

## Without Marianna

By Sarathi Gunarathna, grade 9

“Umm...you’re eighteen dollars and seventy-five cents short, ma’am.” I look up and read the name tag pinned on the cashier’s uniform: TATE. She looks uncomfortable, her eyes taking in everyone and everything around her but me. Maybe she grew up learning that it was rude to stare. Or maybe it’s because she’s not used to meeting people who can’t pay for their groceries with a swipe of their credit card. I close my eyes for a second and try to believe it’s the former. “Ma’am?” Right. I’m eighteen dollars and seventy-five cents short.

“Are you sure there’s no balance on my card? Maybe there’s something wrong with the card reader,” I offer, fingers of heat dragging down from my cheeks to the base of my neck. Tate shrugs and glances at the line forming behind me.

“I can try again.” She takes my card and swipes it again before her face screws up. “It won’t work, sorry,” she mumbles, the inflection of her voice making the apology sound more like a question instead. I take my card back and start sending helpless prayers to any God who could bother listening to my pleas. *Twenty dollars. Just twenty dollars.* I check all the slots in my wallet, desperate to find a miraculous twenty-dollar bill that could be hiding...somewhere.

I don’t.

*Breathe, Marianna. Breathe.*

But I can’t. You’d think that by the fourth time this year, I’d get a grip on my expenses and cut back on purchases, but here I am again with not enough money to my name, surrounded by what feels like a sea of eyes watching. The back of my eyes starts to sting as a lump forms in my throat. *Don’t cry, don’t cry, don’t cry.*

I rub the heels of my hands at my eyes and start playing the game I invented with the kids every time we go shopping: The Rejecting Game: Food Edition. This game involves cutting out food that I don't find myself cooking or using any time soon—I can't let anything go to waste.

I scan the conveyor belt and point at the case of grapes, the twelve-can chickpeas pack, and the bag of chips. “Do you mind removing these, please?” Tate hesitates, her eyes flitting from mine to the food I pointed out. The key to winning this game is to sound braver than you feel.

*Take them out already. Let me leave.*

Tate sighs and taps a few buttons on her screen with a manicured nail before scanning the selected food I've pointed out. I bag the groceries as fast as I can, wanting out of this store.

“Thank you,” I say, throwing a parting smile after she's done.

“Have a nice day,” she replies. There's no inflection this time, her voice steady yet light. Her eyes, however, are hooded heavy with a look I know all too well.

She feels sorry for me. She feels sorry for me to wake up and realize that I'm still me and not someone else. Someone like her who's able to spend money at nail spas.



I have an interview tomorrow at a huge digital corporation looking for a marketing specialist. I went there last week to scope out the working environment, and the first word that came to mind as soon as I walked in was *dignified*.

Women walked in heels, wearing tailored skirts and blouses that definitely can't be found in Walmart, and all employees had laughs you can only find in private golf events or on private jets. They carried themselves with such confidence that just bordered on arrogance.

Despite the egotistical atmosphere, the pay rate is incredible, so if heels and dresses from Prada are needed to get the job, then so be it.

Kidding. I don't need to look good to perform well.

I get home at 3:35 and find Dante and Catalina sprawled on the floor with cards, a heated argument clinging to the walls of the apartment. I sigh and toss my purse onto the dining table and drop the grocery bags on the floor.

“YOU CHEATED!”

“HOW? I JUST GOT LUCKY!” Dante scornfully twists his face when he hears this and only then does he notice I'm watching them. A wide grin wrings on his lips as he drops all his cards and rushes toward me.

“MMMAAAAAMMMI!” I smile and lift him, slinging him by my hip. He throws his arms around my neck, gazing at me wide-eyed with the complete reassurance of a boy who's yet to be let down by the most important person in his life. “Cat saw my cards!” he whines, tugging at the ends of my hair. *What exactly am I supposed to do with that information?*

Catalina throws her hands up and shakes her head. “*Aunt Cat, Dante.*” Dante shoots a glare her way before kicking his legs a little. That's his way of telling me he wants out of my arms. I let him down and he starts his way to the grocery bags. I head to the sofa and curl into a fetal position, hugging a throw pillow. “You okay?”

If okay meant being fine with credit card companies telling me I'm past overdue, cashiers feeling sorry for me, and never knowing my sixteen-year-old son's whereabouts, then yes, I'm okay.

“Where’s Marco?” I ask. My back’s to Catalina’s, so I don’t see the second I-feel-bad-for-you look today. There’s a long pause, and only Dante’s audible exclaims—probably from discovering the oranges—can be heard.

