

Ninina

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Nina was convinced she'd stop smoking hookah when she no longer lived with her mother. Smoking flavored tobacco in her friend's Lebanese restaurant wasn't all that rebellious, as she knew, but the freedom and familiarity she felt at Beirut made her overlook everything Ma disliked about the place: the faded curtains and the tears in the cushions; the corners that needed sweeping and the pipes that weren't disinfected properly; and, above all, the smoke.

Nina knew every waiter by name and stayed after Elvira's shifts to help her wrap utensils in cloth napkins. Ma didn't seem to mind as long as Nina told her where she was and who she was with and checked in every couple of hours. She had to be home by nine on weekdays and by midnight on weekends.

A number of her classmates had started coming to the restaurant on Friday and Saturday evenings. Beirut stayed open until 2 a.m. on weekends, and Elvira had put together a good playlist. People who never hung out at school started taking pleasure in each other's company, and, that particular Friday, Nina finally had a long conversation with Enzo, the boy she liked, and the hours passed without her noticing. When she looked at her phone, it was 1 a.m., and she had

three missed calls from Ma. Nina texted her that she was okay and would be home soon, and Ma had stopped calling, but Nina knew that wouldn't be the end of it.

It was 3 a.m. when Nina got home and had to use her cellphone flashlight to find her way around the apartment. Ma hadn't left a single light on, even though Nina knew she was awake, staring at the alarm clock on her nightstand.

Nina felt like taking a long, hot shower, even if her bathroom was across from Ma's room. She dropped her car keys in the bowl on the stand by the front door and entered the bathroom. She hung her leather jacket on the door hook and dropped her jeans and shirt on the floor. The shirt had a boat neck that revealed her shoulders. Unlike most things Ma bought her, it was feminine without having flowers or lace. Nina had stuffed the shirt into her backpack to change into after school, not wanting to give Ma the satisfaction of seeing her wear it, but she'd forgotten to change out of it at the restaurant.

A shower to mask unwanted smells, she could hear Ma thinking, but Nina was a little buzzed from the cocktails and felt bold. *Let her think I smell of sex*, she thought. *Let her think that*.

Nina sat down to breakfast at 11 a.m. without changing out of her pajamas.

Ma walked in wearing the white dress she wore around the house—a V-neck with frilly shoulders. According to Ma, pajamas were only for sleeping. She eyed Nina up and down.

"Good morning," she said, and leaned down to give Nina a kiss.

"*Bendición*, Ma," Nina said.

"*Dios te bendiga*."

Ma grabbed a cup from the cabinet and poured herself the last of the coffee. She turned off the glowing red switch of the coffeemaker and set the carafe in the sink. She took out the milk box from the fridge, unscrewed the plastic cap, and poured milk into her coffee cup. Nina munched on the wheat squares she had with no milk. She hated soggy cereal, especially when the only milk available was that nonfat long-life milk they sold in the supermarkets. That is, if there was any milk at the stores.

Yet she had a particular dryness in her mouth that made her regret not having milk. She'd gone to bed without drinking water, a rookie mistake, and she was paying for it now. Her temple pulsed. She would have poured herself glasses of

water from the carafe until it was empty, but she couldn't do that with Ma in the room. It would only add to the long list of questions Ma would surely ask as soon as she sat down.

Ma put the milk box back in the fridge and sat across from Nina at the two-person table. It was half-moon shaped, with three legs and a side resting against the wall.

Ma set her cup on the table and cradled it with her perfectly manicured hands, tapping her nails against the porcelain. She had chosen a creamy white nail polish that didn't offer much contrast to her skin.

"You didn't return my calls," Ma said.

Ma searched Nina's eyes. Nina's hands felt cold. She made sure to chew and swallow before speaking.

"I know, Ma. I'm sorry."

"You weren't here by midnight, either."

"I know. Elvira and I were talking, catching up on stuff, and I didn't realize what time it was until I checked my phone."

Nina thought of the black shoulderless shirt she'd worn. She'd made sure to pile it between her school shirt and blue jeans in the laundry bin. She'd hang it back up as soon as their maid, Cecilia, put the pile of washed clothes on her bed—before Ma noticed it.

