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# Detained

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## Detained

My *abuelita* always told me I had a gift for sensing when something was going to happen, good or bad. My whole family laughed whenever she said this, as if it were a joke, but my *abuelita* wasn't kidding.

"...women of color earn less than white women, but in comparison to men of color..."

The professor's head bobbles around at the front of the classroom. His voice rings out and fills the room with a strength possessed by those who demand to be heard, but today his usual method of captivating my attention does not work.

"Now, let me ask you all a question. If women are less likely to ask for a promotion..." I lean forward in my seat and focus my attention on the professor's animated movements. My ears begin ringing, and I can feel sweat collecting on my brow.

My phone vibrates in my pocket. I normally shut it off before any of my classes, but my instincts told me to leave it on. Shoving my fingers into the front pocket of my jeans, I struggle to grasp my phone. Finally, I pull it out and see my younger sister's name flash across the screen. The intensifying sense of dread makes my whole body turn to ice. Ignoring the stares from my classmates, I slide my finger across the screen.

"Elizabeth, *dime*." I wait for her to tell me she needs to talk because she's fighting with her boyfriend again. I sit calmly, and at first there is only silence, but it is quickly followed by a loud sob. I push myself to my feet sending my notebook flying. My professor glares at me.

"Ms. Dominguez, is there a problem? This classroom does not tolerate the use of cell phones. I'll have to ask you—" I don't listen to the rest of his rant and grab my purse and jacket, listening to Elizabeth sob in my ear. Once I am outside the classroom, I begin asking questions.

“What is it? Is it *mi abuelita*? Are you hurt?” She keeps crying. I jog down the long hallways towards the double doors, frantic to get in my car and drive home. “Elizabeth, for the love of God, say *something*.”

“They took them,” She manages in between breaths. I stop in the middle of the parking lot. I know who she means, because it’s been my biggest fear my whole life. I still need her to say it.

“Took who, Elizabeth?” I wait for the words I’ve dreaded hearing since I first learned what it meant to be undocumented in this country.

“The police came. They took *mi amá* and *apá*.”

When I get to the stucco two-story duplex my family rents, I find Elizabeth sitting on the couch clutching papers to her chest. She looks lost and young even in her fully made up face and high heels. I am reminded she is only sixteen.

“Eli, what happened?” I ask. Sitting on the couch next to her, I wrap my arm around her shoulders. She turns her face into my neck and cries. I pull the papers from her grasp. The top of the page reads: U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement. I scan the rest and discover it is a warrant for the removal of my father. My *amá*’s name is nowhere on the papers, but she is gone too. “Are you sure they took both of them? *Mi amá*’s name isn’t on this form.”

Elizabeth nods but says nothing. I know I have to speak with my *abuelita*. She will help us calm down. I reach for my cell phone and call her. I speak with her while Elizabeth remains tucked under my arm. I tell my *abuelita* to come home quickly—but not why. We wait in silence as the minutes pass until the matriarch of the family arrives.

Her presence immediately calms me. As soon as I hear

her key in the lock, I rush towards the door. Pulling her close, I let her familiar scent soothe me: *Suavitel* fabric softener, cinnamon, and a hint of fresh *tortillas*. For a moment, the world is well and my family isn't crumbling around me. I know she can sense the unease in the air. I inherited more than her olive complexion and amber eyes. She, too, has a gift for feeling.

“¿*Anahí, que pasó? Tus padres*, what happened to them?” Her gravelly voice is laced with wisdom and age, reflected similarly in the soft crevices tracing her face. She already knows they are gone. She is asking me why.

“*La migra*. They took them from here. Eli was here when they were taken. I was at school,” I tell her. Her gaze shifts from my face and focuses on Elizabeth. My *abuelita* does not speak softly to Elizabeth. She wants her to give answers. Consolation will come later.

“*Niña*,” she says brusquely. “What did they say when they came?”

“I was getting ready for school,” Elizabeth begins. “*Mi amá* was yelling for me to hurry. Then, I heard someone knock, and *papí* opened the door. I didn't think anything at first. But, then I heard—” Tears flow rapidly and she hiccups. I watch her shiny pink lips tremble, imagining how terrified she must have been. “I heard *mi amá* scream. I ran down the hallway so fast. They had them cuffed on the floor. On the floor! Like *animales*. I tried to ask what they wanted.” Her voice lulls me into a trance, and I replay the scene through her eyes:

My parents laid out on our cheap, barf colored carpet. The floral pattern couch we are currently sitting on has been shoved aside. Four ICE officers are conversing and one is shouting at my parents to remain still. My *amá* is crying, because she will be fired from her job if she isn't there in the next half hour. My *apá* has an impassive face. He will not let these *gringos* faze him. He will uphold his honor. I envision him murmuring softly for my *amá* to calm down. “It will all be

okay. Anahí will handle it,” he whispers to her. Elizabeth runs in frantically, and she yells at the officers to let our parents go. They command her to stay where she is. My *apá* tells Elizabeth to not resist.

