, and he confessed. Said it happened twice and that it was another lady from the gym. Forty. Divorced twice. Panamanian. I know because I asked for details, and I was so angry all I could think of to say was, "Panama used to be Colombia, you fucking asshole."

I had a canned defense. Said I hoped it was worth it. You lost me. Lost me. Lost me. Gave him a wall of silence, unreturned phone calls, adjusted to my life without him, the hole in my evenings and the cold bed. Returned to life before the Hungarian. Sunday without his grill. His friends. Without Vida, the living documentary.

And then I caved in. Because I am weak. Like everyone else who can't do anything based on real principles. Thought of my father. How he would shake his head and say I have no character. That he didn't raise me for this kind of treatment. And when my parents called to check up on me, I closed my eyes and mumbled that everything was fine while the boyfriend fell asleep with his head in my lap like nothing.

When I saw Vida again, this time for dinner, the four of us, at an Argentinean place on 79th, she and I fell into our Spanish

while the boys talked business in their language.

"I didn't think you would take him back," she said softly.

"Neither did I."

Later, the boys suggested we get a bottle of wine and drink it on the beach. Normally Vida loved the beach, but with Sacha and the boyfriend there she seemed indifferent. As the boys got drunk and did flips in the sand, Vida lit herself cigarette after cigarette. She had an eye on Sacha as he and the boyfriend frolicked like little boys in the sand. He blew her a kiss, and she stared back under a veil that looked a lot like contempt.

"The owners of the house used to surprise us at night sometimes. Once, they went extra hard on me, punched my eyes so that I couldn't open them for days. I never was allowed out except two or three times when Sacha let me smoke a cigarette with him behind the house. But after that beating, he put me on his motorcycle, and all I felt was the wind because I couldn't see. I held him as tight as I could, but I was in so much pain I thought for sure I would fall off and die on the road. And then I smelled the change in the air. Salty and sweet at once, and he carried me into the water. At first it stung but then I opened my eyes and saw the sea in front of me, all around me. We were in our clothes but wet up to our necks. He held me so I could float, didn't talk so I could listen to only the waves. And when he returned me to the house and put me back into the bedroom where I lived, I thought it's not his fault that he is so cruel. We'd all become different creatures."

And just when I started to think of her and Sacha as some kind of weird fairytale, Vida turned to me and declared that she was no Eréndira.

She told me other things.

She said there were four girls and they were expected to see clients whenever they showed up, and could only sleep a few hours at a time. One of the girls wore a bikini all the time and would do anything for drugs, and the owner of the house, a guy named Raúl, kept her supplied. One girl, Vida told me, hardly ever spoke, and once they raped her so badly that she bled for

hours in the shower. There was a woman doctor who came to see the girls when Sacha called, but she was cruel and Vida was pretty sure all the girls were sterilized during one of those brutal examinations. Vida heard of a girl who was there before her, who managed to have a client fall in love with her and buy her debt to the house. Some girls thought she was like a Cinderella while Vida thought the client probably made the girl his personal slave. Vida said the other girls resented that Sacha took a liking to her, that she tried to explain to them that she had a plan for seducing him to get them all free, but that Sacha started encouraging clients to pick other girls so Vida wouldn't have to work. For this, Vida said she would never forgive herself.

One of the clients let Vida use his cell phone to call her parents, but when she heard her father's voice she hung up the phone. She said she lived in her dreams for a long time. Thought of an old boyfriend she used to have, a guy named Fernando who moved to Brooklyn to be with his father when they were still in high school. He wrote her a few times but the letters stopped, and Vida told herself that, when she was finally free, she'd go find him. And then the beatings, she said. Every time the bruises faded, there came another round.

All this and it never occurred to me to ask Vida where this house of horrors was. I never thought to report it to the police, to see if the house was still in operation. Help her expose Fito, maybe help the girls who would follow.

None of that. I just listened.

That New Year's Eve, the Hungarians had a party in a mansion on Hibiscus Island. The owners were off skiing, and one of the boyfriend's friends was the caretaker, lived in the guesthouse and had run of the place when the patrons were away. We drank champagne on the boat dock, watched the fireworks over Biscayne Bay. The boyfriend pulled me into his side as we sat on the concrete ledge, our toes skimming the dark canal water. We had our midnight kiss, hugged all the friends. Vida wrapped her skinny arms around my neck, and we toasted privately to

the future.

On our way home, I asked the boyfriend if he knew that Vida used to be a prostitute and that Sacha was her warden. He didn't lift his eyes from the causeway. Just nodded, palms closing tighter around the steering wheel.

"I don't know how she can stand to be with him."

The boyfriend looked over at me, a shot of anger in his eyes. "He almost got killed because of her. They hunted him for months."

"He watched them beat her, rape her, and sell her."

"She never tried to escape."