"Who's that girl into *now*?" Ma asked.

Nina could picture Ma picking Elvira up by the shirt collar, out of "virgins" and into "whores"—her two mental classification bins. Nina munched her cereal slowly.

"No one," she said, and looked Ma straight in the eye. *Never trust someone who can't look you in the eye*, Ma always said.

Ma's eyes were pale blue. *Catira*, they used to call her when she was young. She was born to a second generation of German immigrants who used Johnson's baby oil to tan faster at the beach. Ma liked to tell people that she used to be so blonde when she was a kid that her hair was white and had only darkened with age.

For as long as Nina could remember, the *catires* were the popular ones at school, the ones everyone had a crush on. Enzo was a *catire*, but it wasn't because of that that Nina had a crush on him. She was proud of her dark eyes. They were almost black, like her father's. Her skin, like his, didn't burn red in the sun. *We're golden*, Pa used to say.

"No one?" Ma asked with a smile. She recrossed her legs and moved closer to the edge of her seat. She gave Nina a complicit look. "Who were you with yesterday?"

Nina couldn't help looking away. Her eyes fell on Mr. Quaker Oats—on his plump curls and lopsided smile.

"*Mr. Quaker*," Nina thought of answering and shoved a spoonful in her mouth to keep from laughing.

In another world, Nina would've said this out loud. Ma would've been startled at first, but then they would've laughed. They would've settled on the couch to gossip and sip lemonade. Maybe Nina would've even told her about Enzo, just as she'd seen some friends confide in their mothers. But not in this world.

In this world, Nina's and Ma's lives touched only civilly, as if they were nothing but polite acquaintances living under the same roof.

"Nina?" Ma asked. "Who were you with yesterday?"

Nina had to think of a good answer. If Ma had stopped calling last night, it was because she'd found another way of knowing Nina was well, and who she was with.

"You know, the usual people," Nina shrugged. "Kids from school."

Ma's smile faded. She looked briefly at her cup and then up again and there was a hardness in her eyes.

Nina set her spoon down in the empty bowl and got up to wash the dishes. The water against her hands felt cold, accentuating the dryness in her mouth. Nina wet her lips and swallowed.

There was a window in front of the sink through which Nina could see a house two streets down. It was white and A-framed, and its roof was made of some dark material instead of the red terra-cotta tiles on most other houses. It had a tall, slender window in the front, and two towering pines on each side. It reminded her of Little Red Riding Hood. If Little Red Riding Hood had existed, Nina imagined she would've lived in a house like that one.

"Do you know how dangerous it is for a girl to drive alone at night?" Ma asked.

"Yes, Ma."

Water splashed off the spoon, sprinkling Nina's white shirt. It was an old cotton T-shirt that had belonged to her father. Her pajama pants were from a set Ma bought her—the only pair that had spaceships and planets instead of flowers.

"Kidnappings are going up, Nina."

"I know, Ma."

Nina rinsed the bowl and let it sit in the drying rack.

"They took Rita's son when he was leaving Coffee Market the other day," Ma said. "It wasn't even night yet."

Nina knew to stay quiet. She finished rinsing the carafe and set it next to the bowl in the drying rack. She turned off the faucet. There were birds chirping outside and *chaguaramos* swaying in the breeze. From the third floor, Nina could only see their trunks; she had to lean forward to see the leafy tops of the towering palms.

"They didn't get him back until the next day," Ma said.

"I know," Nina said, a little too quickly.

"No, you don't know," Ma said. She sat sideways on her chair, back straight, facing Nina.

Nina leaned against the counter.

"If you knew, you wouldn't be driving around alone at three in the morning."

A kiskadee cried in the distance. Nina wiped her hands on the dish rag and folded the edges in, the way Ma liked it, and hung it neatly on the oven handle.

"If I hadn't known you were at the restaurant, and in good company," Ma said, "I would've called my friend Fernando from private security. Do you understand, Nina?"

Nina nodded and put the cereal box in the cupboard over the fridge. Ma got up to wash her coffee cup.

"There will be no more driving, Nina," Ma said, holding the foamy cup, her figure dark against the window.

