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A Journey from Darkness

to Light

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**A Journey from Darkness
to Light**

A Memoir of Extraordinary Lives

By **Bianella Orozco-DeLaHoz
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To my mother, Maria Isabel: your love and compassion continue to live through us, Nella and Alain, and your grandkids Isabella Maria, Dassio Adean, Bianella Isabel, Alanna Isabelle, Nina Marie and our future generations. “Mami, I kept my promise to never forget who makes the rainbow.”

-Nella

To my wife Ivette, to our daughters Allana Isabelle and Nina Marie, and to everyone who reads this book, with my thanks and God’s Blessing.

-Alain

This book is a memoir of our lives from childhood to now. We have tried to recreate events, locales, and conversations from our memories of them. Some conversations have been recreated and/or supplemented, and the details of some individuals have been changed to respect their privacy. We hope you are inspired by our story.

- Nella and Alain

INTRODUCTION

The book is in two voices because we are two people telling the same story, but from the perspective of how we saw it. We were both there, but we looked at things through different eyes, and so, you will hear us tell you in our own voices what happened.

Rather, what we lived. This book is the story of our extraordinary life, so far. We are twins, and our twinship has been essential to how we have managed to get through what we did, and to come out as successful, healthy people. Without each other, we don't know if we could have managed it, and thankfully, we won't have to know because we were always there to support each other in both terrible and good times.

Even if we weren't there physically, in the same room, due to events that you shall discover in our story, we were there emotionally and spiritually, knowing that even though we might be alone in a room, we were never truly alone because the other was there with us, in our heart.

So as you read our story, we ask you to bear in mind that, even though we are twins, we are two different people, and we will see things differently. It's a bit like that wonderful film *Rashomon*, in which the same crime story is told seven different ways as it explores the philosophy of justice. We are not trying to tell our story through many different lenses, but there will be times when one of us sees or feels something that the other didn't. And you will notice.

Like *Rashomon*, ours too is a story of terrible crime and eventual justice. It was through our own lives, through our epic struggles and our sometimes unexpected triumphs, that we got not only justice for ourselves, but we found redemption. We hope that our story inspires you to look into your own lives with a new perspective, and to see things that you might not have seen before. We are not alone, for we have God who loves us immensely and wants the best for us even when things may be falling apart around us. In that way, you too may find a path from the darkness into the light.

CHAPTER 1: June 9, 1982

It was the last week of school for us, and we should have been happy that summer joys were just around the corner. Except that joy was very much not around the corner. And what happened on that day changed everything, forever. For the worse, and then, for the better. This is how it happened.

Alain remembers...

It was June 9, 1982. My sister Bianella, whom we call Nella, and I attended the Perrine Baptist Academy, a Christian school in Perrine, a suburb of Miami, Florida. The city was undergoing a transformation from a retirement destination to a cultural one, with renovated hotels popping up, and a lively music scene, all combined with intense drug battles, as the Medellin cartel was in town and doing business. But all we knew at the time was that we were going to be graduating from the fifth to the sixth grade in a week or so, and we were excited to move up in the world. We were especially excited because on the morning of June 9, we were scheduled to go on a field trip to the Sunshine Roller Skating Rink.

Roller skating was a thing back in the 1980s, and it was my thing. I loved it. I used to go skating every weekend, and as an eleven-year-old boy, I was eager to show off my skating skills to my classmates. I was an athletic kid who loved football. To look at me, I was your average Hispanic American kid with dark hair and light brown eyes. I'm normally light skinned, but my sister and I, we sucked up the sun as much as possible. And in Miami there's a lot of sunshine.

Our uncle, Francisco Gomez, whom we called Kiko, was at our house on that warm June morning. He was our mother's older brother, and he had been living with us for the past month. He was tall and lean and had dark curly hair and olive skin. He was a beautiful man. He had a great energy to him, and he was funny. My sister and I loved him.

Our mother's family in Colombia is one you could call middle class; they had car repair shops and trucking companies, but even the middle class is not rich there compared to the United States. Her family was close. Our mother was the youngest of

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six brothers and sisters. Her sister Luz was the oldest, then her sister Nubia, her brother Guillermo who we called “Memo”, and then Kiko. They had a third brother John, who was murdered six months before we were born. Violence was always circling around my family, here and in Colombia.

Kiko also had a dark past. He had been arrested back in 1978 for possession of eighteen kilos of cocaine in Miami-Dade County. He spent about six months in Miami-Dade County Jail. When he finally got bailed out, he escaped back to Colombia. He never faced US time for the crime.

In 1982, he came back to the US via Mexico. He had been a trucker in Medellin, Colombia, driving a 10-ton dump truck. But he wanted to come back and work with his sister, my mother, in the drug business because his wife was pregnant with their fourth child and he wanted to make extra money. This would then allow him to go back to Colombia and build his trucking business and do better for his growing family.

So he showed up at our house about a month before our roller skating field trip. My father owned two Texaco gas stations in Miami, one of them on Le Jeune and Flagler, close to the Miami Airport, and another one a couple of miles away on 16th and Coral Way. One of them was called Orozco's Texaco. The other one was called Zapata's Texaco. However, our father's main business was dealing drugs, and Kiko was getting into the drug business with our father.

On that June morning in 1982, Kiko was driving my sister and me to school in my mother's white Corvette. As we were about to leave, our mother came out of the house to say goodbye to us. I remember her wearing a long white nightgown. She said goodbye to us as she made the sign of the cross over us, which she always did. My mother was raised Catholic and would bring us to church on Sundays—like it or not. My mother knew I was looking forward to skating on our field trip that day. She would take me to the Kendall Skating Center every Saturday morning for two sessions of skating. I was very spoiled by my mother, a huge contrast from our earlier days on welfare in Brooklyn where toys were scarce. Since moving to Miami in 1977, we went from a small apartment to a modest house; to opulent houses with pools and maids; from public to private school, and from playing with a box of mismatched toys to having expensive speed skates, motorcycles and video games at our disposal.

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My mother loved both of us very much, and she was very close to my sister. They were joined at the hip. I was a little wilder and my mother worried about me a lot. I had already broken my arms four times: in Brooklyn, in Colombia, then twice in Miami, and so I was always going in and out of the hospital. I almost died when I was eight in a horseback riding accident in Colombia. I fell off a horse, cracked my skull, and had internal bleeding. My mother was always looking out for me, telling me to be careful.

So, that day, Kiko drove us off to school and dropped my sister and me off in the driveway of the Perrine Baptist Academy. And then we went off on our rolling skating field trip.

Nella remembers...

The night before the roller skating field trip, I was getting ready for it at home. I asked my mom if she could help me iron my jeans. I liked everything just right. I was always a careful person. I was petite in frame with olive skin. Dark brown, curly, frizzy hair. I was very shy and quiet but smiled a lot. I've always had a beautiful smile. My eyes and smile are a true expression of my soul. I was not encouraged to speak my mind or to reveal my emotions; my father thought it was disrespectful for a girl to reveal too much. Although quiet, I was deep in thought with questions. My very first books were Cinderella and the Bible, which I believe inspired me with hopes of finding both love and God. Observing life in silence sharpened my skills at detecting others' emotions: anger, happiness, love—and also cruelty.

My mother was born in Medellin, Colombia and her name was Maria de Los Angeles. However, she had changed her name when she came to the United States and decided to call herself Maria Isabel, but everybody called her Maruja. I called her Mami.

So when I asked my mother to help iron my jeans, she said to me, “Well, you have to learn how to do it. What if I die tomorrow? You have to learn how to do these things yourself.”

I never forgot those words because they came true, and I did have to learn so much more without her. Whenever I am ironing or making a bed, I always think about what she said to me on her last night on earth. That last night was, ironically, very special because of my uncle Kiko, who I loved so much.

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He was my favorite uncle, and he and my mom were very close. I felt so much love from him. He also made me feel very pretty. He would sing to me a song from Nat King Cole “*Yo vendo unos ojos negros*” (it means “I sell black eyes”) with a loving smile. Indeed, he was the first man for whom I ever felt love. I would simply be walking through the hallway, and he would look at me and say, “Who is that beautiful girl? Look at those eyes!” He just made me feel so happy and he gave me the best hugs. He made me feel loved, not only as a niece, but as a daughter as well. I just adored him in a way that I did not adore my father. I was afraid of my father. He was very stern and angry. I had already witnessed his fury when he was beating my mother and us. His belts, his fists, his pulling of hair created a fear of him that he misread as respect.

So on that night before the roller skating trip, my mother, Kiko and I were all sitting at the kitchen counter. I don't know what we were talking about. But we were all laughing, and I was happy to have my mother and my uncle there. Then I went to bed and fell asleep. And I had a nightmare.

