

SUPER IN/OUT - CAGUAS, PUERTO RICO - 1950

EXT. RIVERA FARMHOUSE - DAY

A small white clapboard house with a square of crops beside it sits on the edge of a dirt road. Two similar homes lie across the road. Three white dots in a verdant landscape.

INT. KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

JULIA, 19 years old and very pregnant, sits at a table, drinking black coffee. She has the long, dark hair of her Spanish ancestors. Ivory skin, darkened by years of tropical sun. In the distance, there is a BOOM of thunder.

EXT. RIVERA FARMHOUSE - DAY

Storm clouds gather over the little shack, pelting it with violent rain and winds.

INT. KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

Julia watches the ferocious storm from her tiny window. LIQUID SPLASHES onto the floor. Julia's eyes widen with fear as she realizes she is about to have her baby alone. Panicked, she runs to her front door, pushes it open and escapes onto the street.

EXT. RIVERA FARMHOUSE - CONTINUOUS

Wind, rain and debris attack Julia as she runs across the road for help. She leaps onto the porch of her neighbor's house and bangs on the door with her fists. No answer.

Julia runs toward the next house. A spasm of labor knocks her down into the sludge of the road. Caked with mud, she crawls under the house.

INT. UNDER NEIGHBOR'S HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

Labor wracks Julia's body. She pushes and pushes until...She reaches down to feel for her child. Julia pulls him close. FLASHES OF LIGHTNING reveal the infant. The baby's eyes open a sliver. Finally, the first cries of Julia's newborn son, VICTOR, ring out.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. RIVERA FARMHOUSE - DAY

With Victor bundled in her arms, Julia sits on the steps of porch, basking in the sun. A battered pick-up truck pulls up to the house. It's SAMUEL returning from town. At 23, he's four years older than his wife.

As he approaches his family, Samuel removes his straw hat to reveal dark, curly hair parted in the middle. His dark skin attests to his African heritage. Almond shaped eyes recall original natives of the island. Samuel smiles at the sight of his family.

SAMUEL

Guess who sold everything on the truck today?

JULIA

Really?

SAMUEL

It's true. This is all I have left.

Samuel dances a plump strawberry to Julia's smiling lips. She takes a bite.

JULIA

Mmmmm...

Samuel feeds Julia the rest of the fruit. She passes Victor to her husband. With his son in his arms, Samuel walks toward the small patch of land he and Julia have cultivated for many months.

SAMUEL

Victor, mi hijo. You will always be able to eat. This farm...this land will be my gift to you.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. ROAD - DAY

A red pick-up races along.

I/E TRUCK/ROAD - SAME

Victor, now 16 years old, is behind the wheel.

EXT. ST. TERESA'S - DAY

MARTA, 14 years old, waits for Victor to arrive at the small brick school. The young girl has Julia's hair, Samuel's eyes and mocha skin.

She spots the truck speeding in her direction, shaking her head in disapproval.

E/I ROAD/TRUCK - SAME

Victor slams on the brakes and skids past his sister. The boy is tall with a slender frame, dark eyes and short, curly hair. His skin is caramel. Victor opens the passenger door for Marta.

MARTA
Victor, are you crazy? You're going to
kill somebody one day. Probably me.

VICTOR
I'm not that lucky.

Victor slides behind the wheel and floors the pedal.

MARTA
Slow down, stupid!

VICTOR
Do you want to walk home Marta?

MARTA
No!

The truck zooms down the road.

I/E TRUCK/ROAD - DAY

Victor makes a turn onto a road that will lead home, a shortcut. Victor hits the brakes. Hard! Marta jerks forward then slams back into her seat.

MARTA
Idiot!

VICTOR
Shut up!

Victor jumps out of the truck. A fence blocks their path. A wooden sign attached to the fence reads NO TRESPASSING - PROPERTY OF MUTUAL SUGAR. Victor angrily shakes the fence.

MARTA
Let's go!

Victor gets back into the truck and punches the dashboard. He looks back and reverses the truck. Victor spins the wheel left and speeds away.

EXT. RIVERA FARMHOUSE - NIGHT

Victor and Samuel sit on the steps at the back of the house, sharing a beer.

SAMUEL

Mutual Sugar's been grabbing chunks of the island for forty or fifty years now.

VICTOR

Looks like we're next.

SAMUEL

I don't think so. If we were a big operation like Carasquillo's down the road, I could see it. We grow just enough to feed ourselves and make some money. Mutual doesn't need us.

VICTOR

Thieves never take what they need. They take what they want.

SAMUEL

This farm will be yours one day. No one will ever take it away.

INT. MARTA'S BEDROOM - SAME

Marta is under the covers. The room is simply decorated. Julia enters and sits on the bed.

JULIA

Marta...time for bed.

MARTA

Just a little bit longer, Mami.

JULIA

I want you to turn that light out in ten minutes, okay? Otherwise, you'll be using your desk for a pillow tomorrow.

MARTA

But...

JULIA

No arguments.

Julia kisses Marta good night and walks to the door.

As Julia leaves, Marta grabs her history textbook from her night stand.

INT. JULIA AND SAMUEL'S BEDROOM - LATER

Julia reads *El Gibaro* while she waits for Samuel to come to bed. Samuel stomps in, sits on the edge of the bed and pulls off his boots. He's dead tired.

JULIA
Samuel? Are you okay?

SAMUEL
Just tired, that's all.

JULIA
You don't look well.

SAMUEL
I'm fine. All this talk about Mutual...

JULIA
What do you think they're up to?

SAMUEL
It's just a little dirt road. Just a shortcut...

JULIA
It's land. They keep taking and no one stops them. What about us?

SAMUEL
I don't know how we can stop them. There's just us and Abelardo left here.

JULIA
We worked too hard and sacrificed too much to let them take everything away from us.

INT. VICTOR'S BEDROOM - SAME

Victor sits at a small table in a corner of his room. He sketches the face of a woman with more than a passing resemblance to Julia. He takes care to get the lips just right.

INT. JULIA AND SAMUEL'S BEDROOM - LATER

Julia wakes to the sound of Samuel heaving in the bathroom. She jumps out of bed.

INT. BATHROOM - CONTINUOUS

Samuel clutches the edge of the commode. Julia peers in. Black liquid. Blood. She drops down onto the floor next to her husband and rubs his back. Julia's face is filled with worry for Samuel.

INT. DOCTOR'S OFFICE - DAY

Julia crushes Samuel's hand as they wait. The DOCTOR enters the room, sits behind his desk and opens a folder. Julia focuses intently on his face as he speaks, but no words are heard.

EXT. RIVERA FARMHOUSE - SAME

Victor paints wild strawberries on the front of the family's roadside stand.

INT. ST. TERESA'S - SAME

In her small classroom, Marta eagerly raises her hand to answer a question from SISTER JUANITA MARIA.

EXT. RIVERA FARMHOUSE - NIGHT

Samuel sits on the front steps alone. He looks at his hands, rough and callused. Hands that helped build a home. Hands that put food on his family's table. Samuel balls them into fists.

EXT. RIVERA FARMHOUSE - DAY

Samuel and Victor are loading up the roadside stand with tomatoes.

SAMUEL
Victor...I need you to do something
for me.

VICTOR
What is it?

SAMUEL
I need you to help me. I need you to
help your family.

VICTOR
What's wrong, Papi?

SAMUEL
I'm very sick

VICTOR
Are you going to get better?

Samuel looks away from his son.

SAMUEL
Whatever happens, promise me you'll
do what I ask when the time comes.

VICTOR
I promise.

INT. ABELARDO AND ISABEL'S KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

Julia visits her neighbor ISABEL. She's at least twenty years older than Julia, plump and brown. As they talk, Julia sits, drinking coffee while Isabel packs.

ISABEL
Abelardo has an uncle in Chicago. He says there are plenty of meat packing jobs.

JULIA
Chicago. Isn't it cold?

ISABEL
Not all the time.

JULIA
What are you going to do?

ISABEL
Get a job too, I guess. I don't know. Don't you have family in the States?

Julia looks into her cup of coffee.

JULIA
No.

ISABEL
(puzzled)
I thought you had a sister in New York.

JULIA
No. My only family is here.

ISABEL
Aren't you tired of being the good farm wife? Chasing children and chickens...Aren't you tired of this life?

JULIA
I'm not done living it.

EXT. RIVERA FARMHOUSE - DAY

Victor is pumping water from the well next to the house while Samuel tills soil. Both men hear a loud CRASH. Victor runs to investigate. Samuel begins to run after him, but is too weak.

SAMUEL

Victor!

EXT. ABELARDO AND ISABEL'S HOUSE - MOMENTS LATER

Victor reaches the source of the noise, but sees nothing. A bulldozer slams down onto the roof, splitting the house in two.

Victor is frozen until he sees a weathered old man come around to the front of what's left of the house. This is WILSON. He wears a straw hat, work shirt and dungarees with a machete strapped to his waist.

Furious, Victor launches himself at Wilson and connects with a blow to the old man's jaw. Wilson is knocked down. Victor moves in for the kill.

SAMUEL

Victor! Stop it!

Wilson gets to his feet, a big grin on his face. Victor obeys his father's command and backs off.

WILSON

(laughing)

Your little boy sure packs a punch,
Sammy! Feels kinda familiar.

SAMUEL

That was a long time ago, Wilson.

Victor is surprised.

VICTOR

Papi, you know this man?

WILSON

I knew your poppa in another life.

SAMUEL

Like I said, that was a long time ago.

WILSON

How is Julia?

SAMUEL

I don't owe you that.

WILSON

'Spose that's fair. I'm gonna be
gracious then. Mutual wants this
whole area, Sammy.

VICTOR
We don't want your money!

SAMUEL
Victor! This your revenge, Wilson?

WILSON
Got nothin' to do with me. It's the company. Always is.

SAMUEL
How much?

VICTOR
Papi, no!

SAMUEL
Wilson! How much?

Victor can't believe his ears.

WILSON
As of right now, I got the authority to give you five grand if you get you and yours off the property in thirty days.

SAMUEL
After that?

WILSON
After that, the price goes down five hundred a day. Now, that's a gift, Sammy! Company wanted to knock off a grand a day.

SAMUEL
Don't expect me to thank you.

WILSON
I surely don't. Word of advice for you...

Wilson leans in to whisper to Samuel

WILSON (CONT'D)
...die faster.
Wilson tips his hat and disappears around the corner as the bulldozer's engine turns over and continues to demolish the little farmhouse.

INT. RIVERA FARMHOUSE - DAY

Samuel lies in bed, very weak. As the sun streams through the window, he slowly climbs out of bed.

EXT. RIVERA FARMHOUSE - CONTINUOUS

Samuel steps onto the porch. Julia looks up from her laundry. She runs to her husband and kisses him.

JULIA
Feeling better?

SAMUEL
A little. We have to talk, Julia.

JULIA
What is it?

SAMUEL
We have to sell.

JULIA
What? To Mutual? So we just give up?

SAMUEL
Give up? Give up what? There's nothing here any more. We're the only ones left. Soon, it will just be you and the children. I won't see my family become beggars.

JULIA
Where will we go?

SAMUEL
There's only one place you can go.

JULIA
No. I won't.

SAMUEL
But, Linda is your family.