“He…well,” she fumbles, probably picking the skin of her thumb. I bite my lip and find myself suddenly wishing that she could leave. “I don’t know.”

There it is. The universal answer to that question. *I don’t know*. When Marco first got his phone two years ago, he willingly said he’d share his location with me. I laughed at him and took that willingness for granted because he’s long since turned the setting off, and now, between the time the school releases the kids to the time he gets home, I have no idea where he is. Sometimes he comes back two hours later, other days seven. The longest he’s been out for is three days, and even then I couldn’t find the words to tell him to share his location with me on his phone.

I hug the pillow tighter and try pushing out the harrowing words that come to mind when I think of how much of a pushover I am when it comes to Marco.

If I were to rewind to when Javier, my husband, died five months ago, unravel and roll it back like a ball of yarn, I’d probably be able to see the knots. The warnings. I’d be able to see the start of my son breaking. The start of my son breaking like a vase does when dropped.



When he was younger, and around Dante’s age (five), Marco and I would try staying up until Javi came home from work every night. His head would be on my lap with his little, stubby fingers intertwined with mine and together we would wait on the couch. Sometimes we sang nursery rhymes and other nights we just talked about what five-year-olds love to talk about the most: themselves. But I didn’t mind. Not in the slightest.

With Javi, they'd spend the summers together in the backyard playing with LEGO airplanes or creating obstacle courses with hula hoops and eggs. It was around this age that Marco started gaining an avid rapt towards planes and pilots.

By the time Marco was nine, Javi was pretty much all he wanted to talk or ask about, and vice versa. Their bond was unbreakable and their names became indivisible.

So when Javi passed away, Marco fell apart in ways I never thought he would.

He stopped eating and laughing and started spending more time locked away in his room than he did in any other part of the house.

It was probably two months after Javi died that Marco started changing his appearance and the way he behaved started to become more...abrasive. After a night spent away at a friend's house, he came home the next morning with a new look. His brown hair which was once scruffy and fun to run a hand through had been shaved off and was now a poor attempt at a buzz cut. One side was shaved more than the other, and the back didn't look flattering in the least with jagged lines. It's not that I have a problem with Marco's shaven head, but he, himself, told me in the weeks leading up to Javi's death how much he loved his hair.

I'm applying moisturizer when I check the time on my phone. Marco didn't come home last night which is still something I'm not used to even when he's been doing this for three months now. It hurts every time like a wound in salt. I stare at my reflection on the vanity, analyzing myself through a different lens. I've got rings of black under my eyes that concealer can't mask, and eyes that look too tired, puffy, and disconnected from the world. My eyes darken the hazel to a muddy brown as I try smiling, but I find that even my lips are tired of pretending.

*Don't cry, please don't cry.*

So I stand up instead and watch my reflection gape back at me with fear and confusion. I grab a fistful of my dress shirt and pretend it's my heart I'm clenching instead.

"Why can't you heal?" I whisper under my breath.



The interview went so, so well. So well that I'm affirmative that I got the job. After all, when your interviewer bids goodbye saying, "I'll be hearing back from you very soon," it must have meant he liked you and your resume.

I've got a shy smile on my face when I leave the building, toying with the idea of someone liking me and acknowledging my skills. It's been so long, and it feels so, so good to have this kind of attention on me for once. The feeling doesn't last long though. As soon as I swing the door open, a chilly breeze meets my arms and creates goosebumps, an earthy-like smell filling my nostrils. I look above and watch my giddiness drift upwards to meet the overwhelming layer of gray clouds that linger in the sky. The heavy rain pitter-patters against the windows and the trees shake. Just as I notice a few couples and kids with their parents walking hand-in-hand under umbrellas with genuine smiles on their faces, a sting of jealousy finds its way to my heart. I don't have someone to walk with. I don't have an umbrella.

I pinch the skin between my eyes before taking out my transit ticket. *Grow up, Mari.* But the thought makes me angrier. Why can't *I* whine? Why can't *I* get angry? I have heels on and don't want to run for five minutes in the rain to get to the train station. I want a nice warm car to take me home instead. *Is that too much to ask for?*

I pull the hood of my thin sweater on and bring my purse closer to my chest and prepare to run out the door when suddenly I hear my phone buzz. Is Cat already done with her errands? I

take out my phone and take a seat near the entrance as I read the number. There's no caller ID, just a number I don't recognize. I answer and pull the phone near my ear.

"Hello?"

"Good afternoon, this is Sergeant Mike Corrigan calling from the San Francisco Police Department. Am I speaking with Marianna Rodriguez?" What in the world? My heart stops for a second as I process what he just said. The police? I close my eyes and try to keep my tone impassive.