"Ma."

"I will drop you off and pick you up."

"Ma, I won't be out past midnight, I promise."

"No discussion," Ma said, and held her with her eyes. Nina knew she wouldn't change her mind.

Nina shut the cupboard and walked out of the kitchen into the living room. She eyed the long velvet curtains that kept the light out in the afternoons. Nina hated those curtains. Ma fretted over them incessantly, using a mini vacuum to make sure the velvet was all the same shade.

When Nina was mad, as she was now, she'd run her hand across the curtains, ruffling the nap, leaving behind a horizontal stripe of a lighter shade. Then she'd wait until dinner time, when they sat at the eight-person table with the good plates Ma got as a wedding gift. Nina's seat had its back to the curtains. She'd

wait to see Ma's eyes shift focus mid-sentence: to the curtains and back. Ma would then search Nina's eyes, saying nothing, and take another spoonful of soup before resuming their civil conversation; it was a silent battle that encompassed the rest.

Nina ran her hand over the fabric, leaving behind several stripes, and then went to her room, closed the door and locked it. She dropped onto her bed and screamed into her pillow. She wouldn't put it past Ma to drive up to Beirut before midnight, get out of the car and scan the crowd, searching for Nina, trying to catch her at something.

Sometimes she wondered why Pa ever married Ma. From what she remembered, they were so different. Nina was only seven when he died, but she remembered he smiled a lot and had hair Ma deemed too long for a man. Nina thought him kind because she liked to think herself kind. In the same way, she thought him loving and careful with words, funny, and good at keeping secrets. She liked to think the good things came from him, and the bad came from Ma.

Nina heard the mini vacuum in the living room, followed by Ma's flats on the parquet floor, coming closer. Ma's steps hesitated in the hallway, outside of Nina's room. Nina wondered if this would finally be the day Ma opened the door and said something about the curtains. But Ma recrossed the hallway, went into her own room, and shut the door.

Nina imagined Ma setting her carafe down on the nightstand, changing into her slippers, and heading for the bathroom—the one with the giant tub Nina used to play in when she was a kid. She was suddenly overcome by the thought of leaving: she wanted to get away—away from her mother and the curtains and the apartment. She would take the car with her. She'd stay with Elvira and park the car a few houses down. She would hide from Elvira's parents so when Ma called, they wouldn't know where she was. *That* would give Ma a good scare.

Nina changed into her T-shirt and jeans. *You look so unkempt*, Ma would've said. *Fix yourself up a little.*

Nina had gotten a pixie cut the month before to keep Ma from telling her to do something with her hair. Ma was always properly kempt: she had a whole closet full of crisp white shirts that she arranged by sleeve length. She always wore her hair the same way—combed back with gel in a low ponytail—and always had the same shade of red lipstick. Since Nina's haircut, Ma had stopped commenting on her appearance.

Nina tucked her wallet and house keys in her front pockets, phone in the back, and opened the door. She crossed the living room, boards creaking under

her Converse, and confirmed that the stripes she'd left on the curtains had been set right. When she reached for the key bowl on the stand by the front door, her hand froze. The car keys were no longer there.

Her cheeks grew hot.

Of course, she thought. Ma had made up her mind long before sitting down to breakfast. The keys probably weren't even there when Nina got out of bed.

Fine, Nina thought, *I'll walk*. She slammed the front door behind her, then the iron multi-lock gate, and hurried down the stairs.

In the guards' room downstairs, Nina didn't find Rafael. Through the barred window, Nina could see the old TV, which used to belong to her, flashing colors on the empty white chair. The carafe in the coffeemaker on the counter was half full, and the bathroom door was closed. Ever since she was little, Nina had been told to always ask Rafael to walk with her, even to her grandmother's house down the street. But if she left now, without waiting for Rafael, she wouldn't have to explain why she wanted to keep going when she got to the end of the park. Elvira lived thirty minutes past the park, down the avenue.

Whoever was in charge of park maintenance had given up a long time ago. The concrete path was uneven because of the tree roots and its surface was splattered with bird poop and fallen mangoes. The neighbors had taken matters into their own hands, hiring gardeners to trim the grass when it got too tall: *los choros* had started hiding there to jump maids on their way from work.