I dreamed of two tornadoes coming for us at school. I woke up very scared, and my mother rushed to my room. I told my mom that I had had a terrible dream that frightened me. These terrifying tornadoes were coming after us and it was horrible. She calmed me down and reassured me that it was just something working itself out in my mind and that I would be fine.

As I got ready to leave for school, I asked my mother for money for the field trip and she went and got some for me. She was in her white nightgown. My brother was waiting in the car with my uncle to take us to school. I walked to the car, then turned and ran back to look back at my mother. She always gave us the Sign of the Cross blessing: “In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and may the Virgin Mary accompany you.” That's what she did on this day as well.

I got in the car and waved goodbye to my mother, not knowing it was my last time seeing her alive. As Uncle Kiko drove us to school, I remember just staring at his feet as he drove. Not too much later, I would see them on the TV news, sticking out from a white sheet as he lay on our front lawn . I don't know why I looked at them, but I did.

Once at school, with attendance taken, we got on a bus to go to the skating rink. I suddenly got a really bad stomach ache and went to the skating center to tell them that I

wasn't feeling well. I called my mother from the skating center. There was no answer.

Alain remembers...

Later, what I found out was that on that morning, my father had gone to work and was at one of the Texaco gas stations he owned in Miami.

My father was a good-looking 45-year-old with jet black hair. He stood 5 feet 7 inches and weighed approximately 180 pounds. He presented himself as a very serious man, the oldest of six brothers and sisters, from an impoverished family out of the mining town of Amaga, an hour outside of Medellin, Colombia. He was good to his friends, and he was also a womanizer. He had a swagger to him, with a kind of mob look, and he was also very short tempered. He was physically abusive to the women he was with, whether it was a girlfriend or my mother. Same thing with the kids, as he certainly beat us. My cousin Alan shared with me that he was physically abusive with him as well. He told me about one time when my father got upset because my cousin came in and was jumping around the room. My father just picked him up by the hair and threw him across the room. The kids were crying and everybody was afraid of my father.

So on that day at the gas station, my father got a phone call from my mother saying, "El Monje is coming over." *El Monje* means "The Monk"; his sister Emma was called *La Monja*, "The Nun". My father told me she was given that nickname because she had wanted to be a nun at some point in her life. Her brother Fernando was nicknamed *El Monje* simply because of his sister. They were in their early thirties, about the same age as our mother. They were coming over to pay a debt owed from a previous drug deal.

At the time, all I knew of my father's business was that he owned two Texaco gas stations in Miami and five video stores in Medellin, Colombia. On a couple of occasions I saw piles of cocaine lying on a table in our house which was explained to me as being flour for making cakes for a new bakery in Colombia. I knew something wasn't right with all these shady people that would come and go at the house. Especially after all the events that transpired prior to June 9, 1982.

Usually payment to my father would come in large bundles of money, especially because back then, a kilo of cocaine was very expensive. Its wholesale value was about \$40-50,000 a kilo. My father told me they had been waiting on that three million dollar

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payment for weeks, and a few weeks earlier *El Monje* had shown up with less than \$75,000.

So Fernando, *El Monje*, called asking if my father was home, and our mother had responded that he was, even though he wasn't, not knowing that Fernando had been calling from Old Cutler Hammock Park, which was literally around the corner. The park is now called Bill Sadowski Park, after the congressman. The neighborhood we lived in was Perrine, which has since been renamed Palmetto Bay. It was upper class and predominantly white back then.

At the time of this phone call, my mother asked my uncle to change his clothes because they were having people over and he had been outside mowing the lawn. We had a big house on a cul-de-sac with four homes on it, and we had nice gardens and grounds. Kiko was helping to look after them.

Also in the house was our maid, Gloria. She was a very thin lady with black hair. I remember she read Spanish Tarot cards. Our mother was very religious, but she was also involved in the world of Tarot. About a month before the terrible events of that day, my aunt Lucero and her husband came to visit. She was my father's sister, in her mid-thirties. Her husband, Alberto, was one of the managers at my father's gas stations. We were in the kitchen of our house, and my sister was there as well. Gloria the maid was reading the Tarot cards to my mother, Aunt Lucero and Uncle Alberto.

When Gloria was reading the Tarot cards to Lucero, the death card came out. In that deck and in most Tarot cards, Death is shown in the card as a giant skeleton and takes the fateful number thirteen. Nella and I heard Gloria say, "This card says somebody's gonna die." My aunt and uncle asked, "Who?" Gloria didn't answer. And then she read the cards to my mother, and the death card came out again. They were trying to figure out who was going to die. Very soon they would have their answer.

Gloria was in our house when the men looking to pay the drug debt arrived and rang our doorbell that morning in June. My uncle was still getting dressed and was holding a shirt in his hands; this was confirmed by Gloria because she could see him from the kitchen, where she was standing. She heard him open the door and invite them to come in. They walked into the house and began shooting at Uncle Kiko with silenced guns.

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My mother had been getting dressed herself when she stepped out of her bedroom to see who had arrived, only to see men shooting at her brother in the foyer. As she ran back into the bedroom one of the shooters chased her down, and Gloria heard my Uncle Kiko say, “*No la maten a ella.*” Don't kill her.

One of the men continued to shoot Kiko as my uncle staggered backwards and tried to escape through the garage. Kiko was pressing his body against the garage door to prevent the shooter from entering the garage, so the killer shot through the garage door five times, hitting Kiko again. Even so, Kiko was able to press the button to open the garage door onto the driveway, and he managed to make his way to the end of our driveway, finally collapsing on our lawn, on the grass he had just cut. The killers shot him a couple more times in the face. The police said he had been shot more than 50 times.

The fact that the killers were chasing our uncle and our mother and shooting them gave Gloria the maid time to hide in our father's office behind his desk, which ultimately saved her life. She later told us that she could see that the master bedroom doors were closed, which made her think our mother was inside the bedroom hiding and hearing the assassins pacing through the house.

Gloria waited fifteen minutes or so and then called my father at the gas station to tell him that something horrible had happened, not knowing that the police were already on their way. One of our neighbors had seen our uncle lying in a pool of blood and made the call to the police anonymously.

When the police arrived they found Kiko lying dead outside. Gloria was in the house and our mother, who had been shot several times in the face, across her cheek and up to her ear, was found lying on the blue carpet floor at the entrance of her master bedroom. Gloria had not seen the killer go inside and murder our mother, then leave and close the bedroom doors. Everybody in the house except for Gloria had been killed.

It was not until twenty-four years later that Nella and I finally went to the police to find out what happened to our mother and uncle. That morning, our father had driven to the house after Gloria called him, and upon seeing the yellow police tape marking the scene of a crime, he did not stop to ask what had happened. Instead, he drove to the office of his attorney, Nathan Diamond, in downtown Miami. Which the police immediately found suspicious. Even so, they did nothing about it.

Nella remembers...

As we pulled into the parking lot at our school from the roller skating trip, my brother and I saw police cars near the school drop-off. We could also see Louie, the son of our father's childhood friend Nicolas, standing with the principal and waiting for us. He was tall and slim, with curly brown hair. He wore glasses that were very thick, like bottles. As we stepped out of the bus we asked Louie what he was doing there. Where was our mom? He told us that she was running late at the Winn Dixie supermarket and that he was there to pick us up. We told him that our mother did not want us to leave with anyone but her, and so we would wait for her. As we looked towards our school principal we could see the sadness in her face as she told us that it was okay to leave with Louie.

I had alarms going off inside my head. I just knew something was wrong.

Louie then took us to a satellite police station that didn't look like your usual police station. This one was in an office building. We sat there for a long time, waiting.

I told my

brother I was hungry and to tell the police that I wanted to get something to eat at a store next door. They said sure, so I went to the store and asked to use the phone. Then I called my house.

A man answered the phone, and I could hear a lot of male voices in the background. So I said, "May I speak to my mother?" He said, "Who's your mother?" When I told him, he hung up. So I called again and said, "Where's my mother?" I felt our house had been robbed, and I wanted to know what was happening. He replied that my mother was out, and that she would be "back tomorrow". Then he hung up the phone again.

I went back to my brother and whispered: "We're being robbed again! They broke into our home again. We're being robbed right now. I heard men's voices, and I know that we are being robbed." So in my little eleven-year-old mind, that's what I thought was happening. We had been robbed before, and this is what it sounded like to me.

Alain remembers...

Louie then drove us from the police station to his father Nicolas's house, which was about ten minutes from ours. Nicolas was a childhood friend of my father and at the time was

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about fifty years old. Nicolas and my father grew up in the same town in Colombia, in Amaga. Nicolas had recently moved down from New York and was doing business with my father. I liked Nicolas and his wife, Blanca, and their two sons, Johnny and Louie. But on this day, June 9, 1982, I felt uncomfortable being there because months earlier my sister and I had witnessed a confrontation between my mother, Nicolas and my father in our kitchen. I'll never forget Nicolas telling my mother that if it weren't for my father's presence he would hit her. My mother responded by saying go ahead and try it, that she would kill him if he did. To this day I don't know what that confrontation was all about, but I was shocked that my father hadn't defended my mother and just stood there allowing his old friend to make that threat.