INT. JULIA AND SAMUEL'S BEDROOM - DAY

Julia sits on the edge of the bed as she clutches Samuel's hand. His breathing is labored and he's drenched in sweat. Victor stands in the corner, Marta's head resting on his shoulder.

SAMUEL
Marta.

MARTA
(crying softly)
Yes, Papi.

SAMUEL
So smart...beautiful. Never forget that.

Marta bursts into loud sobs and collapses onto the bed, struggling to embrace her father. Samuel tries to soothe Marta, running his fingers through her hair.

SAMUEL (CONT'D)
Mi hijo...Respect your mother. Help her. Be the man I know you can be.

VICTOR
I will.

JULIA
Rest, my love.

SAMUEL
I don't want to leave you...

JULIA
Don't worry about me. We'll be okay.
You rest now.

SAMUEL
Was it all a dream?

JULIA
Rest.

SAMUEL
You have to sleep to dream. *Tengo que dormir...*

Julia rests her head on Samuel's shoulder. He closes his eyes

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. MANHATTAN - DAY

The rising sun bathes the Manhattan skyline in glorious orange.

INT. JFK INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT - DAY

Julia and her children hurry through the bustling airport. Victor pulls his skinny black tie as he looks around. His black khakis and white short sleeves mark him as a refugee from warmer climes.

The busy terminal entrances Marta. Her eyes follow a skycap in a sharp red uniform pulling a cart full of luggage for a nuclear family of Mom, Dad and Chip. Marta's worn blue skirt and plain white blouse cause her to look away in embarrassment.

Julia stands with her children amidst the mob of humanity in the terminal in a simple beige dress, her dark hair in a bun.

JULIA

(to herself)
We're here.

At the arrivals gate is LINDA ORTIZ. Mid 30s, heavily made-up with outrageously long false eyelashes. Linda's wearing too-tight capri pants, a low-cut blouse and high heels. Finishing the ensemble: a two-tone rabbit fur jacket. Her hair is bouffant style and on the wrong side of red.

Julia scans the crowd for her sister. Her eyes catch Linda and a slight smile crosses her face. Julia puts her arms around Victor and Marta, pulling them along to meet their aunt. Linda spots Julia and runs to meet her, heels clicking loudly.

LINDA
Luly!

Victor and Marta pull away from their mother, allowing Linda to wrap her younger sister in a suffocating hug of fur and perfume.

JULIA
(barely audible)
Thank you for meeting us...

EXT. LINDA'S APARTMENT BUILDING - DAY

A yellow cab pulls up to the front. Linda's building is on the edge of the Bronx, a tough neighborhood for an outsider.

The Riveras hop out. Victor grabs the luggage from the trunk. Marta is drawn to the schoolyard across the street, filled with children enjoying recess. Julia looks up at the four story brick building.

Linda hangs on the passenger door, flirting with the DRIVER.

JULIA
Linda...

Linda extends a raised index finger toward her sister, a signal to wait.

LINDA
Mira...Come see my show. I'm at the
Frolic on the corner of 42nd and
Sixth, okay?

INT. LINDA'S APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

A key turns in the lock. Linda enters. Julia and Marta are right behind her. Victor struggles to get the luggage over the threshold.

The living room has a deep blue couch, a coffee table and a lamp with three multi-color fixtures in the corner. A window to the fire escape looks out to the front of the building.

A console TV sits near the entrance to the kitchen.

LINDA
There's no place like home. It's
small, but I like it.

JULIA
Thank you for letting us stay.

LINDA
Como no, Luly. That's what family is
for. Now, I figure you, me and Marta
can share the bed and Victor can take
the couch.

INT. LINDA'S KITCHEN - LATER

Julia and Linda are having coffee. The walls of the small kitchen are dull yellow. Above the discolored copper faucet of the tiny sink, a plastic black cat's golf ball eyes with diamond shaped pupils count off the seconds.

JULIA
My son won't talk to me.

LINDA
What do you expect? Kid's
shell-shocked. His father's dead.

JULIA
I want to help him. He needs me.

LINDA
Luly, you need each other.

JULIA
What can I do?

LINDA
Losing your father... To a kid, that's
the biggest shot in the gut you can
take.

Marta enters.

JULIA
Marta, come visit with your aunt.

MARTA
I'm tired, Mami.

JULIA
Marta...

LINDA
It's fine, Luly. Sweetie, lie down in
my room.

MARTA
Thank you, tia.

Marta hugs her aunt and kisses her mother before leaving.

JULIA
Thank you for letting us stay here.

LINDA
De nada.

Linda brings her empty cup to the sink.

JULIA
So what happened?

LINDA
What do you mean?

JULIA
You left Puerto Rico to be a real dancer.

LINDA
I am a real dancer.

JULIA
You're so different, Linda.

LINDA
I'm a New Yorker now.

INT. LINDA'S BEDROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Marta flips the light switch. Pictures. Head shots. Party photos. Lobby cards.

A pink feather boa hangs from a slightly ajar closet door. A peek reveals a myriad of costumes. A universe of beads, sequins and rhinestones. A smile brightens Marta's face.

INT. LINDA'S LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Victor wakes up on Linda's couch. A warm breeze lures him to an open window. The traffic below. The people on the streets, so many people. And lights everywhere, flashing and blinking.

LINDA (O.S.)
It's something, isn't it?

Victor pulls his head in. Linda's appearance is quite different. She's wearing a pink bathrobe with fuzzy slippers. Gone are the false eyelashes. The heavy makeup, scrubbed away. A cigarette hangs from her lips.

VICTOR

It's very different from Caguas.

Linda chuckles as she slides her feet across the floor.

LINDA

Caguas might as well be the moon. Come outside with me, kid.

Linda climbs out the window. Victor follows her gingerly.

EXT. FIRE ESCAPE - CONTINUOUS

Linda sits on a wrought iron step and pats a spot next to her. Victor sits.

VICTOR

How can you stand it? All the noise. All the people. Do you ever get used to it?

LINDA

I've been here ten years and every morning I've got butterflies. Like I'm going to race against a million people.

Victor ponders his aunt's answer for a moment.

VICTOR

Do you like it?

LINDA

It's the greatest city in the world. You can do anything. You can be anybody. In Caguas, I was nobody. Here, I'm a dream, a fantasy. I'm the most beautiful woman in the world.

VICTOR

Are you famous?

LINDA

(laughing)

No. Every now and then, I nail an audition and shuffle along in the chorus of a big show. That pays a couple of months rent. But, I have a steady gig down on Forty-Second Street.

VICTOR

And you get to dance.

LINDA

Yeah. I get to dance.

Linda takes an extra long drag on her cigarette and exhales.

EXT. P.S. 33 - DAY

Yellow buses pull up. KIDS stream into the school yard. Excited chatter and playful screams ring out. Marta, dressed in her faded blue Catholic school jumper stands with Julia outside the youthful chaos.

JULIA
There are so many children here.

MARTA
I'll be okay. Don't worry.

JULIA
Are you sure, honey?

MARTA
I'll be fine. Go.

Julia kisses Marta on the cheek and pulls her in for a hug.

JULIA
Good luck, sweetheart.

MARTA
Bye, Mami.

Marta waves as a hesitant Julia leaves. The girl makes her way into the schoolyard, drawing more than a few curious glances. Marta walks to the opposite end of the yard and watches the street through the chain link fence.

EXT. LINDA'S APARTMENT BUILDING - DAY

Linda is speaking with Victor as ARNIE, the super of the building, sits on the steps. In his 50s, he's a short man with a barrel chest, receding hairline and grayish skin. Victor stands, arms folded.

LINDA
(hitting Victor's arms)
What's wrong? You need a job, don't you?

VICTOR
I don't trust him. I don't trust any of them.

LINDA
Look, I understand. I really do, but money is money. Doesn't matter what color hand it comes from.

Arnie interrupts.

ARNIE

So, do I have a helper or not? Very simple job. Sweeping the common areas, painting the vacants. Help with the boiler. Sound like something you can handle, son?

VICTOR

Don't call me that.

ARNIE

Linda, what's with this kid?

LINDA

Victor. C'mon. What do you want to do?

VICTOR

I want to go home. That's what I want. Can you help me do that?

ARNIE

I don't have time for this. See you later, Linda.

Arnie walks off, dragging a ashcan behind him.

LINDA

Arnie! Wait a minute! Great! Just great, kid! What the hell are you thinking? You're not in school. You need a job, Victor.

Linda grabs Victor's arm and pulls him down the street, heels clicking quickly.

INT. CITY DELI - DAY

City Deli is packed. Julia enters. She taps the shoulder of a blond WAITRESS. The harried girl whirls around.

JULIA

Hi. I'm looking for the manager.

The waitress points to the back counter. A short, unshaven man with unruly dark hair in his mid-40s, LUCIANO, eyes Julia.

LUCIANO

Yeah?

JULIA

Hello. I'm Julia.

Luciano shrugs his shoulders.

JULIA (CONT'D)

Linda's sister.

Luciano smiles and his eyes light up at the mention of Linda's name.

LUCIANO
Yeah, yeah. Linda, she's a good kid.

JULIA
She told me you were looking for a waitress for the morning shift.

LUCIANO
I was. Last week.

JULIA
Do you have anything at all?

LUCIANO
Pot washer. Steamy kitchen and scalding hot water. Lot of guys don't last. Second degree burns and all. Oh, I almost forgot, the pots are pretty heavy. How much can you lift?

JULIA
Uh...

Luciano stands back, sizing Julia up.

LUCIANO
You like you could do thirty, forty pounds easy.

JULIA
I don't mind hard work. I need to work. I need this job.

Luciano breaks into a smile.

LUCIANO
I'm sorry. I was just fooling around with you. Got plenty of pot washers.

JULIA
I thought...thanks anyway.

Julia turns to leave.

LUCIANO
Hey! Hang on! Come back.

Julia leaves the deli. Luciano chases her outside.

EXT. CITY DELI - CONTINUOUS

Julia walks quickly. Luciano catches up and reaches for her shoulder.

JULIA

What! Oh.

LUCIANO

I'm sorry. I was just trying to be funny. Sorry, I was so...

JULIA

Mean!

LUCIANO

Yes! Mean. Look, I do have a spot for a waitress. It's on the night shift. If you want it. Let me make it up to you. Cup of coffee? I'll let you bash me over the head with a giant pot. C'mon. Please.

Julia smiles despite herself. She and Luciano go back into the Deli.

INT. FROLIC THEATER DRESSING ROOM - DAY

Victor leans against a push broom as Linda makes adjustments to her genie costume before she hits the stage. The dressing room is large enough to accommodate several dancers with lighted mirrors and costume racks.

LINDA

Victor, this is between you and me, okay? Luly doesn't need to know.

VICTOR

What do I tell her?

LINDA

Tell her you work for Arnie in one of his buildings in Midtown or something. Somewhere far away from here.

EXT. P.S. 33 - DAY

Marta studies on a bench in the schoolyard. She looks up to see two GIRLS standing in front of her. Friends?

MARTA

(smiling)

Hi!

One of the duo, a fat black girl with braids, pushes forward.

GIRL 1

Where you from?

MARTA

I'm from Puerto Rico. We just got here
a week ago.

A second girl, white with stringy blond hair, begins to laugh.

GIRL 2
Uh-huh, I knew it!

MARTA
Knew what?

GIRL 1
You been wearin' that same old dress
since you got here. You poor or
sumpin'?

MARTA
Uh, no. This is my uniform.