"You are. What's going on Sergeant?"

"Your son Marco was involved in some kind of pickpocketing ordeal with a friend and it's not looking too great over here. I'll need you to come down to the station as soon as possible please." Marco. Pickpocketing. Friend.

"What?" I ask, mainly to myself. Mike repeats himself and I feel a blooming headache come into play. My stomach coils and I feel an urge to just slap myself. It all feels like some melodramatic movie instead of reality. When the call ends, I stand up and look around. I'm feeling too many things at once. *One thing at a time, Mari.* I take a small breath before emerging in the rain.



Marco isn't charged for anything but his friend Adam is.

He's got his hair buzzed off like Marco and speaks with a thick Texas accent. His fingernails were caked with dirt and he kept muttering threats under his breath. I should feel angry that he's changed my son to a certain extent but I can't. While he does have that crude disposition to him, to me he just looks like a boy who grew up too fast. Like Cat, maybe he had to become the breadwinner in the family at an early age. Maybe.

Marco and Adam apparently met three months ago at school and bonded over their financial and personal struggles. Today after school, Adam had pitched the idea that the two of them could rob someone at knifepoint and somehow get away with it. Marco was to take the wallet or purse while Adam had the knife at their neck. The plan fell through though when Marco backed out just as Adam had uttered threats at a man named Brian with his pocket knife. While Adam was off guard by Marco's refusal to cooperate, Brian was able to pin him down to the ground and apprehend the knife. *Talk about a melodramatic movie.*

Marco and I are about to leave the station when Sergeant Mike stops us and says something I'll make sure Marco never forgets.

"You're a good guy Marco, don't lose yourself to people like Adam."

When we leave the station, I can't tell if I'm crying or if it's the rain that has streams of water sliding down my cheeks. I curl and uncurl my fists, trying to calm down. But I can't. I deserve answers. I'm allowed to be angry.

"Why Marco?" I stop in my tracks and wait for him to catch up to me. When he does, I notice how slumped his shoulders are and how badly he's shaking. "Why?"

Marco stares at me with neither an angry nor an I-feel-sorry-for-you look that I'm used to. He's got heartache written all over his face.

"LOOK AT US, MAMI! We don't have a car, you're limping because of those stupid heels, and we can't turn on the lights until 8 at night to save electricity. WE'RE POOR, MAMI. WE'RE POOR, THAT'S WHY!" he screams. I drop my purse and try ceasing the rage of fire in my chest to no avail. The water pours on us and the two of us shiver in the cold.



“Marco,” I say, drawing out my words slowly, “being poor doesn’t mean you have the right to stoop so low that you’d be willing to rob someone with a knife.” He laughs and throws his head back a little.

“I can’t stoop low so I have to watch *you* have a hard time instead? Is that what it is, Mami? How can I do that Mami? How can I be okay when I see you sticking on cheap heating pads for your back at night? How can I be okay when I see you calling the bank for university loans? How can I be okay with you taking on two jobs? How? Tell me how?” My jaw slacks shut. When did he see the heating pads? When did he hear my calls to the bank? The blooming headache has taken over all regions of my head. *Please wake up from this nightmare. Please.*

“Let’s talk about this later, Marco. We need to go home.” I reach out a hand for him but he takes a step back.

“I’m not going to university. I’ll get a job so resign from IHOP. *Please,*” he pleads, his lips trembling. I shake my head and pick up my purse. He’s going to university. He’s going to be a pilot. He won’t be trapped on this ground because of *money*. Marco is going to fly. I turn away from him and call Cat to come to pick us up. I hang up before she can ask any more questions about why we’re at the police station and go up the stairs to the station to wait inside.

“THINK ABOUT ME FOR A SECOND, MAMI!” he yells, his voice echoing in the coldest parts of my hollow body. I want to scream too. I want him to think about me for a second too. I want him to think about how hard it is for me to hear my son talk about money so seriously. I want him to think about how much pain he’s giving me.

*Think about me for a second, Marco. Just for a second.*



I’m about to take a bath when a notification rings on my phone. It reads:

**Photos: You have a new memory | On this Day- March 20, 2012.**

My breath hitches as I press the notification. Instantly I'm greeted with a photo of Marco smiling ear-to-ear with a cake slathered all over his mouth. I feel my shoulders shaking a little and with a tap of a button, I'm suddenly watching a video that shuffles photos I took when Marco was five and when Javi was still here, wearing the same beautiful smile Marco had just moments ago. I'm taken back to Marco's first Halloween where he insisted he wanted to be a plane and Javi was able to dress up as the pilot. Then there's Marco and me standing by the Golden Gate Bridge trying to take a selfie as the wind blew in our faces. Marco's got his lips planted on my cheek as his eyes are closed. You can tell...I was happy. So, so happy. I let out a choked sob.