On arriving at Nicolas's house, I saw my cousin, Juan, my mother's nephew. I hadn't seen Juan in months because of a dispute he'd had with my mother as well. Juan was ten years older than me and had been living with us for the past three years. My mother had brought Juan to the US in 1978 to start helping around the house. He was about five feet ten inches and weighed 175 pounds. He and I were very close. He was a masculine kid and loved the girls. It was Juan who introduced me to weight training, and to the martial arts—in particular, Taekwondo—as well as to boxing, not to mention rock n' roll music.

I remember asking my mother to buy me my first record, which was by Ted Nugent, and listening to Wango Tango and Cat Scratch Fever, which were hits back in the early 1980s. I'm grateful to Juan for introducing me to all of these things. Today I still practice martial arts, but when I think back on those days with him, I marvel at the violence. Juan and I would be fighting all the time. We would hit each other hard, throwing body shots. I was just eleven and he was nineteen, so I was taking some heavy blows until one of us ran, usually me.

I remember when I was ten years old I got into a pissing match with five kids across the canal. I was talking to a girl that was on the other side of the canal, and those kids didn't want me talking to her. So I told them to go screw themselves.

I had my best friends with me, Lewis King and Scott. Lewis and Scott were my classmates since the third grade at R.R. Moton, prior to starting at Perrine Baptist Academy Private School. Scott was a white kid with blond hair. Lewis was a Black kid from a lower income neighborhood. I remember going to visit him once at his home and

remembered how familiar it was, and how recently my own family had lived on welfare back in Brooklyn.

So while we were arguing with these guys across the canal, my sister came out. I was telling them to jump in the canal, and then to swim across so we could fight. They were telling us to jump into the canal and do the same. One of them called my sister ugly. That raised the stakes. He had said something disrespectful to my sister, so we really got into it. I took my insults up a notch. They finally had heard enough and jumped into the canal and started to make their way across.

My friends and I ran into my house, and I went into my father's room to get a gun, his .357 Magnum. Scott went into the kitchen to get a knife. And Lewis King went into my bedroom and came out with a baseball bat. Nicolas, who was at our house at the time, stopped us at the door. "What the hell is going on here?" he asked. We were all ten years old, and this was insane. So we did not fight those kids with guns and knives and a baseball bat. We did not fight them at all. At least, not yet.

About six months later, I saw one of the kids on the other side of the canal again. We started fighting again, with words. Juan pulled up in his Camaro and I said, "Brother, please, drive me over there. I gotta kick this kid's ass." Juan refused, but I begged him, and he finally agreed to do it and said that he would drive me to the other side of the canal. It took fifteen minutes to get over to the other side. I was finally face to face with this poor kid giving him what I felt at the time he deserved. The dispute was over.

Nella remembers...

Upon arriving at Nicolas's house we were surprised to see our cousin Juan, since we had not seen him since his argument with our mother a few months earlier. Juan and my brother immediately reunited and went downstairs to practice martial arts with nunchucks. I suppose our cousin Juan was keeping Alain busy, killing time. I can remember Nicolas's wife, Blanca, kept wanting to feed us and I told her that I didn't want to eat. Blanca was a fair skinned woman in her 40's with a slender frame and dark medium length hair. She was nice, caring to us. She liked to cook and tend to her family. I could tell she was a loving mother. I think she wanted us to eat and wouldn't let us watch TV because, I realize now, what had happened at the house was shown on the local news. I said that I wanted

to speak to my dad.

When my father finally called, I immediately got on the phone and asked, "Where's Mami?" He said, "I'm here in the hospital with her. She's just very nervous." I replied, "Let me talk to her because I can calm her down. I know how to calm her down. Just put Mami on the phone."

He told me no, because he would be on his way home with her shortly. "You can talk to her when we get home," he said. So we waited. He finally arrived around 8 pm, and when he came up the stairs he was wearing white and blue striped pants. I looked behind him searching for my mother, but there was no sign of her. Then I just saw the look on my father's face. Everything in my body went suddenly on alarm.

My father said, "Alain, Bianella, and Juan, step into the master bedroom." We followed. I sat at the edge of the bed. My cousin Juan was standing behind our father. Alain was sitting beside me on the bed. My father said, "You know, we've been robbed many times in the past. Today some bad men went into the house, and they killed Kiko." Then, in the same breath he followed with, "and they killed Mami."

I was just in shock when I heard that. I felt like he had thrown a bucket of ice cold water all over me.

Everything was just surreal. I looked to my left, at my brother, who had risen, and was pacing and punching the wall, but he didn't cry. He never cried. I was just taking it all in. And then I started screaming. I remember yelling at my father and saying, "I don't believe you. I don't believe you until I see her myself. I think that you've kidnapped us. You just won't leave her. You kidnapped us. And you have her somewhere."

I had only seen him cry once before in his life, which was when his mother died. At that moment, when I said that to him, tears were coming down his face. This meant to me that what he had told us was all true.

Then Blanca came up to me with a glass of water and a pill. She said, "Take this pill, it will calm you." I was so angry. I looked at her and I said, "Absolutely not. There's no pill in the world that can take this pain away." That set the tone of who I am today. Strength was born in that moment.

My next memory is of us calling Kiko's family back in Colombia to give them the horrible news. It was Juan and not my father who called. I watched as Alain stood

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next to Juan as he was telling them about the murders, but still, no tears came from my brother's eyes. I sat and watched his demeanor and couldn't understand his lack of tears. I realize now that my wounded brother was hiding in a safe place, one from which he would emerge thirty-five years later.

On the phone, Juan told our relatives that a tragedy had occurred, that Maruja and Kiko had been killed. We heard a scream and the call dropped, and Juan had to call again. My poor uncle's family, my cousins, were howling in horror at the news, and my heart ached as I watched and listened to the conversation. Staring at them all. Wondering why my brother was not in tears, too.

Later that night, some police detectives came over and asked us some questions. My father was probably a suspect, because if there's a murder of a wife, husbands are high on the suspect list.

Afterward my brother and I went into one of the other bedrooms at Nicholas's house. We were just thinking, "Okay, so what happens to us now?" We were then told that we were going to the house of Yesenia, who was our father's youngest sister.

Back inside the house we caught a glimpse of the local news. We saw the front of our house surrounded by yellow tape and we saw our uncle lying dead in the front yard, covered with a white sheet with his feet sticking out. His feet are what I remembered seeing last, on the drive to school.

As we were making our exit, a car pulled up, and the housekeeper, Gloria, was inside it.

She got out of the car, and she grabbed us. And she said, "Oh my God. Your mother, your mother, her screams... she screamed." I imagined my mother screaming and I knew this nightmare was all true.

I remember arriving at Yesenia's house and seeing our cousins and Aunt Lucero all together. I just remember wanting to be in my home, in my own bed and not here. Our mom was not close to Yesenia, who was cold to our mother. So when our mother died, the last place I wanted to be was with the people that were not close to my mom. Our mom was very warm and affectionate. She would hug us., and she was very affectionate with us. Our mom and our aunts were not very close, and I didn't feel comfortable with them. I found them to be cold and narrow minded.

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Aunt Yesenia was the youngest of six in my father's family. She was a heavy-set woman with light olive skin and dark, straight, silky hair. She hardly ever looked happy, usually with a frown on her face. Very opinionated and judgmental and her tone was always harsh and angry. But she loved Alain. She would smile and hug him. Always raving about his looks – so handsome – the son of her much adored oldest brother. She herself had four kids, three boys and a girl. I love all my cousins and out of respect for them I'll just say that my aunt was a narrow minded, uneducated woman whom I did not trust. And I didn't want to be in her house.

Our mother died on Wednesday, June 9, 1982, at 9 AM, and on Thursday we were taken from my aunt's home, back to ours by our father to pick out the clothes for the viewing of my mother's body. As we walked into that house, the smell of death was everywhere. There was blood on the walls and floor in our foyer. This is where our Uncle Kiko had been standing when the two murderers walked in. We could follow the blood trail as it led to the garage where we could see the garage door with the five bullet holes in it. As I opened the door, I could see my uncle's bloody handprint on the garage push-button .

We were then taken by our father to the entrance of the master bedroom where Alain remembers our father asking, “Are you sure you want to go inside?” When he opened the door, I could see the outline of our mom's body laid out in the position of her death, with her blood still visible on the light blue carpet. There were two large circular blood stains where she had lain dead the day before. It was so lifeless inside our home, where just a couple of nights earlier we had been laughing with our mother and uncle, just acting as any eleven-year-old kid would act as the school year was coming to an end and summer was in the air.