GIRL 1
Uniform? This ain't no Catholic
school, girl! You must be poor.

GIRL 2
That's right...p-o-o-r. Poor.

MARTA
No, I...

The girls begin to cackle and draw a crowd. Marta's only defense
against the laughter is to cover her ears. But, it just becomes
louder. Marta runs into the building.

INT. FROLIC THEATER DRESSING ROOM - NIGHT

Victor sits on a couch with JEN, a pretty blonde dancer. She's
wearing a white terry bathrobe while she waits to go on stage.
Jen is very animated.

JEN
I couldn't imagine my dad being dead.
That's way too trippy.

VICTOR
Trippy?

JEN
You know, crazy. Loco.

VICTOR
Yeah. Loco.

Jen pulls her legs underneath her and stretches her arms.

JEN
I haven't talked to my folks in so
long.

VICTOR

Why not?

JEN

I came to the city to act. Kept knocking on doors, dropping my picture all over town. After a while, I got tired of people saying no to me. So, here I am. From country girl to city stripper. Some Grace Kelly I turned out to be, huh?

VICTOR

That's the way it is. The world just crushes you. No matter how hard you try. No matter how much you want it to be different. Do we ever get what we want?

JEN

Sometimes you do. Sometimes you have to make do.

Jen pulls a bottle of rum out of her purse. She takes a long swig from the bottle and passes it to Victor. He gives Jen a questioning look.

JEN (CONT'D)

You have to do the best you can with what you got. Like right now. I bet you're as lonely as me. But we've got this bottle and this couch.

Jen moves in to kiss Victor. He's nervous, but kisses her back. Things are heating up on the couch when Linda yanks at Victor's collar.

LINDA

What the hell do you think you're doing?

VICTOR

Tia!

JEN

We were just talking!

LINDA

Must be hard with your mouths pressed together!

VICTOR

It's not her fault.

LINDA

I think I hear your cue, Jen.

JEN

I don't hear anything.

LINDA

Get out!

Jen quickly gathers herself and flees the room. A second later, she returns, grabs the bottle of rum and runs out.

VICTOR

Are you going to tell my mother?

LINDA

Sure. What should I say? Luly, your son was making out with a stripper at the Frolic. What was he doing there? Oh, yeah. I got him a job we never told you about because we didn't want you to kill us.

VICTOR

She seems nice.

LINDA

Look, kid. To get on that stage night after night, you learn to turn it on and off like a switch.

VICTOR

I don't think she's like that.

LINDA

I know how it is. Jen's a cute kid. But, she'll break your heart into tiny pieces and stomp on them.

VICTOR

How do you know that?

LINDA

Because I've done it. I'm alone for a reason, kid. Lucky for you, huh?

VICTOR

Some luck.

LINDA

I just don't want you to catch another tough break with what you've been through.

VICTOR

I don't need a baby sitter.

INT. LINDA'S KITCHEN - NIGHT

Marta studies at the kitchen table. Julia enters in her powder blue and white uniform, a name tag affixed to her top.

JULIA
How do I look?

Julia does a small spin for Marta.

MARTA
You look good, Mami.

JULIA
I left you some *arroz con gandules* for dinner.

MARTA
Again?

JULIA
Don't complain. We have to save money.

MARTA
I wish you didn't have to work at night. It's scary here.

JULIA
What about Victor?

MARTA
He comes home late.

JULIA
I'm sorry, *princesa*. I'll talk to him...if I see him again. Want me to walk you to school in the morning?

MARTA
I can go by myself, Mami.

JULIA
Okay, big girl.

EXT. LINDA'S APARTMENT BUILDING - DAY

Victor pushes through the building door just as a green tennis ball flies his way. He catches it without thinking. Someone WHISTLES for his attention.

A CROWD OF KIDS is gathered at the base of the steps. A tall and wiry boy in a white tee shirt and cuffed jeans steps out in front of the crowd. FLACO is eighteen, with slicked back dark hair and the beginnings of a mustache. He holds out his hand.

FLACO
Chico...the ball.

Victor tosses the ball. Flaco catches it and starts bouncing it against the pavement.

FLACO (CONT'D)

Wanna play?

VICTOR
What are you playing?

FLACO
Stoopball.

Flaco underhands the ball to an IMPATIENT KID positioned in front of the steps.

VICTOR
What's that?

The kid flings the ball at the bottom step. There's a loud POP as the tennis ball flies high into the air. Flaco runs into the street, eyes looking to the sky and focused on the ball. He stops, turns, reaches up and pulls the ball down in his hand.

The "batter" is now out and joins the rest of the kids in the street as Flaco takes his place.

FLACO
Where you from, man?

VICTOR
Caguas.

FLACO
Puertoriqueno. Me too. I was born here, but my family is from Ponce.

BOY'S VOICE (O.S.)
C'mon, Flaco! Hit it!

Flaco ignores the demand and starts bouncing the ball again.

FLACO
It's like baseball. I got the last out, so I'm at bat now. I miss the stoop, it's an out. Goes across the street, homerun.

VICTOR
What if it bounces?

FLACO
Bounces once, single, Twice, double. Three times, that's third base. *Entiende*. Here, take my turn.

Flaco gives the ball to Victor and jogs into the "outfield". Victor bounces the ball a couple of times and flings it. POP! The tennis ball soars out of reach of LEAPING KIDS below. A solid homerun! Victor beams as Flaco slaps him five.

INT. P.S. 33 CORRIDOR - DAY

Marta makes her way through the crowded halls. A bell RINGS. Marta watches as the other students disappear into the classrooms until she is alone in the corridor. She drops one of her books, scoops it up and runs down the hall.

INT. P.S. 33 CLASSROOM - MOMENTS LATER

The classroom of MR. VARGAS, history teacher. Three large windows on the far side of the room offer a view of the schoolyard. Various historical personages glare from posters affixed to the wall.

Vargas, tall with a thin build and short, black hair, writes questions to a pop quiz on the blackboard.

Marta bursts into the classroom, late. Vargas takes no notice of the girl as she slides behind her desk and plops her books on the floor.

Vargas finally stops writing and turns to face the class. Marta rustles paper from a notebook.

MR. VARGAS

Ladies and gentlemen, name and section at the top of your papers. You have fifteen minutes for the three questions on the board. You may begin.

Marta writes her name at the top of her paper. Vargas points in her direction.

MR. VARGAS (CONT'D)

Excuse me, Miss...?

MARTA

Rivera.

MR. VARGAS

Miss Rivera, you have a different assignment. I want you to write the definition of tardiness. Also, a short essay on tardiness and it's negative effects. Make sure to discuss how you plan to avoid tardiness in the future.

Marta sighs quietly and starts writing.

INT. CITY DELI - NIGHT

The Deli is busy, filled with its' late-night crowd of cops, taxi-drivers and party kids. Julia moves from table to table as she takes orders.

Luciano pops up in the window leading to the kitchen.

JULIA
Three scrambled, side of sausage,
toast, and hash browns...burnt? Is
that right?

LUCIANO
It means extra crispy.

JULIA
Is it always like this?

LUCIANO
This is the early rush. Wait until 4
AM.

JULIA
More customers, more tips, right?

LUCIANO
Right. Hey...I've got something for
you.

JULIA
What is it?

LUCIANO
Order up.

Luciano hands Julia two full plates. A smile on her face, she
dives back into work.

EXT. LINDA'S BUILDING - LATER

Victor sits on the steps with a notebook swiped from Marta. He
looks up at the moon, hanging low in the night sky.

A pencil appears in Victor's hand. It begins to move across
paper. Lines become shapes. Shapes become familiar. Apartment
buildings. Street lights. The glowing moon. All flow out of
Victor's pencil.

He begins to focus on one line, tracing it again and again. The
line becomes heavier. The pencil veers off course and makes angry
circles all over the page.

Victor rips the page out of the notebook and crumples it up.

INT. LINDA'S KITCHEN - MORNING

Julia sits at the table with a cigar box. The box contains some
savings. She pulls money from her uniform pocket and counts it
out on the table.

Marta, dressed for school, enters the kitchen.

MARTA
Good morning, Mami.

JULIA
There's a sandwich for you on the counter.

MARTA
Thank you. How was work last night?

JULIA
Another crazy night.

Marta takes a seat at the table.

MARTA
I was thinking...

JULIA
Yes?

MARTA
Maybe I should get a job too.

JULIA
What about school?

MARTA
I could quit.

JULIA
No. I'll work two jobs before I let you do that.

MARTA
But I want to help.

JULIA
You need to stay in school. You're a smart girl. If I let you quit, I would be stealing your future for a few dollars. Think about what your father would say. Let me worry about money.

MARTA
Okay, Mami.

Marta grabs her brown bag lunch from the counter. She kisses Julia on the cheek.

JULIA
Be good.

Julia continues to count the money laid out on the table as Marta leaves.

INT. FROLIC THEATER DRESSING ROOM - DAY

Victor sweeps past the dressing room. He looks up from his pile of dirt and ashes and notices Linda sitting on the couch, smoking.

Victor props up the broom in the doorway. His aunt offers him a drag. He takes a few puffs and hands back the cigarette.

LINDA
Another reason for Luly to kill me.

VICTOR
You won't be alone, tia.

LINDA
How long are we gonna do this?
We can't lie to your mother forever.

VICTOR
Do you want to tell her?

LINDA
Of course not.

VICTOR
What's so bad about this place anyway?

LINDA
Do you have a couple of days?

VICTOR
I'm serious. It's just a job, that's all.

LINDA
Your mother sees things in black and white. She wouldn't understand.

VICTOR
But, she knows you work here.

LINDA
And, she doesn't let me forget it. I can't please her. I never could.

VICTOR
What do you mean?

LINDA
It's a long story, kid.

VICTOR
Hey...is Jen here?

Linda drops her cigarette on the floor and stamps it with a six-inch heel.

LINDA

She'll be here tonight. Look...

VICTOR
I'll be good, tia. I promise.

LINDA
You better be. My list of sins in long
enough.

EXT. LINDA'S APARTMENT BUILDING - NIGHT

Julia is leaving for work when she sees Arnie and flags him down.

ARNIE
Yeah?

JULIA
I'm Victor's mother.

ARNIE
Who?

JULIA
Victor. We're staying with my sister
in 3B.

ARNIE
Yeah, she came by with the kid a couple
of weeks ago.

JULIA
How's he doing?

ARNIE
I don't know. He was real angry. Linda
dragged him off somewhere.

JULIA
So, Victor hasn't been working for
you?

ARNIE
No, ma'am. Could have used the help.
Shame.

EXT. FROLIC THEATER - CONTINUOUS

A MOB is waiting to enter the Frolic. Julia wades through the crowd.

INT. FROLIC STAGE - CONTINUOUS

The smoke-filled room is decorated with gaudy red and gold wallpaper. Heavy red felt curtains hang above the stage. The

MASTER OF CEREMONIES strolls out to cheers and whistles as the house band comes to life. The skinny, bow-tied man grabs the microphone.

M.C.
Gentlemen! Thank you for joining us
this evening. Our featured performer
is about to grace our stage...

INT. FROLIC THEATER DRESSING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Linda brushes powder on her cleavage. She slides on a pair of gloves. She's ready to go when she hears a commotion in the hall.

BOUNCER (O.S.)
You can't go in there!

JULIA (O.S.)
Stop me!