“Then, they took them out the front door and left those papers. No one even offered me a ride to school.” Elizabeth sniffles. She looks more worn than any teenager should. I want to tell her it will be alright. But I don’t, because it would be a lie.

“It says here they took them to a detention center in Albert Lea. That’s not too far. *Abuelita*, should I call?” She nods but says nothing. I know she is deep in thought about what to do. I continue inspecting the pathetic piece of paper that stole my family. My composure begins to slip when I think of the men who took my *apá*. They did not understand a thing about him other than his citizenship status. If they did, they would see my *apá* was a hardworking man who spent his days and most nights struggling for his family’s success.

On my first day of college, I was rushing to get to class on time. A boy yelled, “What’s the rush, Speedy Gonzalez? You running from immigration?” His friend laughed. When I called my *apá* later and told him about the incident, he told me that dealing with *gringos* who would never understand me was the price I had to pay to attend college in the United States. If he were here now, I wonder if he would tell me that these *gringos* taking him was his sacrifice to provide me with a successful future.

I stare at our home and immediately feel that it cannot exist without the aromas of my *amá’s caldo de pollo* and my *apá’s* infectious laughter. I see my reflection in the ridiculously large framed image of *The Last Supper*. I wonder if *Señor Jesus* will help my family through this. He sits permanently with his apostles, one who betrayed him and another who denied him.

I realize that today this country denied my parents and that justice betrayed them. My *abuelita* breaks the painful silence that had settled between the three of us.

“You and Elizabeth will call a lawyer in the morning and then go to the center. Doña Carmela has the number for a good lawyer. I will call her now.” She says it with determination, and I force myself to believe that if we plan and work hard enough my *amá* and *apá* will be home soon. My *abuelita* stands and heads to the kitchen to make us dinner. I decide it’s best to send an email telling my professors I will be unavailable for the next few days.

My *abuelita* called the lawyer early in the morning and he plans to look into my parents’ case. But, only Elizabeth and I make the journey as my *abuelita* cannot risk also being detained. On the road, we drive without speaking, and I play old mariachi songs on a low volume to feel closer to my parents. The journey is only an hour and a half, but my anxiety slows time down to a sluggish pace, allowing me to think about the encounter I am about to have. I turn the radio up louder, but it refuses to block out the sounds of my deepest fears vibrating in my head.

When we finally arrive, Elizabeth and I wait to enter the detention center, letting our eyes trace the plain brick building. The front reads “Freeborn County Adult Detention Center,” but I feel it would be better labeled “Execution Center of the American Dream”. We enter through a revolving door and immediately step in line to walk through metal detectors. I place my purse and jacket in the bins rolling through an x-ray machine. The huge walkthrough metal detectors are guarded by several security guards. Once I pass through, a female guard pats me down. She never smiles, and I see it as a foreshadowing of today’s events. After the 30-minute ordeal, another guard

directs us to a waiting room until our turn.

I notice Elizabeth's sallow expression and regret bringing her. She passed on makeup today. No amount of waterproof mascara could withstand the amount of tears she would shed. The fluorescent lighting in the waiting room highlight her purplish under-eyes from lack of sleep. I release her hair from its ponytail and run my fingers through it. When we were kids, this always worked to lull her to sleep. With all my attention on fishtail-braiding her hair, I can ignore the gray carpets, cylinder block walls, and faint smell of bleach. I pretend we are back home and my *amá* is watching her *novelas* with my *abuelita* while sipping coffee and eating *pan dulce*.

After 20 minutes, a woman calls our names. "Elizabeth and Anahí Dominguez, follow me." Her voice is hard and she sounds like the prison wardens from TV. I wonder if she sees my parents as criminals.

We scramble to our feet and follow behind her. She is a tall woman with angular features and straw like hair pulled into a tight bun. Her pristine blue shirt is tucked into slacks with wedged black clogs built for comfort rather than style. I don't like her, but I know it has more to do with her job than her cold personality. She explains the next steps for our visit.