So I picked out my mother's clothes. It was the same outfit we had given her for her thirty-ninth birthday on February 4, 1982: an ivory skirt suit with a lilac blouse. Then I walked to my room and saw my stuffed animals torn apart and my dollhouse thrown on the floor. With every step I took I felt sick and years later asked, “How could my father take my brother and me to a house where my mother and uncle had just been murdered, with blood stains still visible everywhere—on the floors, walls and doors?”

On Friday, June 11, the funeral home suggested to my father that they should

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have a closed casket for our mother's service. Our father decided to turn this decision over to us, two eleven-year-olds. My brother and I walked into the room where both caskets lay next to each other. Our father opened Kiko's casket, showing us his massacred face and body.

We immediately decided that the children and adults waiting outside should not see our uncle like this. Our mother, on the other hand, looked beautiful, although you could see the bullet entries on the right side of her cheek. I remember Alain was holding me up because my knees buckled when I saw her lifeless body.

Looking at my mother, I could see marks on her hands and on her face, but I was happy just to be holding her hand and just to be with her. Then I got on my knees and prayed, and I felt at peace with her.

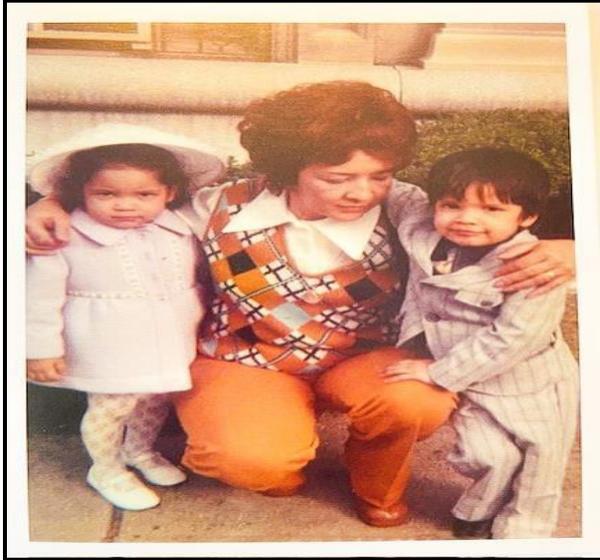
On Saturday, June 12, 1982, the day of my mother's funeral, I learned a great lesson. The funeral director said to us, "Okay, you have ten minutes, and then we're going to close the casket." I was thinking, "What has he said?" He just told me I had only ten minutes with my mother. I would not see my mother for the rest of my life. He had no idea how hard and cruel that was to hear.

Eighteen years later I would become a nurse, and share with the nurses a great lesson, one I learned then. So, to this very day, with my patients and with my labor room nursing sisters, I share that we're never going to rush our patients when they are saying goodbye to their loved ones. They can say goodbyes for as long as it takes them to do so. It's very important that they have their closure, and not be rushed.

At that moment, I just held onto every millisecond of those ten minutes, holding my mother's hands and kissing her. I stayed with her until the casket was closed. It felt like a terrible dream, the ride to the cemetery in a limousine escorted by police. As they laid her in the ground, I felt like a black curtain had come down around me. Everything went black, as if to say to me "that little girl has died" too.

I later learned in therapy the little girl had not died. I succeeded in becoming the woman I envisioned but now it was time to go back and rescue this little girl from the dark abyss of my unconscious. I needed to find that girl and comfort her, and unite her with me, which I've done. But that's the day that the little girl in me died for a very long time. And my mother and uncle were gone forever.

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1973, Brooklyn, NY: Nella and Alain age three, in their Sunday best, with their mother. Ivette, Alain's wife, loves this picture because you can tell by Nella's unhappy face that Alain got away with something!



1977, Brooklyn: Nella with her mother.



Brooklyn, 1975: Studio shot of the twins at age five. Alain still remembers those Buster Brown shoes.

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1975: A happy day in Brooklyn: their mother, Maruja, is laughing and hugging her twins on their birthday.



1977, Miami, Florida: Nella and Alain, age 7, with their mother.



1977: Young Alain at lunch in Coral Gables with Luz and Maruja.

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Florida, 1978: Little Nella hugs her Uncle Kiko.

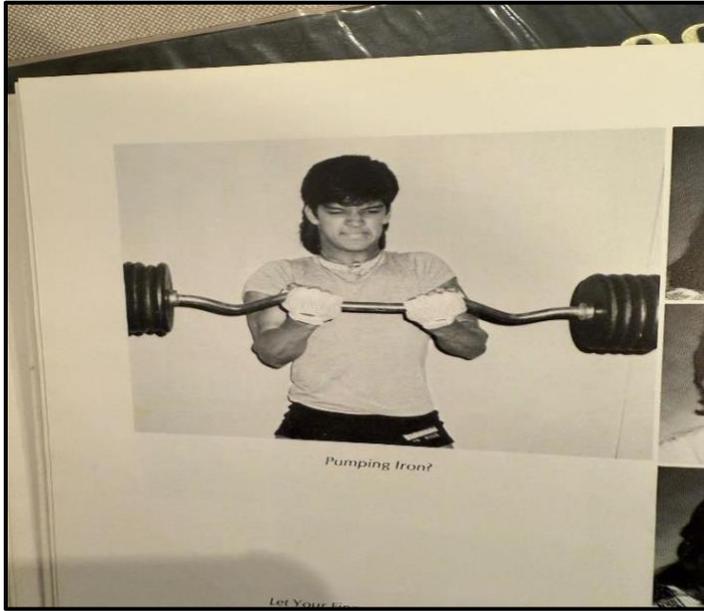


February 4, 1982: Nella and Alain with their mother on her last birthday. She loved the color lilac, her favorite, and she is in an outfit the twins bought for her, which they had her buried in.



May 1982: Maruja in Miami with Mother's Day flowers in her home one month before she was killed.

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Florida, 1984: school year book. Alain has always been into sports and fitness. Here is Alain, age 13, pumping iron.



In that same year book of 1984, this is the picture Alain saw of Ivette, his future wife.

CHAPTER 2: Beginning

Nella remembers...

I'll start this part of my story by going back to this memory of being a child in New York. Our family had two apartments. Alain and I lived in one with our mother in Brooklyn, and my father lived in an apartment in Queens. When you're a kid, you don't know why this is, you only know that's what it is.

We later learned that our father, who had met our mother in a linen factory in Medellin, Colombia, was married to Estela, a woman who was unable to conceive a child. Our mother was the mistress whom he romanced with love letters and secret dates over the years. He was ambitious and obtained a visa to the United States, looking for a better life. I remember him always telling us the story of arriving in New York City with thirteen dollars in his pocket and taking a cab that charged him eight dollars, which left him with five dollars to start a new life in the Big Apple.

He went on to work in a garment district and brought Estela to New York, followed by our mother. Our father, although a hard worker, was also a hard drinker and a very abusive man who assaulted women and children verbally, physically and emotionally. So, because he was married to Estela, our mother lived alone in Brooklyn, and my father would visit her.

I never met Estela. I first knew of her when I was twelve years old after our mother died. I did see a picture of her: she was tall and thin, with fair skin and short hair. My aunts told me that she and my father had dated for a long time and that he had left her at the altar more than once. He would be found in the bar drinking. My father told me the year he died that he had run into her in passing and they exchanged looks. He shared with me his surprise to see her.

As the affair continued, our mother became pregnant with us twins, and Estela decided it was time to leave. After he hit her and broke her arm, she finally did. She left him and took with her his savings of \$7,000, which he grieved until the day he died—the lost money, that is, not the vanished wife. If you ask me, the smartest thing Estela

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did was to leave our father.

I remember one day we went to our father's apartment in Queens with our mother. Our father opened the door, but he wouldn't open it all the way. He had the chain hooked in. Our mother yelled at him to open the door.

When he finally opened the door, I looked to my left and saw a young woman with long dark hair sitting on the sofa. I saw a round coffee table full of red and white Budweiser beer cans. We could hear music on the radio blaring out as well.

I remember seeing my mother being upset as they continued to argue in the bedroom. I then saw my brother walking over to the young woman and sitting on her lap and asking, "Are you my daddy's girlfriend?" I don't remember what she said. I just remember standing in the middle of this scene taking it all in.

Our mother was very upset, and then she just grabbed us by our hands, and we left. We went back to our own apartment in Brooklyn, and I remember my mother smoking a cigarette and shaking. She would cross her legs and shake her foot in anxiety, while she was smoking and crying. And I just remember taking that all in, too, and it fuels my anger and my sadness today to have seen our mother suffering like that.

