

BUTTERCUP

by

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HONORS CAPSTONE

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## ABSTRACT

I wrote a short story that is about how different people react to family tragedy. The story will be titled *Buttercup*. It focuses on a 20 year-old college girl, Lucy, whose father passed away from a long illness when she was younger, and how his death has affected her long term. She struggles with sharing her emotions with others, which has caused her to be very closed off and occasionally suffer from panic attacks. I wrote this story because I believe people should know that dealing with tragedy comes in many forms. My goal is to unpack the effects of tragedy and tell a story of how not all people handle tragic events the same way. Many people grieve differently than others; some are transparent with their feelings and emotions while others are completely closed off. I'm hoping that sharing Lucy's journey with grief and death will help others come to terms with their own grief that they may carry. The audience I envision for this short story are young adults (18-24) who may have experienced loss in their life and are still trying to understand their relationship with grief and trauma. I want my audience to think about how their personal loss has affected them growing up, and hopefully come to terms with how they have been handling their trauma.

The story will be a non-fiction piece because I wanted to challenge myself to write creatively. I was influenced by a few pieces of art and literature to come up with the idea for this project. One piece that influenced me is *The Arsonists* written by Jacqueline Goldfinger. This play examines a woman who must come to terms with the death of her father, and it highlights the internal struggle she faces. I read this play almost a year ago, and even then I was fascinated with how the story was told. I hope to use this play as a piece of inspiration in my writing. Overall, I hope that my project will help others who have experienced grief come to terms with their inner feelings. Good or bad.

## PART 1

It's hard being happy all the time. People who do their best to stay positive in every single situation they're thrown in amaze me. I'm not one of those people, never have been. It's not that I don't like feeling happy, it's just hard for me to get there. But once the tides of joy wash over me, I can't help but linger on the feeling. Even now, I feel happiness cover me as I stand in my old bedroom. Coming home for the weekend— no matter the reason— brings a smile to my face. I'm happy to be home and see mom. I've missed her since I moved out and started college. I was the last one to move out, so I guess she's been feeling that whole *empty nest* thing that parents feel when their kids grow up. My sister, Thalia, moved out a few years ago, but I still miss being able to walk into her room across the hall and see her. That must be how mom feels about me now too.

I lay down on my bed and look at my phone to check the time, and I see that it's about eight o'clock at night. I drove in an hour ago, and the only thing I want to do is lay around. I grab my phone from my nightstand.

I scroll through my old message threads and delete the ones that I haven't used in a few weeks, it keeps my phone more organized. I move on to my contact list because it's time to delete some old phone numbers I saved from high school that I won't ever use again. Being in college for a few months now has taught me that people who believe they are going to keep in touch with all their friends from high school are just kidding themselves. I start from the beginning of the alphabet and work my way down, filtering out which phone numbers I need and which ones I don't. Then, without warning, all the air leaves my body as I stare at the name on my screen.

I had forgotten I saved this person's number onto my phone. My breathing becomes shallow and my palms start to sweat. I haven't had a panic attack in a while, and it seems I've forgotten just how scary they can really be.

Everything in me knows I should have deleted this number a long time ago, because I knew that keeping it would only cause me harm. I close my eyes and take a deep breath. When I open them, I stare at the contact number and the name that reads:

*Dad.*

I click the number and place the phone to my ear, waiting. As if I don't already know what's about to happen.

"The number you have dialed has been disconnected."

I knew this would happen. I used to try to call this number when I was much younger, but it's been years and I don't even remember programming it into this phone. I must have done it the day I got the phone, because I guess I just can't let go.

Instead of letting myself give in to the feelings of sadness and grief that I can feel bubbling at the surface, I scroll down towards the bottom of my contact list. When I get to the name I was searching for, I press the call button. It rings for a few seconds, and then I hear her voice.

"*¡Chiquita!* I was just thinking about you," my sister's voice is cheerful and sweet-sounding. I clear my throat before I respond to her.

"Hey Thalia. I wish you were here at home with me this weekend."