Julia pushes the dressing room door open. Linda stands and turns to face her sister.

LINDA
Luly! What are you doing here? I
thought this wasn't your scene.

JULIA
Where is he?

LINDA
Who?

JULIA
You can save the stupid act for your
customers! Where's my son?

LINDA
Victor? What would he be doing here?

Julia ignores her sister and starts looking around.

JULIA
Victor!

LINDA
Luly! He's not here! I swear to you.

M.C. (O.S.)
...sassy and classy...

Jen and Victor stumble in arm in arm, obviously drunk.

JEN
Linda, what's going on? Who's the new
girl?

VICTOR

Shit.

Julia grabs Jen and pushes her out of the way.

JEN

Hey!

Jen spins and is about to pounce when Victor grabs her.

VICTOR

This is my mother.

M.C. (O.S.)

...plays so nicey, but always
spicy...

JULIA

Enough! How long did you two think you
could lie to me?

VICTOR

Mami, we needed the money! It's just
a job!

JULIA

Just a job. And, this girl. Is she part
of your job, too?

LINDA

Luly, I'm sorry. I was just trying to
help.

JULIA

Help? I should have known I couldn't
trust you to do a simple thing. I
couldn't trust you ten years ago and
I sure can't trust you now.

VICTOR

Mami, it's my fault. Tia tried to get
me another job. Blame me.

JULIA

Believe me, I do blame you. You should
know better. Your aunt is like a
child. Always the easy way out.

LINDA

Julia, please. I made a mistake.

JULIA

I did too.

Julia grabs Victor's arm and pulls him out the door.

M.C. (O.S.)

...redder is better! LINDA
LAROJAAAAA!

Linda closes her eyes for a moment, then exits for the stage.

EXT. APARTMENT BUILDING - DAY

One of the windows of the drab four story building is boarded up. Graffiti covers the front door. Weeds pop up through cracks in the bottom steps.

INT. JULIA'S APARTMENT - SAME

An empty one bedroom with freshly painted white walls. A key turns in the lock. Julia sets down her suitcase. Victor and Marta bring in the rest of the bags.

JULIA
Here we are.

MARTA
It's small.

Victor opens a window to let the paint fumes escape.

VICTOR
Where are we going to sleep?

JULIA
You can sleep here and your and sister
and I will take the bedroom.

VICTOR
No...What are we going to sleep on?

JULIA
Tonight, the floor.

VICTOR
What?

MARTA
Mami?

JULIA
I had to use all the money we had to
get this place.

VICTOR
We could have stayed at Tia Linda's.

JULIA
I'm the head of this family. I decide,
not you.

VICTOR
We wouldn't have to sleep on the
floor.

JULIA
I'm not talking about this anymore. Do
you hear me?

Victor is defiantly silent.

JULIA (CONT'D)
Victor, answer me.

Victor continues to glare in silence.

MARTA
Victor...stop it. Please.

VICTOR
Yes. I hear you.

EXT. JULIA'S BUILDING - NIGHT

Victor sits on the steps. There's lots of noise. On these
streets, noise is trouble. Screams. Fights. Breaking glass.
Coming from a apartment on the first floor, the crackling sound
of a too loud TV.

Flaco arrives carrying a baseball bat. Victor walks into the
night with his new friend.

INT. JULIA'S KITCHEN - LATER

Marta and Julia are having dinner. There's an empty place at the
table.

JULIA
Did your brother say where he was
going?

MARTA
No. He doesn't talk to me. I don't know
why. It's not my fault.

JULIA
Sooner or later, we were going to be
on our own. I have to do what's best
for us. Not what's fun. Not what's
easy.

MARTA
But I miss Tia Linda.

JULIA
Your aunt has too many problems. I
need to keep this family together.

MARTA

She is our family. She helped us. If she has problems, why don't we help her?

JULIA

She can take care of herself. She always has. Now, let's talk about school.

MARTA

What about it?

JULIA

How is it going? I know it's not St. Teresa's...

MARTA

It's okay. The teachers are nice.

JULIA

Have you made any friends yet?

MARTA

Yeah, a couple.

JULIA

Maybe you could invite them over after school. That could be fun.

MARTA

Sure.

INT. LINDA'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Without makeup, Linda sits at her vanity staring at her reflection.

INT. JULIA'S LIVING ROOM - DAY

Victor is sprawled out on the couch, asleep. The window shade suddenly rolls up. The sun stirs Victor to open his eyes. Julia stands over him.

JULIA

Wake up.

Victor rolls over onto his front. Julia taps his shoulder several times.

VICTOR

I'm up.

JULIA

Do you think you can sleep all day?

VICTOR
I'm tired.

JULIA
I'm tired too. I work.

VICTOR
I had a job until you ruined
everything.

JULIA
No. You did that by lying to me.

VICTOR
She told me this would happen.

JULIA
What did you say?

VICTOR
Tia told me you would go crazy.

JULIA
So, now you listen to her? She's not
your mother. I am. You're going to
look for a job.

Victor sits up and rubs his eyes.

VICTOR
Why? What's the point? So we can keep
living in a shitty place?

JULIA
Victor!

VICTOR
I hate it here!

Victor gets up, grabs his jacket and slams the door on his way
out.

INT. CITY DELI - NIGHT

The restaurant is quiet. Julia and Luciano sit at the back
counter.

JULIA
He's in the street all the time. He
doesn't have a job. I don't know what
to do, Luciano.

LUCIANO
You said he's a good kid. He'll come
around.

JULIA

Maybe there's nothing I can do. Maybe I should let him go. He's grown.

LUCIANO

Let him go? To do what? To become a bum or worse? Because that's what's gonna happen if you give up. I grew up in the city. The streets are just waiting for a kid like Victor. They will drag him down.

EXT. SOUTH BRONX STREET - NIGHT

Flaco slams his bat against the windshield of an abandoned car. He takes a swig from can of beer wrapped in a paper bag.

FLACO

You gonna try and go back?

Flaco swings and destroys a side view mirror.

VICTOR

My mother will kill me.

FLACO

That must have been cool. Naked girls.

Flaco gives the beer to Victor. He takes a sip.

VICTOR

It wasn't like that. I was too busy sweeping or mopping.

FLACO

You gonna tell me you didn't see any *tetas*?

VICTOR

(smiling)

I saw a few.

Victor takes another drink and hands the beer back to Flaco, who raises the club above his head and smashes the remains of the mirror off the car.

Flaco tosses the bat to Victor.

FLACO

C'mon, man. You gotta try it.

VICTOR

I don't know.

FLACO

What are you, a chicken?

VICTOR

Shut up!

FLACO

Who cares about this piece of shit car?
Who cares, man?

Victor looks at the bat in his hands. He leaps onto the hood of the car and smashes the windshield over and over as Flaco roars his approval.

INT. FROLIC THEATER DRESSING ROOM - NIGHT

Linda sits at her vanity. She looks like she hasn't slept in days. Jen walks in.

LINDA
How is it out there?

JEN
The usual. Wall-to-wall horny drunks.

LINDA
(softly)
What am I gonna do?

JEN
Linda...you okay?

LINDA
Just thinking out loud.

JEN
How's Victor?

LINDA
What?

JEN
Your nephew. How's he doing? Are you even listening?

LINDA
I can't do this anymore.

JEN
What do mean?

LINDA
I have to get my family back.

JEN
Ohmigod! You're quitting?

LINDA
I guess so. Yeah.

Linda stands, turns off her lighted mirror and pulls Jen into a hug.

JEN
What are you going to do?

LINDA
Something. Take care of yourself,
kid.

Linda grabs her purse and leaves.

EXT. FROLIC STAGE DOOR - MOMENTS LATER

Linda wipes at tears as she walks down the street toward the rest of her life.

EXT. ALLEY - NIGHT

Victor and Flaco stumble down the alley.

VICTOR
Wait...wait.

Victor staggers over to a wall and lowers himself slowly to sit on the ground.

FLACO
What are you doing, man?

VICTOR
I'm tired.

FLACO
I gotta take a piss anyway.

Flaco shuffles behind a trash can to do his business. Victor uses the bat to get up from the ground.

VICTOR
Me too.

Victor starts to unzip his pants, but hears loud voices carrying down the alley. A group of five MEN approach.

Victor ducks behind the trash can with Flaco. The boys peek out and catch a glimpse of two of the men. One is white and skinny with long blond hair. The other man is dark, short and stocky with a shaven head.

FLACO
(whispering)
Let's go, man.

Victor and Flaco try to back away to the safe end of the alley. But, they knock over a garbage can, causing a ruckus.

VICTOR

Run!

The boys take off and the thugs follow. They run into another alleyway. The loud footfalls of the men get closer.

A fence blocks the boys' escape. Victor leaps over the barrier and crashes to the ground. Somehow, Flaco stays on his feet and keeps running.

Face down in a tangle of weeds and trash, Victor lies still. The men run past. They are gone.

Slowly, Victor rises. He notices a strawberry. The fruit is growing wild in the fenced lot. Victor digs and grabs a handful of soil, letting it spill through his fingers.

EXT. TIMES SQUARE - DAY

Linda walks in a yellow mini-skirt, a peasant blouse and go-go boots, white. Classifieds in hand, she cuts through the crowd. Focused.

INT. DANCE STUDIO - SAME

ANTHONY WOODMAN, dance instructor, keeps one bored eye on a COUPLE as they attempt the fox trot, the other eye is on the clock.

Woodman is in his mid-fifties, with a dancer's body. Tall, trim and athletic. He's dressed simply in black pants and a white turtleneck.

He leans against the railing in front of the mirrored wall on the far side of the room.

Linda stomps into the room. Woodman points to her boots and mouths the word NO! She holds up the newspaper.

LINDA

You looking for a teacher?

Linda pulls off her boots, chucks them at the door and slides toward the instructor.

WOODMAN

You're referring to the instructor position? Yes, we need someone part-time. Can you list any credentials?

LINDA

I've been dancing in this city for over ten years. Does that count?

WOODMAN

I'm afraid kicking up your heels at block parties in the barrio doesn't count, Miss...?

LINDA

Ortiz. And, this is your lucky day. I'm the belle of the barrio.

WOODMAN

Good day, Miss Ortiz.

Woodman returns his attention to his students. He claps out the beat of the music. Linda gets in Woodman's face.

LINDA

Waitaminit...that's it? I have real training. I did ballet. Tap. Modern. I could teach schlubs like that how to dance. Probably better than you.

WOODMAN

I doubt that.

LINDA

Watch me.

Linda heads straight for the couple and pulls the male schlub away from his partner.

WOODMAN

Miss Ortiz!

Linda positions the man's feet and arms. She mirrors him and demonstrates the steps. The man moves his feet to the music. He's getting it. Linda and the schlub are doing the fox trot.

LINDA

That's it! That's it!

The female schlub glares at her mate. He dutifully rejoins her.

WOODMAN

Are you done, Miss Ortiz?

LINDA

You need me here.

WOODMAN

And, why is that?

LINDA

I have two things you don't. A personality and a following. I'll have this place packed.

WOODMAN

We have several students already and quite the waiting list.

LINDA

No, you don't. I've been in a lot of studios and this place smells too good. No sweat. Probably doesn't even get hot in here. I think you just got Mister and Missus over here and that's it. Like I said, you need me.

Woodman is flustered. Impatient, Linda taps her boot.

