

## **IT IS MY HAPPINESS**

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The first rays of the morning sun blaze through the only window in my room. Illuminating the colorful flowers of the maxi dress I stripped from my slim body seven hours ago. The black lace heels that used to accompany the outfit are tossed as well on the clean bamboo floor.

Last night started with the order of two Bloody Marys but one ended up decorating the pale face of my nameless blind date. At the beginning, I thought that his right Testoni black dress shoe accidentally brushed my right stiletto. It was clear that the dark square table was supposed to give the appeal of romance, but it made the young man look like a child with his long legs curl into his chest. However, when a flat surface moved up from my right bare leg—the one exposed by the opening of my garment—to my inner thigh, and the efficacious look of him imagining us later in bed made me color his smugness by emptying my crimson drink on him. Rising elegantly from my seat, I held my black handbag and left the pub, but not before seeing his tomato-offended expression.

The beep of my alarm clock indicates that it is nine o'clock. I am supposed to meet with my mother today. She wants to know if the guy I met last night might be her future son-in-law. Her expectations of me marrying someone before turning thirty are becoming an increasingly absurd idealization.

My mama is obsessed with finding me a virile man who helps deliver the baby she desperately wants. She believes that in less than a year my uterus will start turning against me, and she will lose the opportunity of her having her first grandchild. Therefore, she makes me go on these horrible dates that do not pass the first round of drinks. Imagining the disapproving stare of her wrinkled visage kept me from opening my eyes.

Rolling to the other side of the bed has cause Bruno to slightly growl at me. He was adorable when I adopted him in Puerto Rico. It has been several years since my last visit, but sometimes—when I am stressed—I close my eyes and I imagine myself being at Flamenco beach. The waters are like glass tinted in tones of purplish

blues and turquoise. Their beauty is reflected by the cloudless and vibrant sky. The soft waves caress my yellow colored toes as if inviting me to live an indescribable experience. While sitting on my towel, I notice kids that are in the process of making sandcastles, a pair of guys playing beach paddleball, and a dad trying to bury the pole of the Heineken beach umbrella in the white sand.

As I cover myself with the gray comforter, when a cool breeze passes into the open window of my studio room, I feel like I'm actually inhaling the salty air of Flamenco. The view of the waves crashing the sand combined with the shining sun and the joyful laughter of the kids truly makes this moment an image of paradise. Then, I see Carlos walking to where I am, holding the coconut mojito that I requested.

"Here you go, Miss Sophia." Showing me his pearl teeth.

"Gracias, Carlos."

"You know, it's a truly beautiful day!"

"I fully agree, it's like a picture." *Just like the one your mom showed you when you were fifteen.*

"Your mom is calling again."

"And I'm going to keep ignoring her."

"Well, that's not going to help solve the problem."

An unknown feeling sweeps across my chest making me turn to my other beige pillow. I know that I am ignoring her. For the past couple of days, I have been avoiding her because I just cannot deal with her obsession of finding me a guy and having to deal with her disappointment after hearing my horrible dates. I still have not digested the last talk I had with her.

We were on our way to our usual spot, which is a pub that is close to my studio room, and she asked me about my life and if something new had happen.

"Actually, I have great news!" I excitedly stated.

"Yeah! What happened? Did you meet a guy?" My mother hopefully said.

“No, mother. I would appreciate if you stop asking me about that. If something changes and I meet someone, you know that I am going to tell you. In the meantime, I am single and that is that.”

“But what about your happiness?”

“Mom, please! Stop being so melodramatic. I am responsible for my own happiness. Not a guy and not anyone else but myself. How many times do I have to tell you that?”

“Because I know that your father would have been on my side. You know how much he loved children. He wanted to have more kids. We tried to conceive on many occasions, but it just was not in the cards for us. I know that he loved us regardless of our failure to bring another baby, but I sometimes felt that he would have been happier if he had had another one. That is why I want you to find a right guy to marry, so you could live happily ever after with him and with the babies you would get.”

I was so mad at her after what she said that I did not bother to tell her about my promotion in the company. The worst of all is the fact that she used my father to support her argument, and for a moment I felt guilty. I know that my parents have sacrifice a lot, so I could have a good life. They even paid the first months of my rent when I could not find a job. I always appreciated their hard work, and for that I felt the need to be best daughter that I could ever be, so when my mother tells me that apparently, I was not enough, it hurt a lot.

Bruno kept putting his paws on my right shoulder just when I heard the distant bongs of the bells of St. Patrick’s Cathedral. In the beginning, I was annoyed by its sound, but later on I started to love it. Their melody reminded me of the time I visited the Cathedral of San Juan Bautista in Old San Juan. That day was one of the best days of my life.