"Ugh I know but I have to go into work tomorrow for some extra staff training. I wish I was there with you and mom though," she lets out a sigh. My sister just turned 25 a few weeks ago, and I still can't believe how grown up she is. I'm only five years younger than her, but

sometimes I feel like she's conquered life and I'm still wading in the water trying to stay afloat. I begin to speak again.

"It's all good. Mom and I are doing well. She's in her room right now and I'm just hanging in my room before I fall asleep," I take a breath and hope that she can't hear the uneasiness in my voice.

"Luce," Thalia says. "I can tell when you're not feeling okay. Dad's birthday is tomorrow and I bet the house right now is depressing as hell," I let out a laugh.

"Ha! You're actually right. It's freaking depressing here. *Tia* Maria called here earlier saying *mi vida* don't forget that your family loves you so much. *Te quiero mucho amor*. I was ohh thanks *Tia*," a smile breaks across my face. Our *Tia* has never forgotten to call us every year.

"Ay she does that all the time! She called me two hours ago telling me to 'take it easy' this weekend. But I gotta say she always makes sure to check up on us which is nice," Thalia says with a laugh. Then her voice becomes serious. "But honestly, you don't have to lie to my Lucy. I know you're not one to get emotional, but I just want you to know you can talk to me," her concern for my feelings makes my heart skip a beat. She's never failed to make me feel important.

"I mean, yeah I guess today was a little off for me. I don't know, I guess sometimes everything just hits me all at once. Like other people my age who have both their parents can just call them up and wish them a happy birthday. Or come home for the weekend and surprise them with a cake. But here I am alone calling my dad's number knowing damn well that no one will ever be on the other line waiting to hear my voice. I mean sometimes it just—" I begin to trail off, realizing I might have said too much. "It just sucks," there's silence on the other end of the line. Then she takes a breath.

“Oh Lucy. I know, trust me. It’s like this never-ending pain that not everyone is gonna understand in their life. But we’re not like everyone else. We’re stronger. You’re stronger. You’re stronger than all those other people because you know what pain feels like. And I promise you that whenever you need someone to call, I’ll always be on the other line,” I let a tear fall down my face. I let myself take in my sadness just for a brief moment, before I come back to reality.

“Thank you Thalia,” I say. “Um... I kind of wanted to do something nice for mom tomorrow, but I really have no idea what she would like. Just something to make her smile, you know?” A part of me was very thankful for my sister’s words, but another part of me was starting to feel too exposed. I felt like I needed to change the subject before things got any heavier.

“Yes I definitely think you should,” Thalia says. “You know what you should do? You should bring her flowers from that park we used to go to all the time as kids. The one that’s just ten miles from the house. She’d love that.”

Our mom always has to have flowers in the house, and she likes to have a lot. Our dad used to buy her flowers every month, so now she sort of does it for herself. Mom can be pretty sentimental with things, so Thalia’s idea is actually perfect.

“Yeah that’s a good idea. I’ll take the drive in the morning and surprise her with them. Obviously I’ll tell her it was my idea and give you absolutely no credit.”

“Girl! I’m the one helping *you*,” Thalia says with a humorous tone. “But since I was given all the creative genes when I was born, I’ll let you have this moment. Okay Luce I gotta go but I love you and I’ll call you and mom tomorrow night.”

“Okay sounds good. I’ll text you a picture of the flowers when I get them.”

“Perfect! Love you *chiquita*, bye.”

“Bye Thalia.”

I hang up the phone and stretch my arms over my head. I check the time and see that it's still outrageously too early for me to be going to bed. But if I plan to wake up early to surprise my mom, I should try to get some sleep now. I head to my bathroom to brush my teeth and change my clothes.

Once I've scrubbed the day off of me, I climb into my sheets and settle into bed. I turn off my lamp and stare out my window where the moon and the stars shine into my room, creating shadows against my walls. I always hated these moments before sleep. Where your mind is left with no exterior distractions, and the deepest thoughts you force under can claw their way to surface. I squeeze my eyes shut, hoping for a barricade to form so I won't have to face any of those thoughts tonight.