WOODMAN

Very well. Be here Monday at 9 A.M. Proper attire. No tennis shoes or go-go boots. Flats only. Good day, Miss Ortiz.

Linda heads for the door as Woodman gets back to his students.

LINDA

(grinning)

Damn right it is.

INT. STAIRWAY - NIGHT

Victor walks up a flight of stairs, reaches the landing and knocks on a door marked "4A".

FLACO (O.S.)

Quien es?

VICTOR

Flaco. It's me. Victor

A pause. Then the familiar sound of a cylinder turning to unlock the door.

FLACO (O.S.)

Come in!

Victor hesitates for a moment, then pushes the door open.

INT. FLACO'S APARTMENT - SAME

The lights are off, but the living room is bathed in the blue light of a small black and white television. An OLD LADY in a yellow housecoat sits in a recliner hypnotized by the flickering screen.

A door CREAKS open. Flaco stands in the doorway of his room.

FLACO

C'mon, man.

Victor shuffles out of the darkness into Flaco's room, shutting the door behind him.

INT. FLACO'S ROOM - CONTINUOUS

The room is painted a dark blue. A simple wooden bureau in one corner, the twin bed in the opposite one.

Flaco sits on the bed. Victor stands.

FLACO
Sientate.

Victor sits on the far end of the bed.

VICTOR
Nice room. I'm sleeping on the couch at home.

FLACO
That's rough, man.

VICTOR
Who is that out there?

FLACO
That's my *abuelita*. She takes care of me.

VICTOR
What about your parents?

FLACO
My father is upstate.

Victor gives Flaco a puzzled look.

FLACO (CONT'D)
Prison. He stole a couple of cars and got locked up.

VICTOR
Sorry.

FLACO
And, my mother...I don't know. You know what, man? I don't wanna talk about this shit.

VICTOR
Okay.

FLACO
What happened to you the other night?

VICTOR

I tripped. What about you?

FLACO
They almost got me, but I ducked into Saint Michael's. Priest let me stay until morning Mass.

VICTOR
Who were those guys anyway?

FLACO
I seen 'em around before. Some kinda crew or something. Some dangerous streets, *chico*.

VICTOR
Good thing I wasn't alone.

FLACO
We got to stick together, man. That's the only we gonna make it.

VICTOR
Yeah, like brothers.

Flaco holds out his hand. Victor clasps it tight

FLACO
Asi hermanos, man.

EXT. JULIA'S BUILDING - NIGHT

Victor sits on the steps of the building. An older black man, MR. CRAY makes his way down the stairs and takes a seat next to Victor.

MR. CRAY
Nice night.

VICTOR
Beautiful. Warm days are coming.

MR. CRAY
It's the soil. That's how you can tell what the weather's gonna be.

VICTOR
Are you a farmer?

MR. CRAY
Used to be. I seen you out there, digging around. At least you don't got to start from scratch.

VICTOR
How's that?

MR. CRAY

That dump used to be a Victory Garden during the war. Well, the big one. We used to grow everything. Carrots, potatoes, tomatoes. Good land. Fed a lot of people 'round here.

VICTOR

What happened?

MR. CRAY

War was over. No more rationing. They built great big stores. Supermarkets, they called 'em. Why grow when you can buy?

VICTOR

You just let it go?

MR. CRAY

Wasn't just me. Took a lot of folks to start the Garden. One day I looked 'round and all my friends were gone. Long Island, Jersey. All you people started movin' in.

VICTOR

Hey!

MR. CRAY

Don't mean it like that. A lot of good folks still here. But a few bad ones drag everyone down. That's what happened to the Garden. Wasn't just you people throwing their trash over the fence. Seen a lot of black and white faces doin' it too.

VICTOR

Why don't you help me? We can start it up again.

MR. CRAY

Sorry, son. Most days, I just look out the window. Nights, I drag my old bones out here and try to tell the weather.

VICTOR

What's tomorrow look like?

MR. CRAY

Cloudy.

INT. P.S. 33 CLASSROOM - DAY

It's after dismissal. Mr. Vargas erases the board while Marta sits at her desk, waiting patiently. Finally, Vargas takes a seat at his desk and opens his grading folder.

MR. VARGAS

Despite your rocky start, Marta, you have demonstrated you are more than capable of performing well in my class.

MARTA

Thank you, Mr. Vargas.

MR. VARGAS

Some of your fellow classmates, however, are not as, shall we say, gifted, as you are. Would you be interested in peer tutoring, Marta?

MARTA

What would I have to do?

MR. VARGAS

You just have to show up at 2:30 on Mondays and Wednesdays. The tutoring period lasts an hour so you would be getting home late. And you'll have to get your parents' permission. Is that a problem?

MARTA

No, Mr. Vargas.

MR. VARGAS

Also, if your peers improve under your tutelage, you'll receive extra credit.

MARTA

Extra credit. Wow.

MR. VARGAS

Not that you need it. But, something like this is always a good thing to put on a college application. What do you say?

MARTA

Yes!

EXT. P.S. 33 - CONTINUOUS

Marta bounds down the steps of P.S. 33 filled with so much joy, she begins to skip home. Then, she breaks into a run. All the while, Marta never stops smiling.

EXT. DESERTED BUILDING - NIGHT

Flaco and Victor stand in front of a dilapidated office building.

VICTOR
What is this place?

FLACO
You'll see. C'mon.

Flaco pulls himself up by the stone ledge of a boarded up window. He slides a loose board out of the way. Flaco reaches down to pull Victor up. The younger boy backs away.

VICTOR
What's in there?

FLACO
Don't be a chicken.

Flaco reaches down for Victor's hand and pulls his friend up to the window. The boys venture inside.

INT. DESERTED BUILDING - SAME

Flaco and Victor jump down to the creaky wooden floor. It's dark inside. The only light filters in through a large skylight above. Flaco switches on a flashlight. He swings the beam to a large staircase.

Flaco points forward. Victor follows. A loud CREAK escapes a wooden step as the boys start to climb the staircase.

INT. OFFICE - SAME

The office door pushes open. Flaco leads Victor inside.

VICTOR
What the hell are we doing here?

FLACO
This is the best place in the city,
man.

VICTOR
It's like a haunted house.

FLACO
C'mon man. Look around. There's
nobody here. Nobody to bother us.
Nobody can touch us in here.

Flaco hops up to take a seat on a dusty desk.

FLACO (CONT'D)

Sometimes there's just too much shit going on in my head and I need to be somewhere else.

VICTOR
What about your room?

FLACO
That room is a jail 'cept I got an old lady for a warden.

VICTOR
This place is a cemetery, Flaco. There used to be people. It's like they all died.

FLACO
But they're free. The dead are free.

INT. CITY DELI - LATER

3 A.M. and dead quiet. Julia sits at the back counter. Luciano pours her a cup of coffee.

JULIA
Gracias.

LUCIANO
De nada.

Luciano fiddles with the dial of the radio behind the counter. Static gives way to a Latin beat. He smiles and turns it up.

JULIA
Salsa!

Julia taps the counter along with the beat. Luciano is surprised.

LUCIANO
I used to go out with a chick who made me dance to this stuff every Saturday night.

JULIA
I miss dancing.

Luciano springs from behind the counter and begins to move to the rhythm. Julia laughs. Luciano extends his hand.

LUCIANO
C'mon.

JULIA
I can't.

LUCIANO

What are you kiddin' me? You won't get
in trouble. I'm the boss, remember?

Julia looks up to the heavens and grasps Luciano's hand. An awkward start. A smooth movement into harmony with the beat. A couple finds their rhythm. The beat pulses through their veins. The song stops. The beat doesn't.

Julia grabs Luciano's shoulders and pulls him closer. No resistance. Luciano's arms encircle Julia's waist. No pulling back. They kiss. And, let go of all the burdens holding them down. Then, they fall back to earth. Julia pulls away.

JULIA
I'm sorry

LUCIANO
No. It was my fault.

JULIA
I can't do this.

LUCIANO
I know.

The two are silent for a moment.

JULIA
You've been a good friend to me. I
don't want to change that.

LUCIANO
Yeah. Me neither. So...no more
dancing?

JULIA
How about dinner instead?
EXT. STREET - LATER

Flaco and Victor head home, buzzed on beer. In the distance, they see a white KID about their age in jeans and a brown leather jacket alone and walking in their direction.

FLACO
What the hell?

VICTOR
What is it?

FLACO
Look at this *maricon*.

VICTOR
Let's cross the street.

FLACO
This is our neighborhood, man! We
don't have to be afraid of nobody!

VICTOR
Let's just go home, Flaco!

FLACO
(yelling)
Hey, white boy! Yeah, I'm talkin' to
you!

The kid's eyes bug out with fear as he realizes that he's walking into trouble. He turns and runs.

VICTOR
Okay, you scared him away. You happy
now?

FLACO
No! Let's get him!

Flaco chases after the kid.

VICTOR
Flaco! No!

Victor follows his friend. It seems like the kid is going to get away, but he trips. On the ground and vulnerable, he is set upon by Flaco.

KID
I got twenty dollars, man! That's all
I got!

Flaco spits on the ground in disgust.

FLACO
Give it to me! What you doing here?
Huh?

The kid pulls the bill out of his pocket. Flaco snatches it and stuffs it into his jeans.

Flaco kicks the boy in the side. The kid writhes in pain.

KID
Aaargh!

FLACO
Shut up!

Out of breath, Victor comes upon a brutal scene.

VICTOR
Flaco, what are you doing?

FLACO
Protecting what's mine.

A kick to the boy's ribs.

VICTOR
What are you talking about?

FLACO
We have to stick together, man. Don't
you remember.

VICTOR
Not like this. Flaco, let's go.

FLACO
I'm not going anywhere.

VICTOR
Come on! *Vamonos!*

Flaco turns his attention to the kid again. Another kick to the
side.

FLACO
Bet you ain't gonna come down here
again!

VICTOR
Stop it!

The kid coughs and sits up.

KID
I'm just trying to get home.

FLACO
Shut up!

KID
Spic son of a bitch!

FLACO
What did you say?

Victor stops Flaco from jumping on the kid.

KID
You heard me, motherfucker!

FLACO
Victor, let me go!

VICTOR
No, Flaco!

KID
Let him go! C'mon, spic!

FLACO
You hear that shit, man?

VICTOR
So what? Let's just go.

FLACO
I thought you was supposed to be my
brother. You on this faggot's side.

VICTOR
No.

FLACO
You gonna leave? Over this punk?

VICTOR
I don't want to be a part of this.

FLACO
Son of a bitch!

Flaco kicks the kid again.

VICTOR
Flaco! Stop it, man!

FLACO
Shit!

Flaco walks away, furious. Victor kneels down to talk to the kid.

VICTOR
I'm sorry about my fri....

The kid spits blood in Victor's face.

KID
Fuck you.

Victor wipes the blood out of his eyes. Angry, he jumps on top
of the kid. Flaco joins in. They pummel him.

INT. P.S. 33 CLASSROOM - DAY

Marta is the first to arrive for class. She sets her books on
her desk and wanders over to the window.

Marta watches the packed schoolyard below.

Mr. Vargas drops his briefcase on his huge wooden desk.

MR. VARGAS
Marta, you're a little early.

MARTA
I just thought I would study before
class.

MR. VARGAS
So, you're not avoiding your
classmates?