The next memory I have is seeing our father coming into our Brooklyn apartment as if everything was normal. But it wasn't normal. I remember our mother holding a raw piece of steak to cover the bruise on her eye, because our father had beaten her earlier that day. He was abusive to her and to us as well. I remember him beating my brother for wetting the bed, or many times, for no reason at all. He was a very angry man, our father, and he was very scary to me as a little girl.

My father was born in Amaga, a small town outside of Medellin, Colombia. He had a very limited education, only going to school until the fourth grade. He told us he repeated the fourth grade because the school said that they would be adding a fifth grade the following year. The school did not follow through with their plan, so our father's school education ended the second time he repeated the fourth grade. We also know that he entered into the military, which is mandatory in Colombia. The Colombian Army is big, the third largest in the Americas after the United States, with a long history of fighting against guerrilla groups and drug traffickers.

I remember my father was about five feet seven inches tall with olive skin and

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straight jet black hair. He had a sturdy build, with broad shoulders. His ancestry was mixed Spanish and indigenous South American. He was a very serious man who didn't smile much.

My mother was slightly shorter than him, with a medium build and very fair-skinned, like honey. Her hair was curly, but you wouldn't know because she would blow dry it into a wave. She always dyed it brown with blonde highlights. She kept it pretty short most of the time. Her ancestry came from a mixture of Spanish and African people, specifically from Cameroon. Our mother had a very different personality from my father's. She laughed a lot and always had a smile on her face when she looked at you. She was kind and caring with the most beautiful honey-colored eyes, just like my brother has.

My twin brother looks a lot like my dad, except Alain is much taller at five feet eleven inches and in much better shape, thanks to his weight training. I'm petite, at five feet one inch, and I have olive skin with black curly hair, which I got from my mother.

When I think about our mother's family, I remember there were six children. Our mom, Maria de Los Angeles, was the youngest. John, the brother closest in age to our mother, was stabbed to death five months before my brother and I were born. Our mother was pregnant with us when she learned the news. John, who was already a father of five children, had been having an affair with a younger woman. The woman's father and brother had found out about it and killed him in February 1970. Violence was always around us, even before we were born.

Our mother was very nurturing and loving. She was very social, and she had friends in the neighborhood. I had my twin brother, who was my main playmate. I played with his soldiers, and his Superman and Batman dolls, and he played teacups with me. I would pretend I was serving him tea, but on one occasion I served him nail polish remover instead, acetone, as I painted my lips with nail polish so the gloss would last longer. I remember Alain drinking the acetone in the teacup, then running into the kitchen screaming. I could see my mother pouring sugar in his mouth as he passed out. Another memory is of us playing with the dead mice in our apartment. Those were some of our fun playtimes in Brooklyn.

School is where I got my name "Bibi". My brother calls me Nella, but my name

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is Bianella. The nuns and teachers back then could not pronounce my name, so one teacher said, "Can I call you Bibi?" I could not say no, and so my name became "Bibi".

I also remember walking with my brother to school, which was down the street from where we lived. We attended a Catholic school in Flatbush, Brooklyn. Every day the nuns who taught us would stamp a card with an angel or a devil on it to send it home with us as a reflection on how we had done. My brother on most days would get stamped with a devil and I would get the angel. In those days they would give girls a pink card and boys a green card. So I would get an angel on a pink card and Alain would get a green card with a devil on it which our mother would stick on the refrigerator. I can recall being very happy with my stamp, and very happy to share my pink angel with our mother, but my brother would convince me not to show it to her.

"You can't show her that or she'll ask where's mine?" he said. "And she'll see my devil stamp." So we would bury the little angel and little devil in the snow, and off we went.

Across the street from the apartment was a vacant lot where we used to play. We'd play with caterpillars and try to race them. My brother and I have always been very close as fraternal twins. We could always find a way to make our own fun, sometimes out of thin air.

We needed each other and we had each other's backs since our father was so abusive and hurtful to us, both verbally and physically. He would beat us with his belt, leaving welts on our skin; but the words he said were even more horrific. I remember a couple of times he said he would shoot Alain three times in the head. Those words never leave you. Our father was a very troubled soul.

It was in the mid 1970s that the cocaine drug trade started to really take hold in the United States and the Medellin Cartel began to make its inroads. While we lived in Brooklyn, our parents started trafficking and selling cocaine. Our lives started to change financially, though we did not know why. We just knew that we went from being on "government assistance" to traveling in style to Medellin, Colombia to see our family for the first time in 1975. In a very short period of time my mother bought a home in Colombia for her mother, her sister Nubia and Nubia's daughters. Nubia's husband was a mechanic and died when a car he was working under collapsed on him, and she was

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left to bring up four daughters all under the age of twelve. My mother helped raise all of them financially and supported her sister Nubia.

The house in Colombia was in an urban section of Medellin called “Simon Bolivar”. My mother bought a four-storey house where my grandmother lived with Nubia, her daughters, and our aunt Luz's son Jorge, who had Down's Syndrome. The house was big and wrapped around the street corner, and had a lovely rose garden in the front with an iron fence surrounding it.

You'd go up ten steps to the front door, which was metal. Inside, you took three steps down to a living room, which was a formal area where visitors were welcomed with coffee and biscuits. Passing the foyer to the right was the kitchen, dining room and a courtyard patio where there were parrots and macaws that talked a lot.

The kitchen was my favorite place. It was here my Mamaria, my maternal grandmother, would make me fresh raspberry-blackberry smoothies. I now realized we were fed organic whole foods by our grandmother, as once, this led Mamaria to be so angry with my mom for feeding Alain what she said looked like dog food. “How can you feed him food in cans?” she asked. But it was Chef Boyardee! In the dining room we were served on a beautiful linen tablecloth with lovely china and tea sets. Our meals were always five course meals. There was coffee or hot chocolate, arepa with eggs, and fruits.

The money for the house, for everything, came from selling drugs. Our father was given the opportunity to join Fernando, to become his business partner in Miami, and to traffic cocaine from Medellin to Miami. Our father's intent was to leave us in Brooklyn and travel solo in Florida. However, Fernando, who was in his thirties, was in a relationship with my mother's niece Paloma, and insisted my father bring the family to Miami. Our cousin Paloma was a widow in her mid-twenties; her husband had died of a heart attack while playing a soccer game. Paloma had recently started her relationship with Fernando and was living with him in Coral Gables, Florida.

We moved from Brooklyn to Miami in 1977, when I was seven. We moved into an apartment building with an elevator and a community pool. In Brooklyn, we had no elevator or pool, so we were ecstatic with our new Florida residence. It was here we met Fernando, the man in the drug business with our father. I always really liked him because he was very kind to us.

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Fernando, I remember, was of medium build with a slight belly. He had fair skin, and a receding hairline with dark brown wavy hair combed to the side. He was kind and smiled a lot at us. He was known to have a temper, yet I never saw this temper in action. Although he was a quiet man, I felt nothing but kindness come from him. He loved Paloma and she adored him.

I'm not sure how he got involved in the drug business, but I do know he was the one who had invited my father to work in Miami. I also remember hearing conversations revealing that my dad once had an affair with Fernando's sister. Fernando did not like my dad much. Later in my twenties, I was at Fernando's house having lunch and he shared how much he loved my mother and how kind she was. He told me he was very unhappy with my father's "behavior." I can still see him sitting at the head of the table telling me this, with much of the emotion of it being contained. In later years I understood better why this was so. It was just too painful.

For me, Fernando's treatment of us was noticeable because it was so different from how our father treated us. My only other exposure to an older man was with my father, who used to beat us. So, for me, it was a revelation to see another man his age treating us with kindness. He gave me my first book. I was seven years old, and Fernando gave me a pop-up version of Cinderella. I just loved that book.

I remember getting on my knees and opening each page and being so mesmerized with the characters and the story in this book. To this day, my first best friends are my books. I love to read, and books are my comfort. That which I don't know, and where I have yet to go, I'll find through a book. So my first exposure to reading was my father's drug partner giving me that Cinderella book.

It was in Miami that my father became even scarier. I attribute that to the money he was earning, and to the power that he felt. He had the idea that he could keep becoming even bigger and even more powerful by committing crimes. He bought a larger car, a gold 1977 Lincoln Continental with his initials "OOZ" etched on both ends of the car.

We then moved from an apartment to a small house, and then we went to another house with a pool, and then to a bigger house with a pool. Our father was now wearing three-piece suits and we were going to expensive restaurants, things we didn't do back in New York.

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There were all these men around him and my father would speak to them like he was the godfather Don Corleone in that film, *The Godfather*, which first screened in 1972. It became his favorite movie. He would watch it over and over again. And would quote from it in Spanish. And he would show the film to us. He thought he was The Godfather.