Recently, I've been having nightmares. I pray that tonight those nightmares have gone somewhere else and that I can finally get a restful night's sleep. I can feel my body begin to melt into my bed and sleep overcomes me. I take one more deep breath before sleep takes over.

I hate having dreams. I've always heard people say that you don't always remember the dreams you have, but I know that's not true. I remember every single dream I have ever had. Especially the ones where I wake up feeling utterly alone. Those are the hardest ones to forget.

Anyway, the darkness of my closed eyes begin to shift, and I start to see sparks and flashes of dark and unsettling colors and shapes. I can see myself standing and I can hear my heart beating as though every beat is one step closer to an explosion.

Suddenly I am no longer a young woman, I am a little girl. Clinging to my mother as we stand in the hospital room underneath fluorescent lights. When I look up at the lights, they pulse and sway, as though they're alive and waiting to drop on me. The room is small, colorless. It seems so real, except I can't move. My legs are melted to the floor, and I have lost all control of

my small body. I hear beeping, people walking, and muffled cries and sniffles in the background. My mom is crying, and I rarely see her cry. Her eyes are puffy and she looks like she hasn't rested in days. She squeezes my shoulders as I hug her. Hospital rooms freak me out. Although I spent so much time in them, I never liked the feeling of being in one.

I look up at her, and she's staring at the person laying in the hospital bed. It almost looks like her face is contorted, and I can feel the fear in my body rushing to the surface. I turn to look over at the bed that lays in the middle of the room, and there's someone in it. But just when that person is about to look at me, everything blurs together.

The colorless walls of the hospital cave in and the person laying in the bed is gone. The bed, the walls, the fluorescent lights are swallowed up. My mom is no longer grabbing me, and I am standing in the middle of a black, lifeless room of nothing. I can't move. I can't scream. All I can do is just exist in the space that isn't even there. Alone. Then, everything is gone and I realize I'm awake.

I sit up in my bed in a cold sweat. My room is still dark and the world is still quiet. It's the middle of the night, and tears start to well up in my eyes when I realize what that dream was. Even though I didn't see who was in the hospital bed, I knew. I knew it was my dad the night he died. I take a deep breath and wipe away the sadness from my eyes. I step out of bed and move through the hallway to the kitchen.

The house creaks as if no one has lived here in years. I shuffle quietly to the fridge to grab water, and I do my best to not wake mom sleeping in her room. I stand in the kitchen, with the refrigerator light piercing the dark space. I tell myself to get my dad out of my head. It's not that I think about him often. The truth is I don't... almost never. But there are those times throughout the year that I get overwhelmed with emotions, much like today with the phone



number. I get overwhelmed with thinking about him being sick, about him dying, and everything that follows death. Once someone dies, the arms that once held you close are gone. and the shadows I chase of *what could have been* haunt me the older I get. Because the older I become, the farther those shadows run, and the slower I become as I chase after them.

I can feel my emotions breaking the surface once again, but I push them down. Sure, it's nice to let everything out and really get in touch with those feelings that are neglected. I just can't let myself do that. Sometimes I wonder if I truly come to terms with my feelings, would the nightmares stop? Or would everything just feel more real and would I become even more isolated than I really am? I'd rather not find out.

I take my endless questions as a sign that I should probably just go back to sleep. I take a glass of water back with me to my room and I quietly get back in bed. I can physically feel how tired I am, and I wait for my mind to calm down to match my body. Then, without knowing it, I'm back asleep. I sleep until the sun rises and a new day starts.

## **PART 2**

When I wake, it's close to seven in the morning. I sit up slowly and check my phone. I had a few text messages from a couple of my family members. The first one is from my older cousin asking me if I came home this weekend to see mom. I replied to her saying that I did and that I would be leaving tomorrow. The next message is from my *Tía* telling me to have a great day today and to give our mom a hug for her. I react to it with a heart. Then I check the message Thalia sent me.

**I love you *chiquita*. Go pick out those flowers and save one for me. Talk to you soon.**

I send her a quick message back

**Thank you T. I love you and I'll talk to ya soon.**

I set the phone down and grab my clothes and get dressed. I walk out of my room and head down the hall. The house is still quiet, and mom's morning coffee hasn't been brewed which means she is still asleep. I walk across the living room and grab the car keys that are on the counter. I slowly open the door and head to my car that's parked in the driveway.