Ma complained about the used condoms and syringes the guards found during their early-morning walks. She blamed the skaters who gathered by the statue of el Libertador on the side closest to the avenue. According to Ma, Nina's generation was going to hell in a handbasket. They didn't respect their parents. They didn't know how to sit at a table. Technology was making them dumb, and boys no longer opened doors for girls like little gentlemen. People didn't dance at parties anymore, and that's why everyone ended up drunk.

Ma considered herself different from the parents of Nina's generation. She hadn't gone soft like they had. She was "a bad mother": what spoiled children liked to call their mothers when they didn't get what they wanted. According to her, Nina would thank her someday.

Nina had always wanted to run into the condoms and syringes just to know

what they looked like. On one of the concrete benches that lined the path, someone had written in big letters, “*I LOST MY VIRGINITY HERE.*” Nina had noticed it at the beginning of summer, after the gardeners trimmed the trees. Ma and Nina drove past it every day on their way to and from school, saying nothing, the sun hitting it like a spotlight in the afternoons.

Nina wondered if the girl (she assumed it was a girl) had written the message out of pride or regret. Ma had taught her about virginity through metaphors and similes: roses that wilted if touched too much, unwrapped gifts that nobody wanted, and sucked lollipops no one wanted to share. *Men only want one thing*, Ma said, *and when they have it, they leave.*

Nina got the message: her worth was attached to that one thing, and once she lost it, she would be disposable. And yet she imagined positions she had gleaned from movies and telenovelas and tried to figure out which ones were possible on a bench. She wondered if it hurt, or if the bench was uncomfortable against the girl’s back—if, that is, she lost it on her back. She wondered if the girl had loved the man she was with or if she had returned to write those words after realizing she’d been used.

Nina passed the bench and was halfway to the stretch that led to the plaza when she saw a man doing tricep dips on the parallel bars on the other side of the walkway. His arms gleamed with sweat. Through his tank top, Nina could see his shaved chest. Due to the prominent mound visible against the fabric of his jersey shorts, Nina guessed he wasn’t wearing underwear.

He inhaled and exhaled audibly as he dipped. When he rose again, he stopped and looked Nina up and down. He winked. Nina gave him a tight grin and moved on, gripping the house keys in her pocket.

The huffing and puffing resumed, and Nina knew that, for the moment, she wasn’t being followed.

She held her keys firmly, though she didn’t know what she would do with them if she were ever attacked. She’d heard Elvira say they were a measure of protection, and it sounded like something all women knew—or at least women who braved the streets more than Nina did. Nina hadn’t asked, for fear of sounding stupid.

If push came to shove, she thought, she’d stab the guy in the eye. Or at least she’d try.

Leaves rustled behind her, and she turned. It was Rafael in the blue short-sleeved shirt and black pants of his uniform. He carried no weapon—just a

broomstick he used to stretch his back. The government had started taking people's gun licenses so only officers could have them.

"What's the point of a guard with no weapon?" Nina had asked Ma.

"It's still a deterrent, Nina," Ma said. "When *los choros* have to choose between two buildings, they'll choose the one without a guard."

Nina wasn't so convinced.

She waved and waited for Rafael to catch up. He was cleanly shaved, his skin tanned and leathery from the sun. His shirt was properly ironed, tucked in, and his belt and shoes were worn but polished. Every time she saw him, his clothes seemed looser on his frame, his skin tighter on his bones.

He's known you since you were in my belly, Ma liked to say. He and Nina had known each other for over seventeen years, and yet they'd never gotten past the same four subjects: his family (though Nina knew none of their names), the weather, the government, and the state of the country.

"Hello, Ninina," he said, using the nickname she'd had since childhood. It was the name her grandmothers used, and her aunts and cousins, and her pediatrician and *el señor* José from the butchery, and the other José from the school supplies store, and whoever else knew her from those years when she couldn't properly pronounce her own name. It was the name her mother used on the rare occasions that Nina made her laugh. The laugh was always unexpected—it was difficult for Nina to read Ma's moods. Nina would mumble something witty under her breath, something barely audible in the silence of the conversation. Most of the time, Ma wouldn't hear, or she'd ignore the comment, but once in a while she'd let out a chuckle. The smile would light up her face and make her look young. *Ay, Ninina*, Ma would say. To Nina, it was like a breath of fresh air.