However, unlike the Godfather of the film, who was kind and generous with his family, our father was not. In those early years, I remember my brother and I would be sleeping. I would always wake up because I could just sense when our father was beating our mother. One time I came out to the living room, and he was on top of her, punching her. When he saw me, he stopped and he got off of my mother.

He came to me and he asked, "Is it her fault or mine?" And I just looked at him and I couldn't speak. I was terrified. But I pointed to him. I remember putting my finger up and pointing at him. "It's you. It's your fault!" And then I walked over to our mother and gave her a hug.

My next memory was of our mother walking into our room with black garbage bags and putting all of our clothes into them, and then putting Alain and me in a car and driving us away. I was so happy. I thought we were finally leaving this house of pain.

We went to another house, and whose house it was I do not know, but I remember being so happy there. I don't even know if it was one day or one week that we stayed in that little house, but I was so happy because our father wasn't there to torment us. The fear he created was not there. My brother and I would play without worrying that we were going to be beaten for whatever our father thought we had done wrong.

I remember getting two slices of bread and putting ketchup in the middle, as I guess that's all we had in the fridge. I remember being happy eating that ketchup sandwich for lunch. And I was happy to see my mother sitting in a rocking chair outside on the porch, and just being with her. I recall sitting on that porch with my mother practicing my Spanish one day, and then all of a sudden, seeing our father's car pull up into the driveway. He was back in our lives, and so was the fear that came with him. He hauled us back to his house, and then things got even worse.

I remember one day being on the school bus with my brother, and my homework had fallen on the floor. The bus driver was still driving, so I just bent down to get it. The bus driver was concerned because I had to scramble under the seat to reach for it. When

she got to our bus stop, our mother was there to pick us up. The bus driver told my mom that I had gotten off the seat to pick up my homework papers. I wasn't afraid of our mother learning this. I mean, I dropped my homework, I picked it up, and that seemed like the thing to do. What's wrong with doing that?

The bus stop was right across from our house. So our father could see the bus driver speaking to our mother. When we walked into the house, our father asked her what happened. Before our mother could say anything, I told him what I had done to pick up my fallen homework. Suddenly, he grabbed me by the hair and started beating me up. He just grabbed me and just started hitting me and I peed myself. Then he took me to my bedroom and punched me in the face. And then I woke up in my bed. I figured he had knocked me out. We just never knew what was going to trigger him.

Alain remembers...

Remembering our father's wrath is something that causes me alarm to this day. I recall that in 1977, when we were already living in Miami, our family had gone to the Midway Shopping Mall. I was in Woolworths with my mother looking at some toys, about twenty feet from where she stood. I walked over to my mother to tell her where I would be, but at that moment she was looking through a clothing rack and didn't hear me.

My father and sister were with my cousin Paloma, one of Aunt Nubia's four daughters. She was always very sweet and kind to us. So she and Nella and my father continued into the mall. I didn't realize that my mother had walked away from me to join my father. As they were all walking deeper into the mall, I walked back to the last spot I had left her. She was not there. That's when panic set in and I began to search for them.

I ran into the mall and I could not find my family. I ran into the parking lot where I thought the car would be, but I could not find our car, either. It was a big parking lot, so I decided to go back into the mall, and I ended up at JC Penny's. I remember a guard in a red coat at the entrance in front of an arcade, and he saw that I was crying. He asked me what was wrong, and I told him that I had lost my mother. So he took me to a booth inside the store, and they asked me for my mother's name. I told them that it was Maria Isabella Gomez. They called her name through a loudspeaker, repeatedly. Finally, I saw my mother coming with my sister to pick me up. I asked my mother if our father was angry

that I had become lost, and she said yes, he was upset.

I remember walking up to him to apologize. He was leaning on a trash can, and I said, "Papi, I'm sorry." I couldn't say it had been my mother's fault because she hadn't been paying attention to me. As I said my last word, my father stepped toward me and punched me in the stomach so hard that I fell on my ass and slid backwards six feet. He walked up to me, pointed his finger in my seven-year-old face like a tough guy, and said, "Wait till you get home". I just prayed on the ride home he would forget his last words to me.

He did not forget.

When we got back to our apartment, he began beating me with his belt, and then he picked me up with one hand on my hair and his other hand on my trousers. As my mother and sister watched, he threw me headfirst into the wall, breaking the drywall near the baseboard and making a head-sized hole. He never patched that hole; in fact, he would later use it as a place to hide drug money.

I remember in that same apartment, in the middle of the night, our cousin Paloma, who was in her mid-twenties at the time, came knocking at our apartment with her husband Fernando, my father's business partner, hidden behind her.

That night, I had been sleeping on the sofa bed because my Aunt Luz, who had also come up from Colombia, was sleeping in my bed. Luz was the oldest of six siblings in my mother's family and was in her forties at the time. She was petite with a very soft, high-pitched voice. She had short curly hair. She was a kind and loving mother of two boys, Oscar and Jorge, who had Down's Syndrome.

When my mother went to open the door, Fernando, who had been hiding behind Paloma, pushed Paloma through the door with a revolver in hand, asking for my father. He said, "Where is he? I'm going to kill him!"

I can very clearly see the terror on the faces of my mother, my Aunt Luz, and my sister, who had just run out of the bedroom and was now wrapped around Fernando's leg.

My sister was begging him, "Don't kill my dad!" I was frozen. In her panic, my sister was pleading with Fernando not to shoot our father. I, on the other hand, couldn't move a muscle, as I was watching a nightmare in live action.

My mother screamed to my father, "Don't come out!" He was hiding in his

bedroom, while his wife, daughter, and sister-in-law were in the dining area, attempting to save his life by trying to convince Fernando not to kill him. Eventually, my sister's screaming at Fernando snapped him out of his rage, and he and Paloma left the apartment.

What was it all about? Well, my father had slept with Fernando's brother's wife, his sister-in-law. Fernando felt betrayed by my father's action and wanted to kill him. Had my father been the one to open the front door that night, many lives would have been changed. And that change would quite likely have been for the better.

Nella remembers...

When we moved from our first house to a bigger house, our father decided to christen it by giving us another beating. He had a domino set, in a wooden box. On this particular weekend he discovered that seven domino pieces were missing. He asked my brother and me where they were. My brother told him that Larry, our cousin, was the last one to play with the dominoes. I liked Larry and his brother Kevin. They were sweet boys and the sons of Aunt Lucero, my father's sister, and her husband Roberto.

Our father, who had been drinking, proceeded to tell us that he was going to beat us as he walked toward his bedroom to get his belt. Alain followed him and continued to beg him not to hit us but, as he realized his efforts were fruitless, he walked over to the kitchen to wait for the inevitable beating. I watched as our father arrived with his belt and began to beat Alain. Our mother attempted to get in to save Alain, but our father warned her to stay away, or he would beat her as well.

As our father was beating Alain with his leather belt, the belt split in two, which earned my brother a second beating for tearing my father's belt. I ran frantically to the garage and hid behind the refrigerator. I waited, praying for my father to calm down and not beat me, too. I prayed in vain as I saw my father enter the garage and reach for a beer. I came out of hiding and tried to tell him that we had nothing to do with the missing dominoes. He responded by beating me so badly that my next memory was my mother pulling my shirt up and counting the bruises. And I remember her counting fourteen bruises all over my back and my chest. I felt so sore from this terrible beating. I was eight years old.

We were living in this same house in 1978 when I went with Aunt Luz and my

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mother to the Omni Hotel. My father was at home playing tango music, which was one of his few hobbies. Our cousin Juan was also at home, and Alain was two houses down from where we lived, at our neighbor David's house. David was an eight-year-old kid who lived with both his parents and two sisters who were 12 and 14. My brother had met them riding his bike around the block.

Later on we were told by Juan and my father that when Juan had heard the doorbell ring, he looked through the peephole and saw several policemen at the door. He told my father what he saw, and my father said to let them in.

So seven men dressed as Miami Police officers in dark blue uniforms invaded the house. One of them, a Spanish speaking man, proceeded to tell my father that they were not police at all, but that they had come for the diamonds. My father told them that he had no knowledge of any diamonds. Another man grabbed Juan and put him on his knees with a pillowcase over his head and threatened my father; he had to tell them where the diamonds were, or he would blow Juan's brains out.

As the rest of the men searched throughout the house, I arrived home with my mother and Aunt Luz. I could see a red Camaro with no license plate parked out in front. As I jumped out of our car, I ran to open the door of our home, but our mother stopped me and then rang the doorbell. A male voice from within the house said, "Go in through the back." Our mother said, "No. Where's Alain?" The man said that he was not there, but our mother did not believe him. Our father called out from inside and said, "He's not here. He's okay. But come through the back."

So we went around back, with me leading and our mother right behind me. We had a screened swimming pool and patio area in this big house. So, as I went to open the screen door, our mother pulled me back. "Don't go in," she said.