There's a small breeze in the air and I can hear birds in the distance. My neighborhood has always been a quiet place, especially my street. Not much goes on here, so it was the perfect place for my sister and I to grow up. Our house is a smaller one, but I always loved that the most. The front yard is covered with green grass and two big oak trees that tower over the street. Thalia, our mom, and our dad set up a tire swing on one of them for me when I was young, and it still rests there today. The tire is worn out from age and the two blue ropes that used to hold it so strongly are now a faded brown color and wearing thin. I probably wouldn't trust it now, unless my plan was to fall and bust my ass.

Behind the trees that guard the front of our house is mom's flower garden that rests below the two windows next to our front door. The flowers are a mix of reds and pinks with a hint of yellow. Their colors are light and sweet, a perfect blend. Mom loves flowers, and red was her and my dad's favorite color. I turn back to the car and open the front door. I get into my car and start my engine. I put my car into drive and head down the driveway onto the street.

After twenty minutes of driving along country roads and neighborhood streets, I turned into the parking lot of Wildflower Park which is a local park in Colorado Springs. Wildflower Park has always been my favorite park in the area, mostly because of the vast open spaces. It was a great place for Thalia and I to run around when we had so much energy that our parents didn't know what to do with us. It's also one of the closest to my neighborhood, which meant it was usually the first one our parents drove us to. I park and step out of my car carrying a small tote

bag. Some people in the area get annoyed when people try to pick the flowers and take things from the park. Those people need to mind their business.

I walk along the trails through the trees and past the small creek that runs through the ground. I reach a clearing that is surrounded by beautiful flowers. I couldn't possibly have known what every single one of the flowers are called. But thanks to my family's strange obsession with them, I knew a few. I see some pink azaleas, orange coneflowers and yellow daffodils. I also see my absolute favorite: persian buttercups. Filled with bright fiery red petals that shine beautifully in the sun. I bend down and take as many flowers as I can. I don't want to be that girl that takes all of them; I got to save some for the butterflies and the bees of course. I place them carefully in my bag, and make my way to a bench that is placed perfectly in the middle of the small clearing surrounded by all the greenery.

When I take a seat, I cross my legs together and place my hands on the tops of my thighs. I close my eyes and soak up the sounds of the park. Dogs bark in the distance, water from the small creek and the birds flying from tree to tree. I sat there, very still, for what felt like an eternity. I just let myself be in the moment, a moment where I am truly alone. This is one of the first times I have been alone since I started college, and it starts to make me a bit nervous.

I hate being alone. When someone takes time to be alone, there is no one to distract them. There's no one to draw their attention to something else, something that can distract from the feelings they bury deep inside. This is precisely why I never like to be alone, because there's no one around to keep me from digging up those feelings. There's no one to stop me from allowing my body the relief it craves from constantly trying to act like nothing's wrong, like nothing really hurts me. The truth is, however, everything hurt me. It hurts when I'm in my dorm room. It hurts

when I drive my car. I ache every time I wake up in the morning and I realize that there are just certain things in my life that I'm never gonna have.

I'm never going to be able to show my dad around my college. I'm never going to get to drive him around in my very first car. Other people at my school beg their parents not to visit them in college, like it's some kind of embarrassment for having them in the first place. While I sit there, knowing I would give anything to have my dad visit me in college instead of having to watch his body being lowered into the ground.

Multiple thoughts come racing into my mind, and I can't stop them. I can't push them down like I usually do. I continue to shake as my mind races.

I wake up everyday knowing that I have to live with an experience that shifted my entire life in a direction I didn't know I would have to go. And for a long time, I never even realized how much his death affected me. I was so young when it happened, that I didn't understand what death meant... *dead*. Gone forever. No more memories, and no more anything.

Now that I'm older, I'm starting to really see just how badly I've been affected. It's like this sharp pair of teeth that's been eating away at me for years, but I *just* started to see the scars and blood. Now it's like I'm living in a constant state of panic, but I can get away from it because I don't know how to deal with it. Then I hear the sound of thunder in the distance.