It began by hearing in the car the lively music of El Gran Combo. Their songs always shower me with memories of when my dad used to let me put my tiny feet over his black tennis shoes and we danced around our living room. That day we went to the Paseo de la Princesa and we were surrounded by the abundance of verdant trees that shelter us. Its beauty takes me to the time he laced my hand to his while we lazily strolled through it. I also remember the different vendors and craft stalls. For example, Mr. Suárez, who makes everything from decorative boxes to the Three Wise Men in wood. Mrs. Juanita, who incessantly knits famous characters hats and

Mr. and Mrs. Santiago, who assure that aromatic candles, soaps, and lotions are the ways to a man's heart —especially since they are handmade.

After we finished seeing the beautiful wood art, my mother wanted us to stop by the bronze statue thick with verdigris of the Spanish, Amerindian, and African people known as the Raíces Fountain. If I am not mistaken, I was ten during that visit and I will never forget how she dragged us to the middle of it and made us smile. At first, we were complaining because we were tired and sweaty. That day had surpassed 95°F and we felt the small drops of liquid dripping down our necks, but then we coincided after she bribed us with piraguas.

As I'm leading myself to where don Paco is shaving the ice using his hand ice shaver, I acknowledge how his yellow and red wooden pushcart is brighter and radiant. His famous "Yo soy Boricua" umbrella still stands proudly beside the cart. It's amazing the way he places the shaved ice into a cup and uses a funnel to give it the distinctive pyramid shape.

"The usual cherry piragua, Miss Sophia?" Showing me his kind brown eyes.

"Well of course, don Paco!"

"Your dad is extremely proud of you." He says when he hands me the red flavored goodness.

A sense of ignominy causes my head to fall to my chest.

"You remind him of your mother," he states.

"What?", I ask.

"Your dark-brown eyes also reveal emotions, your almost-black wavy hair smells like the Caribbean ocean too, and you definitely inherited her stubborn personality."

"But she expects me to marry someone right now. She doesn't realize that me working for Hachette Book Group has been my dream, that Reyes and Nash have been my constant friends since losing papa, and that living in NYC has been a blessing to me."

"Have you told her that?"

A salty tear drops to my close lips, but my chest continues to rise and falls evenly.

Then, the combination of the marimba and the flute at the beginning of “Africa” by Toto makes Bruno growl even more. By the ringtone, I know that my mother is calling. Grabbing the beige pillow that is beside me, I place it harshly over my face and pretend that I do not hear it. When that does not work, I grab Bruno and I begin to caress his fur until I feel my eyes close again.

Me being 15 again save me from having to face reality—even if it meant for a short period of time. My backyard is filled with shining golden lights and the full moon illuminates the three level-stand where all the banana cupcakes are located. We are celebrating my birthday, and everyone is at my house.

My uncle Jaime is at the grill. He never stops saying how a drop of beer guarantees juicy ribs. My uncle Franco is in charge of cooking the rice and beans since his well-known farm, Cosechas Tierra Viva, cultivates the best cilantro, sweet peppers, eggplants, and all the different herbs you can imagine. He is the one who brought me the beautiful bouquet of fifteen yellow African daisies. Reyes is in charge of the music, but Nash is trying to explain to him that the Backstreet Boys are never coming back. As I’m saying hello to my aunt, Natalia, I hear the joyful sound of laughter that belongs to my mother. As I move closer, I realize that she is listening to a joke my father is attempting to tell. This is the last time I saw her so peaceful.

Tonight, I’m wearing a white dress that contrasts the golden center of ruby colored flowers. Dad is the one who said that it made me look like an angel. I never thought that, after that day, he was the one who would become my angel. The intro of “Regresa a mi” by LeBron Brothers directs my father to me. He grabs my hand and I look into his kind brown eyes, and his infectious smile shows me his pearly teeth. He loves this song. He says that in his time, couples would dance all night long to romantic ballads. He even met my mother in such gatherings. He puts my left hand on his waist and my right hand close to his heart. We begin to sway to the rhythm of the song, but he chuckles when I end up hugging him instead. His arms feel so real that it’s like a protective blanket is covering me right now.

“I will always love you, Sophia.”

“I know papa.”

“Your mom only wants what she thinks will make you happy.”

A determined expression passes over my face.

“I am going to tell her that I am happy. That one day I will find love and he will treasure me the same way you have done to us. That I am proud of myself for accomplishing all the goals that I wanted. I am going to tell her that I love her too and that we will always have each other.”

Papa tightens our hug and whispers “Te amo” in my ear.

Mario —my black cat— hisses as he enters the lighted room through the open window —he may have lost the battle with the mouse today, Bruno decides at that moment to assault my cheek with his hot and bumpy tongue, and just when I turn and see that it is half past ten, I hear the three familiar knocks at the door letting me know that my mother is here.