We stood there at the doorway, and inside I saw four men, all dressed in dark blue uniforms. I remember one was tall and thin, and he was the one who spoke to our mother, telling her to come inside. Our father was there, and so was our cousin Juan. Our father was pleading with her to just come inside, but our mother refused. "Where is Alain?" she asked. She was scared.

I suddenly remembered that Alain had gone to David's house, around the corner. So we took off, running to look for him there. We were frantic thinking that Alain might

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not be there, either. Our mother and I burst into the kitchen at David's home, with my mother picking up the phone in the kitchen to call our father at our house to tell him that Alain was missing. Alain was, in fact, playing with match cars in David's bedroom when he heard the screaming in the kitchen. Alain and David ran in to find my mother telling my father to get Alain out of the house as she thought he was still there. It sounded as if my father was telling her to come back, that the men had just left. My brother walked in asking, "Mami, what's happening" and my mother was relieved to see Alain safe and sound.

So my brother, our mother, our Aunt Luz and I all went back to the house, entering through the back patio. I could see that my father's head was bleeding and that his shirt was unbuttoned and that Juan's eyes were bloodshot. I heard my father say to our mother, "They took everything."

The men in the police uniforms had taken out the drawers from our chests; clothes were spread out on the floor, as well as the jewelry. We had been robbed. I later found out from Alain that my father had told him he had \$1,450,000 in cash from drug money in the house. \$400,000 was my dad's profit, \$450,000 was that of my father's partner Jaime Wilis, and \$600,000 was to be shipped back to Colombia.

At the time, I thought we were lucky to have survived the home invasion; however, we still felt unsafe. As our dad grew in power and money, so did our exposure to violence.

After this home invasion my father moved us to a rental home near Coral Way and SW 97th Avenue. I remember it also had a pool, and Alain and I spent a lot of time in it, swimming and just enjoying being in the water.

Payback for his crimes kept coming back at our father. On the night of April 10, 1979, Alain and I were watching TV in the living room when five men arrived at the house to speak to our father. We were later told that these men were there to warn our father of a robbery and that they wanted to be paid off for the tip. My father told Alain years later that he had told the men to leave the house, and that there would be no payoff.

Later that same night, Alain and I were now watching TV in our bedroom. We were watching a Western, *The Legend of the Golden Gun*, which aired on ABC on April 10, 1979. It stars a young Hal Holbrook and it's about a farm boy who takes revenge

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against those who murdered his parents. Our mother walked into our room to tell us to turn off the TV before our dad came home, since we had gone past our bedtime.

Shortly after, we saw car lights pull into our driveway. We thought it was our dad coming home and we turned the TV off. In reality, we later were told by our father that our mother had left to pick up \$50,000 at the nearby Sedano's Market, one of a chain of Florida-based supermarkets. The car lights were the five men who had showed up earlier coming back. Our father was already home when the five men returned to finish the home invasion, tying everyone up in the home. Which included my cousin Juan, and a friend of the family, Gabriel.

Gabriel was the brother of one of our mother's close friends, Betty. I'm not sure why Gabriel stayed with us but do remember he lived with us for a short while. I remember Gabriel, who was in his late twenties, being a nice and funny man. He was thin, with olive skin, short hair and a strong jawline. I now believe he was a drug-user. I remember once seeing him sweating profusely in the car and acting strange – he was probably high as a kite. I think he worked with my dad in the drug business.

Our mother, after picking up the \$50,000 at Sedanos's supermarket, pulled into the driveway in her gold Trans Am. As she got out, she could see our father being held in a chokehold by one of the men inside the house. Our dad pleaded for her to come inside, which she refused to do. She demanded to have her children taken out of the house. My father asked her again, “Maruja, if you don't come inside they are going to kill me.”

Our mother left the \$50,000 in the car and stepped inside the house. My brother and I were still awake in our bedroom and heard the voices. Alain quickly told me to turn around and to pretend that we were sleeping. I then saw one of the men in a blue three-piece suit with a cigar in his hand open the door slightly and walk into our bedroom, checking in on us. I remember trying to keep my breathing even and still while my heart pounded loudly in my ears. As he walked out, I could see Juan and Gabriel sitting on the floor out in the hallway with their hands bound behind them.

Minutes later the man walked back into our room and when he opened the door we could see our mother now sitting in the hallway leading to the bathroom with her hands tied behind her back. We then saw her spit on the man's face as we heard the beating my father was getting in the next bedroom. This man in the three-piece suit walked out again

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from our room, and our fear gave way to extreme fatigue, and we fell fast asleep.

The following morning we awoke and, as we walked into the living room, we found our parents speaking to each other. Our father had a black eye from the pistol whipping that he took the night before. My father later told Alain that the home invaders took ten kilos of cocaine and \$150,000 in cash. He continued to tell Alain that the robbers had been sent by the realtor who rented us the house.

I remember another time when my brother and I walked in on our parents and other members of the family who were counting mounds of cash in the master bedroom. I also remember the laundry room countertops full of white powder, lit by lamps. I asked what the white powder was for, and our mother told us we had a bakery in Medellin and that we made cakes. Our father had several businesses, two gas stations, five video rental stores, and a flower shop. So a bakery was nothing out of the ordinary. Let's make some cakes, why not!

I also remember my mom driving down Old Cutler Road, a scenic ride we took every day to and back from school. Old Cutler Road remains very dear to my heart. It is full of banyan trees that hover over the road and ringed with wealthy homes of different styles, colonial, Spanish and farmhouse. It is a road where you see joggers and cyclists, and between the homes are these wise, old banyan trees. I cannot afford to live in these homes, but they are always beautiful to see.

I was my mother's confidant, and she would share much of her heartache with me while she drove, which took me out of the role of being her little girl into that of a grownup, even though I was very much not a grownup. My mother would tell me never to believe in a man. She said, "Don't believe him when he tells you pretty things so you will sleep with him. When you wake up in the morning you will regret sleeping with him."

At that point, I was only ten years old. I didn't understand what "sleep with him" meant. I was puzzled. How could just sleeping next to a person make them a liar? She continued, telling me that men, in her experience, will tell you what you want to hear to get what they want. I just stayed quiet and listened to her. I knew she was talking about our father.

She would listen to a song that I knew our father had dedicated to her when they

were dating. It was called “*Frente a una Copa de vino*” by Luisito Rey, also known as “King Luisito”, who was a very popular singer in his homeland of Spain. His songs were hits in America, Mexico and Argentina in the 1960s and 1970s. She sobbed as she drove and sang along:

“Frente a una copa de vino yo me rio de mi” (In front of a glass of wine, I laugh at myself) Me da una pena tan grande.. Que me tengo que reir” (It makes me so sad .. I have to laugh) Y al espejo me mire (And I looked in the mirror) / Y me he dicho para mí (And I have said to myself) / Y me he dicho para mí (And I have said to myself) / (With this guy and no money) / ¿Quién me va a querer a mí? (Who is going to love me?)”

I wondered why she hadn't just left him. Why stay with a scary man who was always so angry and quick to beat all of us?

I look back on that night and realize that this was the beginning of the end. I was in my room at the time. My brother was in his room sleeping when I heard our parents arguing. I listened carefully, and I heard my mother say to my father, “Tell me where she is. Tell me where she is. Because even if I find her sitting in a church, I will kill her.”

Doris was one of Aunt Nubia's daughters, my mother's niece, and had been one of my favorite cousins growing up. As a little girl, I thought she was the prettiest of them all. Tall and thin, she had fair skin and long, thick hair styled like the actress Farah Fawcett, in a feathered cut. As a child I thought she was cool. She wore makeup and pretty dresses, and she would give in to my wants. For example, my ears were pierced and she gave me a second piercing with ice and a needle. She would take me along to hang out with her boyfriend on a motorcycle, Carlos. As a little girl I loved her very much. She was my Godmother for confirmation.

After Mom and Kiko died, I was not allowed to have contact with my mother's family except with Doris, who was now my stepmother. So I was thrilled to have some part of my mother's family with me. Once living together under one roof with Alain, I was very much attached to her. She was very influential in my teenage years. She herself was young and so we were more like friends. Being young and foolish herself, she did not give good advice about boys and I made stupid decisions based on her advice. As I got older and made my own friends, I realized she was not in line with my values. Lorena, Jean, Lupe, Edith and Irene all were my pillars of light. I thank God for placing them in

my life and guiding my path. I will tell you more about them later.

Little did my mother know that Doris, who was now twenty-one, was staying at our father's sister Octavia's house in Medellin—and that she was eight months' pregnant with his child.

I remember my eleven-year-old brain thinking, “Why is my mother saying that she would kill somebody in church, the most sacred place?” I ran to wake up my brother and told him that they were fighting. He said, “Wake me up if he hits her.”