I remember the very last time we had visited this park all together. I was about to turn eight, and we were getting ready to leave because we could feel the rain coming in the distance. Storm clouds started to roll in and I started to feel scared because I hated storms. Dad leaned in next to me and whispered, "don't worry angel, this sky just needs to cry every once in a while." That's what he used to tell me every time it would rain to keep me from getting scared of the storm.

I answered back, “but why? I hate when the sky cries.”

“I know you do. That’s why I’m here,” he then scoops me up and carries me to the car as mom and Thalia walk along with us. I can feel myself start to tear up, and instead of forcing myself to swallow my pain, I allow my body to finally give in to what it needs. I can feel small raindrops hit my head and my shoulders. And just like the sky, I begin to cry.

I cry so hard that it’s a silent cry. The kind where you can truly feel your heart shatter into a million pieces. I bring my knees up to my chest and rock myself on the bench. I don’t know how long I cried, but I know that I had never allowed myself to cry like that. In a way, it hurt. But something in my body told me that I needed to allow myself to feel this way. That I couldn’t begin to heal if I never let myself break completely.

I started to feel my body ache. My stomach is tight and empty, and my eyes were hurting from how tightly I had been squeezing them. The rain continued, but it felt fresh and cool against my skin. I take a deep breath in, and I open my eyes to check the time on my phone. It was getting close to nine o’clock, which meant that mom was definitely awake by now. I knew I should get home so I could spend the day with her, because it’s clear to me that I needed to be with someone who could understand everything that’s been going on inside my head.

I begin to put myself back together and make my way to my car. When I get into the driver’s seat, I am immediately taken aback at how different I feel. I never let myself cry like that, but I knew that one day it was just going to happen and I wouldn’t be able to stop it. I guess I’m glad that I let myself give into my feelings, but I still would rather keep them to myself for the most part.

I let out a deep sigh and started my car. Although I'm confused about how I was feeling about all of my emotions, I know that the only person I want to see right now is my mom. I put my car into drive and begin to head home.

### PART 3

Once I pull into my driveway and make my way to the front door, I'm anxious. I gotta be honest with her about my feelings, but I wonder what she'll say. Of course she'll be sympathetic, but I've never been too open about my feelings with her. The wall I've carefully built around myself is beginning to crumble piece by piece. I'm afraid it could collapse completely at any moment. I'd rather chip away at it brick by brick than let it rush me.

I open the front door and make my way into the living room. I smell coffee coming from the kitchen and pancakes sizzling on the stove. Mom is standing in the kitchen with a spatula in her hand and a warm smile on her face.

“*Mija!* I was wondering where you went,” she throws her arms around me and gives me a long embrace. “Honestly I miss when you were too small to drive yourself and you had to ask *me* to take you everywhere. And now you just drive off like you're an *adult* or something.”

I give her a tight hug back and let out a sigh. “Sorry I didn't want to wake you because I went out and got you a surprise. And also I appreciate the concern for my whereabouts, but I *am* an adult now. Which means I have free will,” I say. It's clear she didn't like that response because she playfully pinched the side of my stomach and I let out a small laugh.

“*Ay cuidado chiquita.* I would use the term ‘adult’ very loosely. You still call me asking me if it's okay to put styrofoam in the microwave. Real adults don't do that.” She ruffles up my hair and then continues to flip pancakes until they're golden. “Now what did you get me? *Déjame aver.*”

I take a step back and reach into my bag to carefully pull out the flowers. They're in perfect condition and instantly light up the room. I held them out so she could see them. I tell her, "I went to Wildflower to get them." Her eyes light up once she realizes the reason I went to Wildflower Park out of all the places I could have gone.

"*Mija* they're beautiful I love them," she takes the flowers carefully from me and begins to search for a vase to place them in. "I haven't visited that place in so long. Ooo buttercups! I've been meaning to add those to my garden outside," she says as she places them in a glass vase and begins to meticulously arrange each one.