"Marco," I whispered. We all need him. Dante needs his big brother to watch him build his first LEGO airplane. He needs to be there when Dante starts riding a two-wheeled bike. Cat needs her nephew to be there when she's alone and bored. She needs company. And I need my son to be there for me when things get tough. Because we're not family by blood. We're family by memories and love.

And as soon as I realize this, I run down the stairs and find Cat and Dante playing with dominoes.

"Where's Marco?" I ask. Cat wears a proud smile and points to the floor.

"Lobby. I told him if he went outside, I'd feed him only peas for a week." Dante laughs and remarks a witty comment but my head's somewhere else. *Lobby, lobby, lobby.*

I do end up finding Marco in the lobby, watching the dolphin water fountain spew water from its mouth.

“Hey,” I whisper, taking a seat next to him on the bench. He looks my way for a second before returning his gaze to the dolphin. His legs start parting in a way that makes me think that he’ll run away and leave me any second now, but I don’t let that deter me from what I want to say. I just have to pitch it right.

We sit in silence and listen to the murmured conversations around us, the discomfort embedded in Marco’s face. “You know...when I was around your age, I used to hold poker games in the school parking lot back in Argentina. For some reason, I thought it was a clever way to make money.” Marco scrunches his nose and looks at me.

“Never knew you were a gambler,” he mumbles. I pinch his cheek.

“I *organized* the gambling but that doesn’t mean I participated. There’s a difference.” He smiles and plays with a string hanging by the hem of his shirt. “I got caught though. Of course I did, you can never trust a school that has a crazy number of snitches. I got suspended for two weeks and that made my Mami cry.” Marco’s eyes widen.

“Suspended?” he asks. “I’ve never been suspended,” he says with pride drenched in every word. I snort.

“At least I didn’t cut my hair like...*that*,” I retort, waving a finger at his buzz cut. He laughs a full and deliberate laugh that sounds like a foreign song I’ve never heard before.

“It looks bad, doesn’t it?” he asks, his face flushed. As an individual, his hair does look bad. But as his mother, I think it embraces him well. I don’t say this though and look up at the ceiling.

“Go to university, Marco. I’ll pay the fees, so just go. Don’t get held back because of money. Apply for scholarships and who knows, you might just get lucky with a full-ride.” He leans his head on my shoulder and I listen to his breathing. The in and outs.

“I hurt you, didn’t I?” There’s a crack in his voice.

“My heart is iron, Marco. Nothing can hurt me.” If only that were true.

“You’re lying. Why are you always lying? Why do you keep pretending that everything will be okay?” he asks, wrapping an arm around mine. I bite my tongue and feel the taste of iron pool in my mouth.

“It’s hard for me to ask for help, Marco. You know that.”

“Then ask me for help. Lean on me, Mami. I want to help you and Cat.” *Okay, Marco.* *Okay.* I nudge him on the side with my elbow, trying to get him to sit up. He does and raises an eyebrow.

“Before you worry about getting a job, start treating me better, Marco. I don’t want us to fall apart like this. I want to know where you are and who your friends are. I want you to spend more time with Cat, Dante, and me...is that too much to ask?” He slowly shakes his head before cradling his head in his arms.

“I know—I’m sorry. I’ll try Mami. I’ll really try.” I nod and give an encouraging pat on his back. “H-how’s Dante doing? Is he doing good in school?” I can’t help but smile.

“He’s doing fine. But his teacher wants him to participate more in class. He’s shy.” Marco shakes his head in disbelief.

“Shy? Seriously? Are you sure we’re talking about Dante here?” I laugh before pulling Marco close to me.

“The one and only. You know—the two of you looked and acted the same back then.”

Marco stares at me, his eyes big and apologetic. “I’ll try Mami. Really,” he whispers.

I believe in him. I’ll always believe him—he’s not one to make empty promises.

I have to break the hug to wipe the tears that start forming in the corners of my eyes. *He's really growing up.* And in some ways, I've got to grow up too. I can't be fine with playing the Rejecting Game every time we go to the grocery store and smile when I'm fully aware that others are walking all over me like some welcome mat. I need to be brave, not brittle.

I used to compare Marco to a vase all the time, but I'm starting to realize that I've got similar attributes to a vase myself. I carry myself with such fragility when it comes to myself, but when it comes to others I'm always ready to fall for them.

"It's time for a change. A *big* change," I whisper, a hand to my heart.