At this point, my brother had grown from a little boy to suddenly a pubescent male, and he was the tallest kid in his class. So I kept listening to them fighting until I heard our father's jewelry rattle. When I heard that, I knew he was hitting her because his bracelets would rattle when he made contact with her face.

So I went back to my brother, “He's hitting her! He's hitting her!” Alain jumped out of his bed, threw the blanket across the room, and stormed into the living room where my father was on top of our mother, punching her. Again, I was standing there as my father looked at me while he was beating our mother. Then, my brother ran towards him and kicked him off her, then pushed him. My father fell backwards.

Our father just stared at us, then yelled at our mother and blamed her. “Look what you've done! Now they hate me.” Our mother was so distraught, seeing Alain hitting our father. Then my brother said to him, “You're never touching her again. *Never touching her again.*” And he stood in front of our mother. Our mother told our father, “You see, Alain is getting bigger, and you can't do this to me anymore.” From that moment, I think my father realized that he was seeing a young man who was not going to let him hurt us anymore.

My father left a scar on our mother's cheek from that night, from the gold and diamond rings on his hands. I later remember seeing that scar on her cheek as she lay in her casket. But that night, I told my mother, again, “Please, pack your stuff and let's leave.” She said no, not now, but that she would think about it in the morning. And I said, “You always say that, and you don't ever go. We just have to do it now.” So I went into my room, got a suitcase, and I packed my clothes. I grabbed my Bible. We were attending a private school that gave each student a Bible. It was important to me, and I put it in the suitcase.

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“Now!” I said. “We have to leave now.” And she said no. So we stayed.

As the days passed, the intensity of my father's anger grew. A few days after the incident where Alain confronted my father, Alain and I were hiding in the family room, listening to our parents arguing in my father's office. We heard our father say, “Because of you, the kids don't call me when I'm in Colombia.”

It was then that Alain jumped up and walked from the family room, across the kitchen, and barged into his office. “That's not true. Mami always tells us to call you. But we don't want to talk with you.” At this moment, my mother sensed the energy shifting and stood behind Alain as my father rose from his chair to confront Alain. He said, “*Entonces que huevon? Me vas a pegar o que.*” Meaning, “So what now, punk, you gonna hit me?”

Alain lifted his right arm back, ready to throw a punch at my father when my mother stopped him by catching his arm. Mom said, “You see! This can't continue. Alain is growing up.”

Alain said to our father, “I told you already, you're not touching my mom.” Our father realized at that moment that my brother was truly a force against him. Alain was becoming braver, as “fear plus action equals courage” was the equation fueling him. That was a victory over our father in itself. Our father backed off. Or so we thought.

One day soon after, I went to see our father, who was sitting at his desk in his office. I sat across from him, as if he were an executive interviewing me for a job. My leg was shaking because I was so nervous, so I put a hand on my leg to stop the shaking. I said to our father, “Can you please divorce my mother?” He looked at me in astonishment, and said no. So I continued, “Why? You don't love us; you don't need us. Why can't you just leave her? Divorce her and let her go.”

His response astonished me. “I do not believe in divorce.”

I was deflated. There I had summoned the courage to go to him and ask him to leave her, but he would not free us because he did not believe in divorce. Yet he did believe in beating his wife and children.

It was perhaps a couple of weeks before my mother died when I noticed that she had started to change. She had started to get stronger. She picked me up from school, and she said, “Nella, you're never going to believe this, but I finally did it.”

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“What did you do?” I asked. She answered me in Spanish: “I don't love your father anymore. And today I tried to kill him. We were arguing in our bathroom, and he spit on my face, so I grabbed the gun, and he ran around the house. I ran after him with the .357 magnum that was in his nightstand. And I shot the gun. But, Nicolas, his old friend from Amaga, grabbed my hands just as I pulled the trigger, and the bullet went up into the bedroom ceiling.”

Sure enough, when I got home, I saw the bullet hole in the ceiling of the bedroom. My mother went on to tell me that he was still in his underwear running around the house when she fired the gun.

I knew that my father was going to be furious and humiliated because he ran from our mother in his underwear in front of his friend who was visiting that morning.

A couple of days passed and our mother said, “Well, I found an apartment, and we're leaving.” She said it was an apartment in Miami Beach. I was so happy to be leaving for anywhere, but especially a place with a sunny beach nearby. We were finally going to be free of him.

Even so, our mother continued in the cocaine business that my father had brought her into. I later learned she was a hothead in business—and ballsy, to say the least. I recall Alain and I being used as mules when we were eight years old to take money back to Medellin. On one occasion, he and I were running through the Miami International Airport. My mom cringed, calling after Alain when she saw a wad of cash peeking out from the bottom of his pant leg: “Don't run! Stay still, Alain!”

She took him into the bathroom to adjust the cash strapped around his legs. We both had stacks of money taped to our legs. I had another stack taped between my legs. I can still remember my legs throbbing and bleeding from how tight the money was taped.

We finally arrived at our big house in Medellin, with the rose garden out front and the talking parrots and macaws on the patio. But I recall laying in bed, waiting anxiously for Mami to cut the tape off me. To get the money off me. It was so painful. When she finally removed it, I could feel the blood rushing through my legs in relief.

As a mother of three myself now, I can't believe she agreed to do that; but then again, she did not learn how to say “No” to our father. The ability to say “No” was something that I most certainly did learn.

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Back at home, in Florida, I knew the time was getting close for my mom to leave our dad and start a new life. On one of our drives together I remember seeing a rainbow. She said, "Look at the beautiful colors God made that rainbow. Don't you forget that! You have to believe in God."

She then said, "Promise me that if something happens to me, you'll take care of Alain.

You won't let him get into drugs. Promise me you're going to finish school and become a doctor." I said, "Okay." And then she said something really troubling. "If something happens to me, go to Colombia and live with my sister, Nubia. I want you to promise me these things," she continued, and so I said okay.

Nubia was the closest to Mami. They shared secrets and were kindred spirits. I truly have only felt love from Nubia. When they were growing up and my mom began her affair with my dad, she would have Nubia cover for her because my grandparents were strict. When she followed him to New York, she shared the news of our births with Nubia and no one else.

Nubia was saved by my mom. Although she was the youngest, it was Mom who went to work so Nubia could stay home and help raise her daughters after her husband had passed away tragically. Nubia also stayed caring for both my grandparents, Mamaria and Papapacho. My mother would support them financially, sending money from the U.S.

My mother was murdered just a few days later, and the only promise I was able to keep was my faith in God. I did not go to Colombia to live with my aunt. I did not become a doctor. Instead, I became a nurse, and I'm very proud of that.

I also did not keep my brother out of drugs. That is a story to come.

Our mother was very religious: she went to Mass and prayed in church. She believed in God and the Virgin Mary and all the angels and saints, but she would also go to psychics and fortune tellers. And she would take us with her.

Not too long before she died, she went to see a *santera* named Modesta who read Tarot cards and was a psychic. I remember this fortune teller revealing to our mother that she needed to leave her husband, that she saw somebody watching our house. She told her she could see blood coming out of her head. Our mother was frightened.

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So then Modesta offered her a remedy to prevent this death that she had foreseen. Modesta's husband, who was her assistant, had a chicken and some flowers and rubbed both over all three of our bodies, then proceeded to lay the chicken on its side before pulling off the chicken's head. The bird was then put in a brown paper bag. I think the chicken was meant to prevent the tragedy. Our mother was instructed to take it and throw it in the middle of a railroad track and not look back.

Our mother drove across a railroad track on Killian Parkway near Dixie Highway and threw the bag with the chicken in it onto the tracks. We were also instructed not to look back when the bag was left on the railroad track. My curiosity forced me to look back.

That haunted me for a very long time. In the Bible, Genesis 19, Lot's wife is commanded by angels not to look back when Lot and his family are fleeing the sinful cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Lot's wife disobeys this command and she looks back, and in doing so, she becomes a pillar of salt. When our mother died, I thought, "Because I looked back, I broke the promise, I was not supposed to look back." The little girl in me didn't know any better. But there was a part of me that felt like maybe it wouldn't have happened if I had not broken the spell by looking back.

One other omen of her death occurred, but this one came directly from the source. I remember sitting in the living room with our mother and father. He was drinking his whiskey and telling us stories. He said he had bought land in Colombia and that he was building a house. He was very impressed with himself, talking about his horses and cattle on this big ranch he had bought. I asked, "When are we gonna go to see it?"

This was a very pivotal moment in my life, one that I didn't realize at the time. As he looked at Alain and me, he said, "You are going to get to see it. But she will not." And he pointed to my mother. I remember thinking, 'Why not? Why is my mom not going to go?' Then the subject was changed. This moment would not return to my consciousness for a long time, when I finally learned the truth about what he meant. And about his deadly plan.