"Yeah..." I say, "it wasn't actually my idea. Thalia came up with it last night."

"I know, I figured just as much," she gives me a wink and then gestures at the flowers. "This definitely *screams* Thalia. No offense!" She gives me a look that reminds me that she's only joking, but we both know it's sort of true.

"Yeah yeah she's better at getting gifts. I get it," I shrug my shoulders. Mom huffs and nudges me playfully.

"You know that's not what I mean! You made me a bird once in your pottery class. It was...very pretty," she begins to laugh when thinking back to how awful that bird actually looked. It might as well have been run over by a car in my process of making it.

"Okay listen," I say. "I hated that stupid pottery class. And that damn bird was the best thing I made."

She places a few pancakes on her plate, and then mine. "And that's why I keep it in my living room. Because it's just so pretty!"

I roll my eyes at her and she laughs to herself. I walk over to the dining room table to have a seat. I begin to feel like sharing with mom what happened to me today wasn't the best

idea after all. I don't want to do anything that will make her sad, especially not on dad's birthday. I look back up at her as she continues to flip a few more pancakes before coming over with a plate of them to sit next to me. We both sit together and eat like we always would before I moved out. Suddenly she says, "so I heard you in the kitchen late last night. I figured you had gotten up to get a drink or something, but I wanted to make sure nothing else was bothering you."

I stop eating and look at her. She's still smiling, but I can see a hint of concern in her eyes. I place my fork on my plate and tell myself that if I'm gonna be honest with her, then this is my chance. I clear my throat and begin to speak, "yeah um, I had a bit of nightmare that kind of spooked me. It was about dad, and I guess I was just feeling a little sad."

She continues to look at me. She says, "what happened?"

I look down at the ground. Then I say, "You and I were standing in the room the night he died. You were there, and you were just crying. So much that your face...didn't look like you anymore. And dad was just lying in the hospital bed. And...I just—" I couldn't speak anymore.

She places her hand on my shoulder. "*Lo siento mi amor*. How are you feeling now?" I don't say anything. I simply just look down at the floor, but not saying anything was exactly what she needed to hear to know how I felt. She stands up from the dining table and takes my hand. She leads me to the living room couch and motions for me to sit.

Then she says, "you know, I always wondered if we would ever have one of these talks again."

I look up at her, "what do you mean?"

"Well," she takes a deep breath. "When your dad passed, you were so young that I wasn't sure how to talk to you. Thalia was older, so she understood. But with you, baby you were so small.



“Yeah,” I say. “I remember. You told me that dad was in heaven now and that he wasn’t hurting anymore.”

She nods at me and continues to speak. “Yes, exactly. I wanted to tell you more, I really did. But you were just a kid.. I just knew that when you got older, it was going to come to you,” she speaks to me as though she had gone through this conversation a thousand times in her head, as though she knew that one day I would feel the way I am feeling now.

Although my voice is wavering, I begin to speak. “I just feel like there’s this voice inside of me telling me that it’s too late to feel sad. Like I missed my chance to feel sad,” I feel the tears forming around my eyes, but I do my best to hold them back. I feel my hands begin to shake, but she reaches over and grabs them.

For the first time in a very long time, it’s just me with my mom. Me with one of the only people in the world that I trust with my whole life.

“Baby, you’re still grieving,” mom says.

I shake my head and say, “I shouldn’t be. I mean my god, it’s been long enough,” She squeezes my hands tighter.

“Lucy stop,” she tells me with such emotion in her voice. “*Amor*; you are just feeling the things that every person feels in their lives. It’s a grief baby. And grief is a wonderful thing to feel.”

I start shuffling around in my seat. I speak in a hushed voice, “Really? Cause it feels like crap.”

Mom lets out a small sigh. “Trust me. All of the pain and the hurt you feel is just your soul telling you that they were worth loving.”

I see the same hurt in her eyes that rest in mine. Only she doesn't look sad because of her feelings, she looks sad because of the way I'm feeling.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said anything in the first place. I didn't mean to make this a whole big thing," I tell her as I start to inch away to the other side of the couch, but she continues to hold my hands and doesn't allow me to shy away from our conversation.