Nina knew it was time to go home. She swallowed and fell back in step with Rafael, and they looped around toward the building.

"How are you, *señor* Rafael?"

"Here," he said with a smile. Nina had come to understand that, under certain circumstances, simply existing was a feat.

Nina nodded. "The family?"

"Good, *gracias a Dios*."

"The kids, how old are they now?"

They were nearing the end of the walkway by the fringe of the mango trees. There was no walkway leading from the park to the street, only a dirt path where the grass had stopped growing due to people's steps.

"Thirteen and nine."

Nina remembered he had a son and a daughter.

"Wow," she said. "They're getting big now."

"Yes, ma'am." Rafael stopped to examine a long stick on the ground. Nina looked up at her balcony on the third floor and felt her knees grow weak.

Ma was leaning on the railing, a string of smoke curling up from her hand. It was the first time Nina had seen her mother smoke.

Ma's hair was slightly frizzled, as it was when it dried on its own and not under the strain of the blow-dryer and the spiral comb. She was wearing the white bathrobe Nina had only seen her wear in her room and was taking a drag from a cigarette. If she hadn't been so surprised, Nina might've even thought she looked glamorous.

Nina looked away. Her hands felt clammy. There was a fallen mango by the side of the dirt path, flies and bees dipping and rising over the flesh.

You're going to kill yourself, Ma used to tell Pa. *You're going to kill yourself with that smoking*. Nina would look at her father, terrified, and he'd wink at her before grinding out his cigarette in the crystal ashtray on the balcony table. *Pa's a grown man*, he'd say when Nina asked if he was really going to die. *He knows how to take care of himself*.

For the first time, Nina considered the weight of those words on Ma's conscience. Ever since Pa died from a heart attack, there had been no more ashtrays. The one on the balcony table, Nina had thought heavy enough to kill a man. She'd often wondered why Ma had gone through the trouble of buying such an elaborate ashtray if she didn't want Pa to smoke. Had Ma started smoking when he was alive and only scolded him for smoking in front of Nina? Or had she started after he passed, in those solitary moments she spent at home?

Rafael straightened up to measure the broomstick against the other stick.

Ma took another drag from her cigarette. Nina wondered if any of the neighbors had seen her smoke.

She imagined Ma seeing her cross the street with Rafael. Maybe Nina would look up as she crossed to make sure Ma knew she had seen her. Ma would then drop the cigarette on the balcony floor and step on it with her slipper. She'd grab it with a napkin or a handkerchief, making sure to leave no trace. She'd then slip it in the pocket of her robe with a trembling hand, and she'd be back in her room before Nina could unlock their front door. It would be like the battle of the curtains: the matter would never be addressed.

Nina crossed the street with Rafael but didn't look up.

Rafael turned the key in the iron door, his keychain banging against the metal surface.

"Hasta luego, señor Rafael," Nina said with a smile.

"Adiós, Ninina."

Nina got on the elevator, feeling her stomach heavy and empty at the same time. As the elevator rose, she felt her heart drop to her feet. When the elevator stopped on the third floor, her mind was clear of thoughts except for the image of her mother smoking in her white robe.

She found Ma in the living room, arms crossed over her chest, but she didn't look mad; her nose was puffy, her eyes red, as if she had been crying. The balcony door was open, and through it blew a faint breeze that carried the smell of rain. The light outside outlined Ma's frizzled hair. She looked thin and cold. She was barefoot, her pale feet on the parquet floor.

Ma followed Nina's gaze and looked at her own feet. She chuckled and stretched her arms wide.

"Come here," she said.

Nina stepped closer. When Ma hugged her, Nina stiffened at first, but then Ma pressed her cheek tightly against hers and Nina relaxed. Ma's cheek was softer than Nina remembered, as if it had lost its firmness with time.

"Te quiero," Ma whispered, "I love you, Ninina," and Nina knew it was true.