MARTA
No. Why would I do that?

MR. VARGAS
Right. Why would you?

Marta walks over to her desk and slides into her seat.

MARTA
I just like to be alone sometimes.

MR. VARGAS
Nothing wrong with that. It gives you
time to think.

MARTA
I just wish they didn't hate me so
much.

Mr. Vargas sits on top of the desk in front of Marta.

MR. VARGAS
Do you really think that? That they
hate you?

MARTA
Sometimes.

MR. VARGAS
I know it's been hard for you. Losing
your father...it's terrible. But,
some of these kids aren't as lucky as
you.

MARTA
Lucky?

MR. VARGAS
I mean, they never had the chance to
know their fathers. Some of them are
in foster homes. Or, living with
relatives who don't want them.

MARTA
I don't know how to be friends with
them.

MR. VARGAS
You don't have to. You just have to be
yourself and continue to do your best.
One day, this will be over and you'll
leave me and everybody else in this
building far behind. And, you will be

the girl...the woman you were meant to be.

JULIA'S LIVING ROOM - DAY

Julia arrives home from another night shift at City Deli. She finds Victor sleeping on the couch. She pauses to kiss him on the forehead before going to bed.

Victor wakes and sits up just as Julia reaches her bedroom door.

VICTOR
Mami?

JULIA
Yes?

VICTOR
I'm sorry.

JULIA
About what?

VICTOR
Everything. I promised Papi I would be a man. I was supposed to respect you, help you. I'm nothing. I'm not a man. I'm nobody now.

Julia sits on the coffee table. She grabs her son's hands.

JULIA
That's not true. I know who you are. You're my son. Your father's son. That means you don't give up. Like him. You never stop trying.

VICTOR
What if it's too late?

JULIA
It's never too late.

VICTOR
Will you forgive me?

JULIA
I could never turn you away, *mi hijo*.

EXT. ABANDONED LOT - NIGHT

Victor pulls weeds. It begins to rain. Victor keeps working. The rain becomes heavier. Victor continues to work.

INT. LINDA'S BEDROOM - SAME

Linda is packing away her mementos, props and costumes. She stops for a moment to watch the rain from her window.

INT. JULIA'S BEDROOM - SAME

THUNDER wakes Julia from her nap. Her eyes settle on a picture on the bedside table. It's Samuel and Julia, smiling and happy.

EXT. ABANDONED LOT - DAY

Victor works hard to finish clearing the lot. It's so hot, he pauses to get rid of his shirt.

Mr. Cray and four other PEOPLE from the neighborhood walk across the street to the lot.

VICTOR
It's a hot one.

MR. CRAY
Sometimes these bones don't know
nothin'.

VICTOR
Here to work?

MR. CRAY
(laughs)
Not me, son. Not me. Some of these
other folks just might be interested
in what you doin'.

A middle-aged heavysset black woman in a house coat, MRS. STEPTOE, comes forward.

MRS. STEPTOE
What are you doing?

VICTOR
Cleaning it up.

MRS. STEPTOE
For what?

VICTOR
I want to make this a garden again.

MRS. STEPTOE
This was a garden, Mr. Cray?

MR. CRAY

Boy knows what he's talkin' 'bout.
Just take some hard work to change it
back.

MRS. STEPTOE
Shoot! Boy looks like he's playing in
dirt to me.

A young Latino man in jeans and a army jacket comes forward.
DOMINGO carries an artist's sketch pad under his arm.

DOMINGO
What are you planning on growing?

VICTOR
Beans, tomatoes...

DOMINGO
What about peppers? You have to have
peppers.

VICTOR
OK, peppers.

MRS. STEPTOE
Can you grow some corn?

VICTOR
I think so.

MRS. STEPTOE
Okra?

VICTOR
What's okra?

MRS. STEPTOE
Mr. Cray, you better tell this boy
somethin'!

MR. CRAY
You tell him yourself. I hope you all
don't expect the boy to do this by
himself. That's not how it 'spose to
work. We have to help each other.

MRS. STEPTOE
I can't be out here diggin' around
like no pig.

MR. CRAY
Then you can't eat no corn. Or okrie.

DOMINGO
I'll help.

MRS. STEPTOE

Shoot. Tired of eatin' okra from a can
anyway.

In the meantime, the crowd has grown and it seems they all want
to have a say. Mr. Cray just stands back, grinning like a proud
father.

EXT. JULIA'S BUILDING - LATER

Domingo and Victor sit on the front steps, flipping through the
older man's sketch pad.

DOMINGO
I drew this when I was in Da Nang.

VICTOR
Where's that?

DOMINGO
Vietnam.

VICTOR
Where's that?

DOMINGO
Half a world away.

VICTOR
How long were you there?

DOMINGO
Long enough to learn I never want to
go back.

VICTOR
I used to draw a lot back home.

DOMINGO
You don't anymore?

VICTOR
I can't. The city...I don't feel it.
Does that make any sense?

DOMINGO
When I got home, it took me a long time
before I could even look at my
sketchbook. I thought it would just
remind of too many bad things.

VICTOR
How did you start again?

DOMINGO

There was always a moment...on the bus...in the park. I would think about how I needed to draw right then. But, I didn't have my pad and the moment was gone. You have to be patient. Your moments will come. Don't miss them.

INT. JULIA'S KITCHEN - NIGHT

Julia's at her kitchen table with a cup of tea. Marta enters to put a glass in the sink.

JULIA
Marta, I signed the permission slip and left it on your bureau for you.

MARTA
Thank you.

JULIA
Your father would be so proud of you right now. He always knew how smart you were.

MARTA
Really?

JULIA
Even as a little girl, you were always trying to figure out how something worked. When you were eight, you smashed his watch on a rock. He found you trying to put it back together.

MARTA
Did it work?

JULIA
(laughing at the memory)
No. I wanted to buy him another watch, but I never got the chance.

The kitchen falls silent for a couple of moments.

JULIA (CONT'D)
Well, you keep trying to figure it all out, Marta. We have to celebrate. Or, maybe we'll just wait until your Quinceanos.

Victor pops his head into the kitchen.

VICTOR
That's right. Fifteen. One five. You'll be a woman.

Marta rolls her eyes and puts her hands to her hips.

MARTA
What am I now?

VICTOR
A goofy kid.

MARTA
Shut up, stupid.

JULIA
Stop it, you two.

MARTA
Sorry.

JULIA
Don't tease your sister. It's a very
special occasion.

Marta flashes the tongue of victory before moving on to the sink
to wash dishes.

VICTOR
I was just kidding.

JULIA
Are you going to be around Saturday
night?

VICTOR
Why?

JULIA
I invited Luciano over for dinner.

VICTOR
Oh.

JULIA
He's my friend. He gave me a job. He
helped us get this apartment. It's the
least we can do to pay him back.

INT. JULIA'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Julia and Marta are busy in the kitchen while Victor stands watch
over the lot from the living room window.

There is a KNOCK at the door. Victor answers. It's Luciano
bearing flowers and a small wrapped present.

LUCIANO
You must be Victor.

Luciano extends his hand. Victor gives him a tepid handshake.

VICTOR
Nice to meet you.

LUCIANO
Mucho gusto. That's right, isn't it?

VICTOR
Yeah.

Julia enters the room to greet her guest.

JULIA
Come in...come in. I'm so glad you
could make it.

LUCIANO
Glad to be invited.

JULIA
Victor, put these in some water
please.

Victor groans and leaves for the kitchen.

LUCIANO
Smells good in here.

JULIA
Chicken and rice.

LUCIANO
My favorite. To be honest,
everything's my favorite.

Luciano pats his belly as Julia laughs.

JULIA
Please have a seat.

INT. JULIA'S KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

Marta cuts her tomatoes methodically. Julia bursts into the kitchen, grabs the knife from Marta and quickly finishes the task.

JULIA
Victor.

VICTOR
Yeah.

JULIA
Set the table, please. Marta, help
your brother.

MARTA

Yes, Mami.

JULIA
Victor, please don't embarrass me.
Luciano is a very nice man.

VICTOR
I'll try.

JULIA
You'll do more than that, okay?

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. JULIA'S KITCHEN - LATER

The table is set. Chicken and rice. Salad. Black beans. Bread pudding is in the oven. Everyone is seated. Julia is at the head of the table.

LUCIANO
This is quite a spread.

JULIA
I hope you like it.

LUCIANO
Do you mind if I say Grace?

JULIA
Of course not.

LUCIANO
Heavenly Father...Thank you for this good food we are about to enjoy as we pray for those who are hungry. Thank you for our health as we pray for those who are sick. Thank you for our friends as we pray for those who are lonely. We thank you for all our gifts as we pray for those who still wait. Amen.

Luciano grabs his fork. He looks across the table at Julia who returns a look of surprise.

JULIA
Where did you learn that?

LUCIANO
Read it somewhere once. Just stuck with me.

Julia shakes her head in disbelief and smiles.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. JULIA'S KITCHEN - LATER THAT NIGHT

After dinner. The table is messy with the remnants of the meal. Everyone is works on their slabs of bread pudding with generous dollops of cream.

VICTOR
May I be excused?

JULIA
Where are you going?

VICTOR
Just across the street.

JULIA
Don't stay out too late. And, bring a jacket.

VICTOR
Okay.

LUCIANO
It was good to finally meet you,
Victor.

VICTOR
Yeah, you too.

Victor leaves the kitchen.

MARTA
Me too?

LUCIANO
Hold on, little lady.

Luciano pulls the wrapped package from under the table.

MARTA
A present!

Marta claps her hands excitedly.

LUCIANO
I understand you have a special
birthday coming up.

MARTA
I'll be fifteen.

LUCIANO
Consider this an early present.

Marta rips the gift paper with glee. An old doll. Marta is confused.

MARTA

But, I don't play with dolls.

JULIA

I know, honey. But you need one for your party.

MARTA

What am I going to do with it? I don't have a baby sister to give it to.

JULIA

We're going to do something a little different. We can change tradition for one day.

MARTA

Okay. Thank you, sir.

LUCIANO

Luciano.

MARTA

Thank you, Luciano.

EXT. JULIA'S BUILDING - CONTINUOUS

Julia sits on the steps with Luciano as he smokes.

JULIA

That was really sweet of you.

LUCIANO

It's her big day. She deserves to have something go right. You too.

JULIA

Luciano...You've been such a good friend to me and my children, but...

LUCIANO

You're still in love with Samuel. I know.

JULIA

So, you understand why we can't be more.

LUCIANO

No, I don't. I know how you feel. It's like he could touch your shoulder any minute. I have my ghosts, too.

JULIA

What do you mean?

LUCIANO

Ten years ago, I had a wife. A little girl. We were on the Jersey Turnpike on our way to the Shore. Had a nice cottage down there. One of those goddamn big trucks skidded in front of us. I turned the wheel and stood on the brakes.

Luciano flicks his cigarette into the street.

JULIA
(softly)
Oh my God.

LUCIANO
We spun around and slammed into the truck. I guess I got knocked out 'cause I don't remember anything after that. When I woke up, a fireman told me my family was gone.

Julia grabs Luciano's hand.

JULIA
I'm so sorry.

LUCIANO
Every day it becomes harder to remember them at all. It's like a scar you get when you're a little kid. You grow up and look at it, but you don't know why it's there.

JULIA
I don't know what to say.