"Never apologize for how you feel, okay?" She says. "Nothing makes me happier than when you or your sister confide in me."

I tilt my head, "How so?"

"Well," she begins. "I guess it's because your dad's birthday is always a mixed-day for me. I never quite know how to feel. Of course I'll always miss him, and I love that we get to celebrate him in our own way. But sometimes I get scared that one of these years his birthday is just going to feel like a regular day. Nothing different, or special. Just a regular day where I wake up and live my life. But I know that's pretty normal, so I guess it's okay," I can tell that this is something she's been wanting to talk about with someone for a long time.

I tell her, "Oh wow. I guess I never really thought about that before."

"Yeah, losing someone is a weird thing. You know it happens, but you never really understand it until it happens to you," she says with a bit of sadness in her voice. "But that's why we have people in our lives that can help us through these times. Grief may not be something that comes over you right away. Sometimes it takes time for those feelings to arise. But when they do, just remind yourself about how much love you still have in your life, okay *amor*?" She leans over and wraps her arms around me.

I squeeze her tight and I feel the tears fall. "Thank you mom. I love you."

“I love you too *mija*,” she hugs me tighter and then lets go. She stands up and says, “well I didn’t expect for us to have this conversation but I’m really glad we did. I’m gonna clean up the kitchen and then we can go ahead and start our day.”

“Oh mom I can clean up for you,” I say as I begin to stand up.

“No no! I can do it,” she puts her hands out as if to motion to me to stay seated and comfortable. “Just stay here and relax! Besides it’s only a few things and I’ll be done fast. I’m just happy you came to see me this weekend,” she smiles at me and I do as she says and remain seated. She heads back into the kitchen and begins to wipe away the mess we left from breakfast. Normally I would go in there and help despite her request for me to relax, but today I do as she says and just sit there comfortably on my couch.

I glance over at the coffee table where a potted succulent has been resting for years. Next to the succulent is that damn bird. Its right wing has a few cracks in it from age, and it’s missing an eye. Or maybe I never even gave it two eyes when I made it all those years ago. I then turn my attention to the book shelf that is placed next to the TV. The bookshelf is filled with romance and mystery novels, along with a few framed photos of our family. One photo is of my parents on their wedding day, and the other is of Thalia and I when we were kids. I was five in the picture and Thalia was ten. We’re sitting in the grass outside of our house wearing matching swimsuits our mom was obsessed with. A smile forms across my face as I stare at the photos.

Then, I glance up into the kitchen where mom is. From where I sit, I can see the top half of her body as she cleans the dishes in the sink. Her dark hair is tied up and she’s got the pink earrings that Thalia bought her for mother’s day last year. Seeing her now, I’m beginning to see just how much her and Thalia look alike. Both have slender faces and dark hair that match their dark complexion. I’m much fairer than both of them, which I got from my dad.

It's funny how the smallest things can change a person's entire perspective. Growing up hasn't always been simple for me, especially the older I get. It seems as though the more I grow, the farther I am from the life I always wanted. I wanted a life where I could graduate college and save a seat for both of my parents, and I wanted to be the girl that danced with mom and dad at my wedding. I wanted a life where I could watch both my parents become grandparents to my first child. Now, thinking back to what I thought I wanted –or thought I needed –I realize that there's so much more to life than grasping at what you'll never be able to reach.

Instead of being someone who has two parents, I'm someone who has a spectacular mother, a beautiful sister, and the loving memory of a father. I'll get to watch mom become the best grandmother and my sister turn into an amazing aunt, and I'll be able to look at those two strong women and say that they are who I want to be when I grow up. My grief will always follow me no matter where I go, but so will the love I have for the people that still walk beside me. For the first time since I have been home, I am completely happy.

I stand up and make my way to the kitchen sink where mom is. I walk up to her and give her another hug, and she smiles at me.

“Do you feel better *mija*?” She asks me.

“I do. I actually do,” I let go of her and took two steps towards my room. “Anyway, wanna watch a movie later tonight? I gotta head to my room first and turn in a few homework assignments.”

