

## Hand-me-downs by Hannah Rose Rosales

### **scene 30**

“I was waiting for you.”

Abuelito does not reply. He sits at the opposite end of the dinner table, hands folded neatly.

I sigh, asking him, “Who told you we live here anyway?”

“That’s not how you welcome Abuelito,” I hear Mama’s voice say from behind me. “You know he’s—”

“I was waiting for you.”

Abuelito arches a brow. “No kiss for me, Xavier?”

He taps his fingers on the table, waiting for a response.

“I’ll talk to you later,” I say, grabbing my keys.

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### **scene 9**

Papa washes the dishes; I dry them. He sings and I don’t really like it. But he sings about loving, crying, and wanting to be made whole. I never tell him to stop—maybe I should.

“Papa.”

His eyes don’t leave the dishes and he asks, “Mmm? Xavier?”

“Why do you love Mama?”

“I don’t know.”

“So you love what you don’t know?”

Papa laughs, then wipes his hands on his apron. He scoops me up and places me on a dry part of the counter. “Xavier, after loving someone for so long, you find so many ways to love them. I don’t know—we’ve been through a lot together, okay?”

He waits for me to respond. I nod.

“Do you love your Mama?” he asks.

I extend my arms as wide as I can. “I love her *this* much!”

“Only that much?”

“A lot, a lot, a lot!”

“A lot, huh?” Papa starts to tickle me. “Okay, so what about me?”

“You? Papa, I love you a lot, too!” I say between giggles, trying to dodge his tickles. *A whole lot. I love you so much, Papa.*

Papa cocks his head and smiles. He scoops me up again and places me on his shoulders. I rest my chin on the top of his head—I feel invincible. We walk up the stairs, stopping in front of the picture frames in the hallway. Pictures of me. Pictures of Mama and Papa. Pictures of places we have been to and places that I have never seen before. I feel his shoulders start to tense and he pauses at the end of the hall.

“Put me back down, Papa. I want to see the pictures!”

He doesn’t budge though. Instead, he moves his head in search of something. Then, he trails his fingers on one blue wooden frame among the golden metallic frames. It’s a picture of Mama and me. Papa took the picture. He is always the one taking pictures.

“You love your Mama—right, Xavier?”

“Yes, Papa.”

“Promise me you’ll always look out for your Mama, okay?”

“Yes, Papa.”

“And if I ever hurt her, let me know, okay?”

“Hurt her?”

“Don’t ever let your Mama cry. Even if it’s about me.” Papa places me back on the ground and stoops to my eye level. “Are you listening?”

I nod. “Yes, Papa.”

“Okay. Okay, good.” He strokes my hair. “You’re a good boy, Xavier.”

Papa gets back up and takes the blue frame. He unscrews the back, revealing another photo lodged behind the photo of me and Mama.

“I keep this photo of *my* mama behind the one of you and Mama.”

I scan through the other picture frames, looking for another photo of the woman Papa holds in his hands.

“Do we have any other photos of Abuelita?”

“They’re somewhere, *hijo*.”

“Why don’t you have a separate frame for this?”

Papa shrugs his shoulders. “I like to keep the people I love in one place. Easier to find. Easier to hold.”

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### **scene 5**

I wait for Papa to pick me up from school. He is always on time. His hugs smell like empanadas, Armani, and home.

“*Hijo!*”

I run into Papa’s arms and he takes my backpack off my shoulders. I stuff my face into his belly and he asks, “How was school?”

“It was good!”

“Mmm. Okay. Nothing bad happened today?” He starts the car and the engine rumbles—but his growling stomach is almost louder.

“Nope. Nothing, Papa.”

“Okay. Okay. Let’s eat, Xavier. Are empanadas okay?”

Yes. *Always*.

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### **scene 15**

Abuelito is coming today. Papa says we need to make sure every corner of the house is clean. Papa and Mama stuck a lemon air freshener in every empty electrical outlet they could find. I can see my reflection in the floors.

The white Porsche pulls into the driveway around noon. Papa still flinches when the knock comes at the door.

“I’ll get it, Papa,” I yell from my room, starting to run down the staircase.

“No. I’ll get it,” Papa whispers, using an arm to stop me. “And don’t yell like that.”

When Abuelito takes his first step into the house, the room feels so much smaller. Despite his lankiness, his presence fills up the entire room. Suddenly, our house does not feel like home.

“Peter,” Abuelito says, giving Papa a nod.

Papa stands a little straighter. “Where’s Ma?”

“She wasn’t feeling too well,” Abuelito mutters. “I’m starving.”

He walks past Papa and sits at one end of the dinner table. Mama and Papa take a seat on each side of him.

“*Hijo*,” Abuelito points at me. “I want you to sit beside me. No Cassandra, you stay. Peter can move.”

I look at Papa for reassurance before moving. He smiles at me as we switch seats.

Abuelito whistles and leans back into his chair as we pass the food around. Mama cooked the meal for us, but Papa’s cooking tastes better than hers.

“I have something for you, Xavier,” Abuelito sings. “You’re going to love this.”

He pulls out a small bottle from inside his blazer pocket. “I got your father the very same cologne for his 15th birthday. Right, Peter?”

“I remember, Pa.”

Abuelito opens the bottle and inhales. He smiles to himself. “It’s so good. Here. Smell it, Xavier.”

I retrieve the bottle from his hands and take a long inhale. I’m not sure what it smells like, but it smells like everything I imagined Abuelito to be like. Like gold and everything that shines.

“It smells lovely, thank you, Abuelito.” I reach over to hug him—and the bottle slips, shattering on the floor.

“Xav—”

“Shh, Cassandra,” Abuelito silences Mama with a finger. “It’s okay.”