"You will be taken to a room and sit facing a glass window. You will not see both your parents as they are in separate wings. You are aware, correct?" She looks back and forth between us, waiting for an answer. We don't give her one. She sighs and continues. "You will see your father for 20 minutes. I suggest saving a small part of the discussion for creating a list of personal items that your father and mother likely need. They are not provided uniforms. So, they need clothes and undergarments."

She ends just as we approach the double doors to the visitation wing. I can see glossy linoleum floors and rows of

doors. The woman scans her ID, and leads us to room 15. She holds the door open and leaves without another word. Elizabeth and I seat ourselves and face a glass window with a chair on the opposite side.

A buzzer sound echoes through the room, and the door behind the glass opens. Tears collect in Elizabeth's eyes and fall as soon as she sees him. I sit in astonishment at the man who appears before us. My *apá* is the supervisor at the factory where he works. He dresses professionally even though it isn't required. I know he would be ashamed of his appearance now and it pains me. His normally perfectly ironed khakis and tucked in polo are rumpled and stained. Today, his salt and pepper hair is not slicked back as usual. Even though the glass separates us, I know that he probably still smells of his aftershave and the cologne my mom bought him for their last anniversary. Taking in his ruffled appearance and the purple bags beneath his eyes, a ball of fury sits heavy in my stomach, because these people have made someone like my *apá* look so broken.

“¿*Como estas? ¿Dormiste bien?*” I know he didn't sleep well. I have to ask and like the strong man he is, my *apá* nods his head. He has always lied to me about family problems because he would rather I focus on school. My heart clenches from his continuous sacrifices. Even now, he knows he must be strong for his daughters. I steer the topic away from him.

“The lawyer will visit tomorrow. *Mi abuelita* called someone that Doña Carmela used for her cousin last year. She says he can help you fight this.” Instead of seeing hopefulness, I see a defeated look on my *apá's* face. I dread what he will say next, because I can sense he is going to reveal something life-altering.

“Listen to me, *niñas*. I don't think I'll be coming home.” He holds up a finger because Elizabeth opened her mouth to speak. “*Espérate*, let me finish. They sent me a letter a few

months ago telling me I had to leave the country. I don't know how they got our address, but I knew this would happen eventually." He stops and looks at both of us. "I am so sorry."

"But, *papí*, there has to be something we can do! Maybe we can go to court—" Elizabeth looks frantic. I can see the despair on her face. My *apá* stops her.

"Elizabeth, I have been speaking to my lawyer for the past three months. There is no way around it. I have a chance to apply once I am back in *México*. Until then I am just a criminal in their eyes." Defeat overtakes his entire demeanor. He visibly shrinks in his seat and I realize the weight of what he is saying: my *apá* will be taken from me shortly. From our home and family. I slap my hand on the table.

"*No es justo!* We cannot let them do this. *Apá* we can fight this. We can show them your list of references. They will say you are a good man and an excellent American. You've worked at the factory for 20 years. They can see value in that, right?" I try to reason, but it falls on deaf ears.

"*Anahí, miija*, I love you for wanting to fight, but I don't know what else can be done."

"But, *apá*, you won't see me graduate from college." The reality of my statement hangs like thick fog in the air.

"*Anahí*, I would give anything to see you graduate. It has been my dream to see my precious daughter achieve something I never could. I came to this country with nothing but my clothes and a promise that the struggles I had as a child would never touch the lives of my children. And, even though I will not be able to—" He stops mid-sentence and I see his agony. My hand presses against the glass, wishing I could hug the man who has sacrificed his own well-being to give Elizabeth and me an opportunity for something better. The buzzer sounds again and the door behind my *apá* opens.

As a child, I used to love to swing as high as I could. The image of open sky above me and the feeling of my bare

feet flailing in the air gave me with a sense of freedom. One day, I swung higher and higher until I somehow tumbled off the swing and plunged down to the compacted earth beneath me. An excruciating pain spread through my back, leaving me with burning lungs and the inability to cry. As my *apá* stands to leave, I feel that same initial impact and desperation to breathe.

“*Apá!*” I cry. “Don’t leave me.” My chest heaves like I just finished sprinting and my vision is tunneling. Panic settles in at the thought of being left to take care of my sister alone. My *apá* catches my eye as he turns to exit the room.

“*Anahí, somos fuertes.* I worked hard for my children to have a good life. You and Elizabeth have always made me proud as a father. Finish our dream.” And then he is gone. I look at Elizabeth and repeat my *apá*’s words: “We are strong.”

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