She nods her head and says, “sure thing. I'll see you when you're done!”

I turn to head towards my room, but then my mom stops me. I turn to face her and she says, “wait, take this with you! It's too pretty not to look at,” she reaches over to the bouquet of flowers I brought to her this morning and takes out a red buttercup. She then grabs a single

flower vase, fills it with water, and places the buttercup gently in the vase. I reach over and take it from her.

“Aw thanks!” I take the vase from her and head to my room. Once I’m in my room, I set the flower on my desk. The sun coming from my window shines on the red petals and instantly I am overwhelmed with how beautiful the flower is. It’s small, but its brightness and blossoming presents leaves me feeling whole.

#### **PART 4**

I spent the rest of my dad’s birthday finishing my homework, watching movies with mom, and eating chinese takeout because we were both too lazy to cook. We called Thalia once she was done with work for the day and spoke with her for a good amount of time. They both teased me about my inability to cook pasta, even though the kitchen in my dorm is single-handedly the worst kitchen of all time. It’s not even worth using. Then after the phone call, mom and I finish the night by looking at old photos from my childhood.

We flip through photos of both my parents holding me when I was a baby. I must have been one or two years old, and my hair went halfway down my back. I had on a purple long sleeve shirt, with yellow pants. My dad was wearing a black shirt, and it looked like he was standing in the middle of the kitchen. Neither one of us is looking at the camera. I was looking off to the side, while he was only looking at me. Smiling down at his youngest daughter, while holding her close.

As I look at this photo, I wonder if he ever thought about the possibility of dying and not watching me grow up. Not being around to see me graduate high school, begin college, or live my life. Do parents ever think about these things? Do dark thoughts of death and loss enter their mind when they have a child this small? Or do they simply live in the bliss of having something

they love as much as their baby? I never ask anyone these questions, but I know these thoughts won't ever leave me. One day I'll think about them as I stare at my own child, preparing myself for the possibility of having to raise her alone, or not even getting to raise her myself.

I let these thoughts wash over me. No point in getting lost in them now. Instead, I flip to another page. The next page is covered with Thalia and I. Six-year-old Thalia is sitting with me on the couch when I was only a year old. Her smile is so big, that you can see she's started to lose her baby teeth. I'm wedged in between her arm and the side of her torso, and it almost looks like I'm asleep. My eyes are barely open, and my head is slumped on Thalia's small shoulder. We're both fitted in pink dresses, and it looks like our parents tried to do our hair in the same style. But a one year old can only keep a bow in their hair for so long until they're tired of it. Mom makes a comment on how sweet we looked. Then, right after this photo was taken, I threw a temper tantrum and started to hit Thalia in the face, which made her cry, which made me giggle.

I laugh at the thought of me as a baby, and the amount of times I probably made Thalia cry and got away with it. Being the youngest sibling always comes with its perks. When we were done reminiscing about mine and Thalia's childhood, it was close to ten o'clock at night. I told her I was about ready to go to bed, and she hugged me and gave me a quick kiss on the forehead.

*"Buenas noches mi vida. Sleep well and let me know if you need anything okay?"*

"I will, good night," I make my way to my room and begin to get ready for bed. Once I've washed off the day, I turn off my lights and climb under the sheets. Just like I did last night, I lay there in the darkness. However, instead of having that uneasy feeling I did the night before, I feel at peace.

All of the sadness and hurt I carried with me yesterday has morphed into something else. Of course it's still there, but there's a bit more acceptance as well. I'm starting to understand what mom was talking about earlier when she was sharing with me her views on grief.

Grief never truly goes away. It can lay dormant and arise out of nowhere, and it is something that can weigh down a person's heart until it feels like there's nothing anyone can do. However, grief is so much more than that. Not only is it the heartache you carry, but it's all of the love you carry as well. Having all of this love in my heart is something I should start to cherish, rather than push away. I guess in some ways I'm lucky that I have a better understanding of all the things I feel. Some days might not seem as good as others, so I should take this time to allow myself to feel happy and grateful.

Once I fell asleep, I had no nightmare. I finally just slept, peacefully.