LUCIANO
I was like you once. I kept waiting for my family to come back. Then, I became angry. I kept my heart hidden for a long time. One day, I looked up and realized the world was still spinning and it wasn't gonna wait for me. So, I jumped back on.

JULIA
It's too soon.

LUCIANO
It doesn't have to be today. Someday is good enough for now. Just promise me someday.

JULIA
Okay, Luciano. Someday

Julia kisses Luciano on the cheek and walks up the stairs.

LUCIANO
'Cause I'll wait, Julia. I'll wait.

JULIA
Good night.

Luciano hops down the steps and WHISTLES for a cab.

EXT. JULIA'S BUILDING - DAY

Victor explains his plan for the lot to Mr. Cray. He shows him a sketch of a little white house.

MR. CRAY
A casi-what?

VICTOR
A *casita*. It means little house.

MR. CRAY
What are you gonna do with it?

VICTOR
It's a gathering place.

MR. CRAY
Now you gone crazy! This ain't Porto Ricko. What about the garden?

VICTOR
This can be more than just a garden. We can celebrate here. Birthdays...weddings...days of the Saints.

MR. CRAY
Boy, I'm a Baptist. I go to church once a week and that's enough!

VICTOR
Don't you see, Mr. Cray? This is just what we need around here.

MR. CRAY
I don't know, boy. Sounds crazy. Buildin' a shack in the city.

VICTOR
It's not a shack. Back home, we had a *casita*. My father and his friends built it. We ate good food... listened to music... we celebrated life there. We didn't have a lot, but being together with our friends made everything special. We could use special around here.

MR. CRAY
Lessee...I got a friend can get you
some scrap wood. You might be able to
build your cas-see-ta outta that.

INT. CITY DELI - NIGHT

Julia spots Linda in a booth, nervously tapping a spoon on the table. She's wearing a respectable ensemble: Orange jacket and skirt with low white boots, topped off with a white beret.

Julia sighs and walks over.

JULIA
What are you doing here?

LINDA
Have a cup of coffee with me, Luly.

JULIA
I'm working.

Linda looks around. Empty.

LINDA
C'mon! I got all dressed up for you!

JULIA
I'm still mad at you.

LINDA
I know. Two sugars and cream, okay?

JULIA
(sighs)
Okay.

Julia grabs the coffee and sets it in front of her sister. Linda takes a sip and makes a face.

LINDA
A little too sweet for me, baby sis.

JULIA
Bitter and sweet. Sounds like a good
combination

LINDA
(smiling)
You should know.

JULIA
Is that what you came here for? I
really don't have time for this!

LINDA
I know...I know. You're so busy.

JULIA

I don't want to play this game with you. You hurt me. You lied to me!

LINDA

And, what about me? Judging me to my face while I was trying to help you! Why do you think I left Caguas?

JULIA

I thought you were going off to the big city to be rich and famous.

LINDA

No matter what I did. No matter how hard I tried. I was never going to be as good as you. It didn't even matter when you ran off with Samuel. They still loved you more than me!

Linda begins to cry. Julia is shocked. She's never seen her sister cry like this.

JULIA

Linda...

LINDA

I wanted to show you I could be a good person. But, I just messed it up. When you and the kids left...I wanted to show you I could be a different person. I even quit the Frolic.

JULIA

Are you still dancing?

LINDA

Yeah, but not like that. Not anymore. I'm teaching now. I teach the cha-cha, the fox trot and the tango. Two classes a day, three days a week. I wanted you to see that I could be better.

JULIA

I don't need you to be better. I just need you to be my big sister again.

Julia offers her hand. Linda takes it. The sisters hug across the table.

EXT. ABANDONED LOT - DAY

Victor claws at the soil with a rake. A shadow falls. It's Flaco.

FLACO

Que paso? Where you been, man?

VICTOR
Busy.

FLACO
Busy playing garbageman? C'mon, let's go.

VICTOR
No, Flaco.

FLACO

What's wrong?

VICTOR
That boy...

FLACO
Aw, man. He deserved what he got.

VICTOR
Why? For going home?

FLACO

What do you think? You think he would have left us alone on his block?

Victor stands up.

VICTOR
I don't know. It doesn't matter.

FLACO
He called us spics, man.

VICTOR
After we beat him up.

FLACO
What difference does it make? You gonna be his friend now?

VICTOR
I'm not going with you, Flaco.

FLACO
We can steal a couple of beers and hang out.

VICTOR
Go away.

Flaco gets in Victor's face.

FLACO
You a punk, man.

VICTOR
Get out of here.

FLACO
Maybe I want to stay.

VICTOR
Don't make me...

FLACO
What? You gonna fight me?

VICTOR
I don't want to fight. Just leave me
alone.

FLACO
Pendejo!

Mr. Cray crosses over to check up on Victor. He sees the boy push Flaco and knock him to the ground.

Flaco scrambles to his feet and takes off down the street.

EXT. WILLIS AVENUE - DAY

Linda and Marta walk down the bustling street.

MARTA
Am I going to feel any different?

LINDA
You're still gonna be a kid. This
Quinceanos thing is just a racket.

MARTA

Is that true?

LINDA
Back on the island, you had to marry
off girls somehow.

MARTA
They don't do that here, tia.

LINDA
Take advantage of women? I guess
you're right. Forgot we were living in
Paradise.

Marta tugs on Linda's jacket. She sees a frilly pink dress in a store window.

MARTA
What about that one?

LINDA

It's the right color, Marta. But, with all the ribbons and tassels, you'll look like a slice of wedding cake.

MARTA

The dress has to be pink?

LINDA

That's the tradition. People do a lot of different things.

MARTA

Mami said we would make our own tradition.

LINDA

That's how they start. Don't worry your pretty little head. You're going to have the best birthday ever, *princesa*.

EXT. CASITA - DAY

Domingo and a few other NEIGHBORS put the casita's frame together. Victor is in the rear of the casita with Mr. Cray.

MR. CRAY

Lookin' good. Got my greens comin' up just fine.

VICTOR

Pretty soon, you're going to see corn, beans, tomatoes...you name it.

MR. CRAY

What about the okra?

VICTOR

Mrs. Steptoe should be happy.

MR. CRAY

That boy still giving you trouble?

VICTOR

No.

MR. CRAY

Punch me in my face, you won't see me either. I'll get you back tho'. You won't see it comin', but I'll get you back.

EXT. STREET NEAR JULIA'S BUILDING - DAY

Marta is on her way to school. She sees Flaco ahead, waiting for her. She crosses the street. Flaco runs to catch up with Marta.

FLACO
Where you going?

MARTA
School. Like you should be.

FLACO
I would go, but they kicked me out.

MARTA
I can't talk to you.

Marta starts to walk faster.

FLACO
Hey! Why not?

MARTA
I don't talk to strangers.

FLACO
C'mon, Marta.

MARTA
I have to go.

FLACO
Can I walk you to school?

MARTA
I don't know you.

FLACO
But your brother does. He would be mad at me if I didn't make sure you got to school safe

MARTA
OK.

A shy smile crosses Marta's lips.

INT. LINDA'S LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Linda is curled up on her couch, watching television. There's a BANG at the door. Linda peers through the peephole and flings the door open. It's Jen, bruised and banged up. Linda pulls the girl inside and onto the couch.

LINDA
What the hell happened, kid?

JEN

After you left, Jerry was canned and they brought in a new manager. A real tough guy. He kept wanting me to do more than dance, you know.

LINDA
He beat you up?

JEN
No. He had someone else do it while he watched. Trippy, huh?

LINDA
Yeah. Want to go to the hospital?

JEN
No! I mean...I can't do that. They'll call my parents and I can't...

Jen bursts into tears. Pain. Anger. Sadness

LINDA
Shhh...It's okay, honey. It's okay.
Linda holds Jen, trying to sooth the girl's pain.

INT. JULIA'S KITCHEN - DAY

Victor sits at the table eating cereal. Julia joins him with a cup of tea.

VICTOR
Mami, you still think about Papi.

JULIA
All the time.

VICTOR
I miss him so much.

JULIA
If he could see what you're doing across the street, he would be so proud.

VICTOR
Sometimes I just want to talk to him. Ask him what he would do.

JULIA
I think he would tell you what I'm going to tell you. You can't do everything. It's okay to ask for help. It doesn't make you weak. It makes you a human being like the rest of us.

EXT. LINDA'S FIRE ESCAPE - DAY

Jen sits outside wrapped up in a robe borrowed from Linda.

LINDA (O.S.)
Hey, kid! Want some pancakes?

JEN
Sure!

LINDA (O.S.)
Tea?

JEN
Yeah!

Linda appears in the window.

LINDA
How are you feeling?

JEN
My head hurts like hell.

LINDA
I'll grab a couple of aspirin.

JEN
Thanks. Hey, have you seen Victor?

LINDA
C'mon, kid. I just made up with his mother.

JEN
It's just that he was so nice to me. I don't want him to think I was just one of those girls.

LINDA
Watch it. I was one of those girls.

JEN
You know what I mean.

LINDA
My nephew is a good kid, Jen. I don't want to see him get hurt.

INT. P.S. 33 CLASSROOM - DAY

Marta helps a younger STUDENT with her homework.

MARTA
It helps if you think about the multipliers as boxes and dots. So,

five times four...imagine there are
four boxes with five dots in each of
them.

Marta draws the boxes and dots for the young girl.

STUDENT
Okay.

MARTA
Now you count the dots.

The girl uses her pencil to count the dots.

STUDENT
Twenty.

MARTA
Right. So, five times four is...

STUDENT
Twenty.

MARTA
Good.

EXT. P.S. 33 - LATER

It's late, well past dismissal time. Marta walks down the stone
steps of the building. Flaco waits for her.

MARTA
Hi.

FLACO
Hi.

MARTA
How long have you been here?

FLACO
Not long.

Marta and Flaco walk down the street.

MARTA
I was wondering...

FLACO
Yeah.

MARTA
My birthday party is this weekend.
Would you like to come?

FLACO

I don't know. Victor...

MARTA
It's my birthday.

FLACO
Okay.

Flaco takes Marta's hand as they continue down the street.

EXT. CASITA - NIGHT

Victor is getting ready for Marta's party. He draws an outline of Puerto Rico on the door of the casita. Jen enters the garden.

JEN
Hey.

Victor smiles at the pleasant surprise until he notices Jen's bruises.

VICTOR
(angrily)
What happened to you?

JEN
It doesn't matter. I'm okay now.
You've been busy.

VICTOR
My sister's birthday is coming up.

JEN
Linda was telling me. You going to
have the party out here?

VICTOR
That's the plan.

JEN
It's nice. Did you do all this?

VICTOR
No. I had a lot of help. Let me show
you something.

Victor leads Jen into the rear of the garden. He stops at a bare spot.

JEN
What's this?

VICTOR
I don't know what to plant here. What
do you think?

JEN
You're asking me?

VICTOR
I don't want to plant any more
vegetables.

JEN
How about a apple tree? My parents
used to take me apple picking in the
fall. My mother made these apple pies
that were like heaven.

VICTOR
I didn't think I would ever see you
again.

JEN
I missed you.

VICTOR
Sorry about everything.

JEN
You don't owe me an apology. You're
just about the only friend I have
right now.

VICTOR
Friend?

JEN
Let's say that for now.

INT. CITY DELI - LATER THAT NIGHT

The rush is over. Julia and Luciano sit in a booth.