"They shot a girl in the back once for trying to run away."

"They just told the girls that to keep them from trying," he laughed.

"How could you have known about it all and done nothing?"

That set him off. The boyfriend pulled over right there on the Venetian and wrapped his fat knuckles around my shoulder, his rough fingertips carving into my skin.

"It was just a job, Sabina. He had to make a living too. It's not his fault they took her there. If it wasn't for him she'd still be there."

"Being a witness can make a person just as guilty."

A solid minute passed. The boyfriend's eyes drove into mine, and I refused to soften. He wasn't my lover anymore but an accomplice to something terrible and his hands on my body felt like weights. The strange thing is that he was looking at me with a blend of hatred and confusion. We didn't recognize each other anymore. Or maybe we were seeing each other for the first time.

"Get out of the car, Sabina."

But as soon as he said it, he relented. Pulled me into his chest with that same heavy hand and pushed my hair off my face, kissing my cheeks and forehead with his dry, chapped lips.

I wish I'd gotten out. Had a little integrity and walked home by foot, each step reminding me how off-track in my life I was.

But I didn't move. Let the boyfriend drive me home and let him sleep in my bed and everything else.

Vida and I both woke up the next day with the same idea. She called me while the boyfriend was still sleeping and Sacha was out for an errand for one of his clients.

She didn't even have to say it. I already knew.

Later that day she told Sacha she was going to buy cigarettes. I told the boyfriend I was visiting Jessamy. I picked up Vida on the corner of her block, and we drove all the way to Orlando before we stopped for a toilet. Didn't talk the whole way either. It was only there that we realized we needed a plan.

We drove for something like thirty hours. When we got to the New Jersey line I called my parents and said to expect us. They were nice to my new friend Vida, didn't understand why they'd never heard of her, or what we were doing there in New Jersey in the dead of January with no luggage and still in our Miami clothes. I dressed her up in one of my high school sweaters, gave her some thick socks and duck boots. Made her look like a real suburbanite.

I slept in my childhood bedroom, and she slept next door in the one that belonged to my brother. I went into my parents' room early the next morning and shut the door behind me. Vida was still sleeping. I tried to explain to them as much as I could but stopped short in several places, every time I saw my mother lift her palm to cover her heart.

I'm a coward. I hid when my parents took Vida into the kitchen, pushed some breakfast her way and tried to talk some truth out of her while their muchacha, Luz, pretended to be busy chopping vegetables for the lunch soup.

I listened from the hallway as Vida complimented the coffee and asked for another bagel. My mother told her she could use our phone to call her parents and Vida declined.

"They must be worried about you," said Papi.

I knew that's all it would take. The face of a father. Any father.

Vida started to cry, and Papi had an in. Offered her a ticket home. Or he said, she could stay here and they'd figure something else out. But my mother pushed her towards Colombia. Said it's not a question of dreams anymore. It's a question of love and she should be with her family for now.

Seems so easy now. After all those confessions on the beach. Problems solved by a long ass drive and my dad's credit card.

The next day, she was home.

On my end, I still hadn't figured anything out, but I decided to stay with my parents a little while longer. The boyfriend would forget me after a while. Maybe he'd pester me to find out about Vida for Sacha, but he'd replace me with another chica soon enough.

My parents and I took her to Newark Airport together for that insanely early Avianca flight. I insisted to Papi that he book her a direct flight, no layover in Miami. I was afraid the sight of the ocean might blow her off course. It happens to the best of us.

She hugged me. Gave me a new smile. A shy one I'd never seen before. Thanked me for nothing specific, which was fine because I felt like I'd been really stingy in every way. Why did it take me this long to get her there? I'll never know.

When she landed, she called. Her parents got on the phone and thanked mine for their help. They still didn't have a clue about Vida's life here. I wondered if she'd ever tell them.

It's been a year since all this.

I went back to Miami. After a few failed phone calls the boyfriend forgot me, just as predicted. I only saw him once afterward, at the movies. I was alone and he was with a girl wearing knee-high leather boots in the middle of Florida summer.

Every time I get to thinking of Vida, she is the one to call first. Always that fuzzy connection, her warning me that she's only got a few minutes left on the calling card and we might get cut off.

"I'm just calling to make sure you're okay," she tells me. "I

worry about you.”

That always cracks me up.

She says she’s washing hair at a nice salon on La Septima, that they’re going to teach her how to do highlights. Her family is planning a trip to Cartagena. Their first vacation together ever.

She sends her love to my parents. Makes me promise to visit her one of these days.

On the long drive up from Miami, Vida and I went through two or three states without a word between us. She hardly moved her gaze from the stretch of interstate sound barriers beyond her window. Somewhere around Maryland, Vida spoke over the hum of the engine that comforted me through the night. Said, “There is no love. Only people living life together. Tomorrow will be better.”