Before I even start to apologize, Papa is already sweeping up the broken glass. Mama gets up to search for something to wrap the pieces in.

“Peter!” Abuelito hisses. “Sit down, Peter. Just eat.”

“Pa, I’m so sorry, Xavier is so clumsy and—”

“Apologize to Abuelito, Xavier! He came all the way—”

“I’m sorry, Abuelito, I’m really sorry—”

“Enough!” Abuelito yells, covering his ears. “Everyone, please sit down. It’s fine.”

“A-a-abuelito. I’m s-s-so s-s-orry, I-I-I-I k-k-know that y-y-you probably—”

“I don’t want to hear that, Xavier,” Abuelito says sharply, slamming a hand onto the table. “Did you not hear me the first time?”

He breathes in then says, “Let’s continue eating.”

So we do.

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### **scene 10**

“Mama, how do you make empanadas?”

“Your Papa taught me, Xavier,” she laughs. “Ask him.”

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### **scene 11**

The telephone rings and rings; Papa can’t hear the telephone over his music and the kitchen exhaust fan.

“Papa!” I jump up and down to get his attention, gesturing towards the phone. “Papa! Someone is calling!”

“Hello!” Papa chirps, turning off the exhaust fan. But then he frowns. “Yes? No, Pa. I don’t want to send him there.”

Papa looks at me and mouths, *Go upstairs*. I nod.

“I think he’s doing great with us. He’s doing just fine. We’re doing fine, Pa.”

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### **scene 29**

I sit beside Mama, holding her hand tight. Tears don’t stream down her face, but the way her body droops says enough.

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### **scene 9**

“Are you crying, Mama?”

Mama musters a smile and her cheeks glisten with tears in the moonlight. “Go back to bed, Xavier. I’m okay.”

“I could hear you.” I sit on the edge of my parent’s bed. Papa’s side is empty. “Where’s Papa?”

“He’ll be back soon.”

“Okay, Mama.”

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### **scene 29**

Abuelito takes something from inside his blazer—it’s a bottle. The same brand of cologne he once tried to give me. He kisses the bottle and places it inside Papa’s blue, wooden casket.

I walk up and stand beside Abuelito. I wait for him to hug me, to scoop me up, to hold me. Anything to show solidarity through the grief for the man that connects us.

I wait for him. But Abuelito does not move. He keeps his eyes on his hands. And I remember he is Abuelito after all. He has not shed a tear. I don’t think he ever will.

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### **scene 17**

As Abuelito drives down the freeway, pop music plays on the car radio. I insist that we drive in silence, but he enjoys the noise. *I like to stay updated—I like to know what's going on*, he once said.

“Where are you going for college, *hijo*?”

“I don't know.”

“Your Papa said that you like math. So engineering? Or maybe something business-related? Commerce?”

“Maybe.”

“I want you to have stability.”

“I know.”

“I don't want to see you end up like your Papa. Wasted potential.”

“I know.”

But not really.

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### **scene 28**

When I get home, I find Papa sitting at the dinner table, a notebook before him. He is always writing these days. Less talking, more time spent in his journals.

His hands are shaking. I hold them. They don't stop.

“Papa, I don't like seeing you like this. We need to see—”

“No, Xavier,” he snaps, pulling his hands away from mine. He starts to leave the kitchen. “No.”

I follow him. “Papa, please; I have money—”

“Let me make my own choices, Xavier. Please.”

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### **scene 30**

I can feel Abuelito standing behind me. I don't turn around.

“Your Mama said you haven’t been back to work in six months. Do you think your Papa would want to see you like this? Do you think—”

I shrug my shoulders. “I don’t know.”

“You know exactly what he would want!”

I shrug again, watching the autumn leaves surrender to the breeze.

“Listen to me,” Abuelito sighs, taking a seat on the porch. When I don’t respond, he scoots his chair closer. “Look at me, Xavier. Look at me in the eyes.”

“I’m listening.”

“Xavier.”

“Yes. I’m listening.” I grab a dead leaf from the ground and play with it. “Say what you need to say. I know your time is precious.”

I hear Abuelito approach, the leaves rustle with his footsteps. I don’t move.

“Xavier,” Abuelito whispers, but the autumn wind is louder. “*Hijo*, do you think I ever hurt your Papa?”

I sharply turn my head toward him. “Abuelito?”

Abuelito’s shoulders drop, and his fingers fiddle with his gold necklace. His face is illuminated by the streetlights; they soften the hard lines on his face.

“Abuelito? What do you mean?”

“I don’t understand, Xavier.” Abuelito’s voice cracks. He looks up at the sky then at his hands. “I don’t understand... I gave him everything—why did he leave? Why did he leave *me*?”

*Why did he leave us?*

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## **scene 29**

I help Papa prepare the empanadas for Mama’s birthday. I insisted that we go to a restaurant, but she only wanted dinner at home. Just the three of us and Papa’s cooking.



When Mama comes home from work, Papa wraps his arms around Mama, giving her a hug from behind as she takes off her shoes.

“Stop that—I’m losing my balance,” Mama laughs, brushing him off. “I’m hungry. What’s on the birthday menu?”

“Empanadas, pancit, chicken adobo, spring rolls, arroz caldo...” I begin to say.

Papa continues, “And ube pandesal, leche flan, fruit salad—”

Mama’s laughter interrupts Papa. “Please tell me you’re not kidding.”

“Of course not,” Papa says, kissing her on the cheek. “Only your favourites.”

“Okay. Okay, of course you would.” Mama fixes Papa’s blue shirt and adjusts the wooden cross on his neck. And I hug both of them.