LUCIANO
What a night!

JULIA
I'm glad it was busy. When I'm busy,
I don't worry.

LUCIANO
You're such a bad liar. I could see it
in your eyes all night. What's wrong?

JULIA
Nothing. That's what bothers me.
Marta is doing well in school. Victor
is busy with the casita. Even Linda is
great.

LUCIANO

So what's the problem. Julia, be happy.

JULIA
I'm afraid to be happy. The last time I was, everything fell apart.

EXT. CASITA - DAY

Marta's 15th birthday. Pink balloons tied to the chain link fence. A homemade banner - FELIZ QUINCEANOS! - HAPPY 15th BIRTHDAY! - hangs from the casita. Traditional music fills the air. Food is everywhere. The neighborhood is vibrant and alive with people.

Victor sits on the porch with Mr. Cray.

MR. CRAY
You should be proud of yourself. You brought this place back to life.

VICTOR
Not just me. I had a lot of help.

MR. CRAY
Don't be afraid to take credit, boy. We didn't start diggin' out heah. You did. False modesty ain't nothin' but a lie. You can crow today. Crow loud.

Julia arranges a table filled with cakes, cookies and snacks of all kinds. She's wearing a long red dress with short gathered sleeves. Luciano arrives, carrying a white box tied with bakery string. He's dressed in beige slacks and a white guayabera shirt.

JULIA
Thank you for coming.

Julia gives Luciano a peck on the cheek.

LUCIANO
I wouldn't miss it. Is there room for this?

Julia takes the white box from Luciano and balances it in her hand as though weighing it.

JULIA
What is it?

LUCIANO
My specialty. Cannolis...straight from the bakery!

The two share a laugh.

INT. JULIA'S BATHROOM - SAME

Linda is helping Marta with her hair. She's wearing the same dress as her sister while Marta is in a pink version.

LINDA
Nervous, kid?

MARTA
A little.

LINDA
Try to relax. This is your day.

MARTA
Thank you for the dress, tia.

LINDA
Of course. Anything for you, sweetie.

EXT. CASITA - DAY

Jen is amazed by the atmosphere in the casita. An OLD LADY sitting at a table with her head wrapped in a multicolored scarf catches her attention. She's crushing leaves with a mortar and pestle. She motions for Jen to step forward. Jen looks around.

JEN
Me?

OLD LADY
Yes, dear. Come closer.

JEN
I'm sorry for staring.

OLD LADY
You look for answers, but you look in the wrong place.

JEN
What do you mean?

OLD LADY
The world isn't where the answers are.

The old lady takes Jen's hand and places it over her heart.

JEN
I'm not looking for anything.

OLD LADY
Your heart is. That's what brought you to me.

The old lady sprinkles the crushed leaves into a wooden cup. She pours water into the cup. The water turns gold.

JEN
What is that?

OLD LADY
Yerba buena.

JEN
Tea?

OLD LADY
More than tea. It clears your head...cleanses your soul. The wrong that was done to you, child. All the wrong. Drink and let it go.

Jen looks at the cup. She picks it up with trembling hands. Jen gulps down the *yerba buena*. The bitter taste shows on her face.

OLD LADY (CONT'D)
Wait...

JEN
It got sweeter!

OLD LADY
You swallowed all the wrong. After this, you live free again.

EXT. CASITA - SAME

Marta stands at the head of the table, surrounded by well-wishers. Her birthday cake sits in front of her with fifteen blazing candles. Julia and Victor stand beside Marta as she makes her wish and blows the candles out.

EXT. CASITA - NIGHT

On the porch of the casita, TWO MEN play traditional music. One strums a three-string guitar while the other keeps rhythm on the conga. The crowd claps along. The song ends to applause. The duo starts another song: an old jibaro ballad.

Julia is cleaning up. Luciano taps her shoulder.

LUCIANO
Can we make an exception to the "no dancing" rule?

JULIA
(smiling)
Only because it's my daughter's birthday.

Linda leans against the fence with Jen, watching the action. As the fourth member of Marta's court, Jen is now wearing the same red dress.

JEN
This is great. It's like this is the first real party I've been to. Know what I mean?

LINDA
It's just getting started, kid.

Victor approaches Jen.

VICTOR
Would you like to dance?

Victor is watching his aunt for her approval.

LINDA
Are you asking me or her?

JEN
Yes.

Victor leads Jen into the swirling crowd of dancing couples.

VICTOR
Some of the older people here...they remember the jibaro traditions.

JEN
Jibaro?

VICTOR
The closest word you have for it is hillbilly.

JEN
(laughs)
That makes sense!

VICTOR
But it means more than that. Jibaros make a pact with the land. It's everything to them. To us. Like this song. It's about a man longing to return to his one true love. At first, you think it's a woman. But, it's the island.

JEN
That's beautiful.

Victor is no longer the unsure boy in the dressing room at the Frolic. He's a confident young man who embraces life. That's the man who kisses Jen now. She rests her head on Victor's shoulder as they continue to dance.

EXT. CASITA - LATER

It's near the end of Marta's birthday celebration. Her mother and the rest of her court, Linda and Jen, guide her to the *batey*, the entrance to the casita. Party guests gather to watch this last ritual. A flock of little girls wait as Julia coaches her daughter.

JULIA

This is it. Say good-bye to childhood.

Julia hands Marta the doll Luciano had given her at dinner. She grabs her daughter's shoulders gently and turns her body away from the eager little girls.

MARTA

Just like the bouquet at a wedding.
Toss it over your shoulder to the girls. Then, we'll get you into your red dress and heels.

Julia stands back to watch with everyone else. Marta seems to be ready. The little girls squeal in anticipation. The guests are clapping along with the band.

Marta turns to the little girls, to the crowd. And, walks away into the casita. Murmurs of confusion rise. Julia appeals to the crowd.

JULIA

She's just a little nervous.

INT. CASITA - NIGHT

The casita is furnished simply. A table and chairs for dominoes. A few pictures on the wall next to a map of Puerto Rico. Julia finds Marta crying.

JULIA

It's okay, honey. We'll just go back out there and...

MARTA

But, I don't want to Mami! I can't!

JULIA

What's wrong? You don't like the dress. Is it the doll?

MARTA

It's not the stupid doll, okay!

Julia is shocked at Marta's behavior. She kneels next to her daughter.

JULIA

What is it, honey?

MARTA

This whole thing! I haven't been a little girl in so long. But, none of you have been around to notice. This whole thing is a lie.

JULIA

With everything that's happened...you were always strong. I just didn't worry. You kept going along, doing well in school. Helping me keep things in order.

MARTA

Everyone is so selfish. Worried about themselves. But, it doesn't matter anymore. I finally have someone who cares about me.

JULIA

What are you talking about, sweetheart?

EXT. CASITA - DAY

Luciano is sitting at the gift table. Everyone is waiting for Marta and Julia to return. Flaco arrives. Victor sees him and approaches.

VICTOR

What are you doing here?

FLACO

I was invited.

VICTOR

By who?

FLACO

Your baby sister.

VICTOR

You need to leave now.

FLACO

You gonna make me leave?

VICTOR

If I have to.

Luciano puts himself between the two boys.

LUCIANO

Let's break this up now! This isn't the time or the place for this nonsense.

FLACO
This isn't your business, old man.

LUCIANO
You're gonna ruin a sweet little
girl's party. That makes it my
business, punk!

FLACO
I'm a guest.

Marta appears at the door of the casita.

MARTA
You're here!

She runs to Flaco and the couple hug. Victor is enraged. He tries to pull them apart. Marta is crying and screaming. Flaco holds her tighter. Jen and Linda jump into the fray.

Flaco releases Marta. Her family stands there, stunned. Julia comes out the casita.

JULIA
What are you doing, Marta?

MARTA
What am I doing? What am I doing? I'm
trying to be happy! It's okay for all
of you, but not for me? Flaco is good
to me. He loves me.

LINDA
We love you too, Marta.

MARTA
Not enough, *tia*.

Flaco holds out his hand to Marta. She takes it and they leave. Victor starts to go after them.

JULIA
Victor! Let them go!

VICTOR
Mami! We have to stop her!

JULIA
No. We have to let her go.

The crowd is silent as Julia pulls down the banner.

EXT. JULIA'S BUILDING - NIGHT

The street is quiet as Luciano sits with Julia.

JULIA
Thank you.

LUCIANO
For what?

JULIA
For helping my family.

LUCIANO
I wasn't gonna let anybody get hurt.
Marta?

JULIA
Nothing. I've never seen her like
that. I didn't know how much she was
hurting inside.

LUCIANO
How could you? She didn't say
anything.

JULIA
I'm her mother. It's my job and I
failed.

Luciano takes Julia's hand.

LUCIANO
You did your best, Julia. That's all
anyone can do.

JULIA
And, it wasn't good enough. My
daughter's out there. With that boy.

LUCIANO
I know. Sorry. You know, I always
imagine what it would have been like
to see my little girl all grown up.

JULIA
What was her name?

LUCIANO
Abigail. Abby. We named her after my
wife's grandmother.

Linda walks up.

LINDA
Luly, you okay?

JULIA
She's gone, Linda. My little girl is
gone.

Julia breaks down. Linda and Luciano try to comfort her.

INT. CASITA - NIGHT

Victor and Jen sit in the casita. Victor is wound up after the way the party ended.

VICTOR
That son of a bitch! My baby
sister...Jesus Christ! She's out
there with him.

JEN
It will be okay. Marta will come
back...

VICTOR
Will she? Flaco tried to muscle me. He
wanted me to sell drugs with him. He
wanted to sell them here.

JEN
Out of the casita?

VICTOR
Yeah. I don't get it. Why can't
something just be what it is? Why do
people always want to twist it into
something else?

JEN
What do you mean?

VICTOR
I built this place so people could
step away from their troubles even for
just a few minutes. It was supposed to
be like back home.

JEN
That's the problem. Victor. This is
the Bronx. Like you said, people
always try to twist things into
something else.

VICTOR
You're right. I was so blind.

JEN
I didn't say stop trying. Just keep
your eyes on what's real.

Jen moves in and kisses Victor deeply.

INT. FLACO'S PLACE - NIGHT

In the small, empty room a few blocks away from the Riveras. Flaco and Marta are making out. He keeps trying to reach under her dress. She slaps his hand away.

MARTA
Flaco! Stop it!

FLACO
C'mon, baby. You supposed to be a woman now, right?

MARTA
That's just made up. My aunt told me.

FLACO
The stripper aunt?

MARTA
She doesn't do that anymore.

FLACO
Marta, I can't help myself. You're so sexy. Can you blame me for wanting you so bad?

MARTA
I want to wait.

FLACO
But, I thought you loved me?

MARTA
I do love you. I just...

FLACO
Just what? Look at your family? What do you think they've been doing? They tell you this is bad. But, they're doing it!

Flaco nibbles on Marta's ear and kisses her neck. She turns and kisses him. Flaco reaches under her dress and rubs her breasts. Marta doesn't stop him.

Flaco pulls at the band of her underwear. Marta doesn't stop him. She pulls off Flaco's jacket and reaches into his shirt.

Flaco slides off Marta's underwear and pulls off his pants. He gets on top of Marta.

MARTA
Flaco...wait...

They continue to kiss.

FLACO
C'mon, baby...this is what you want.

MARTA
No...no. Flaco...stop.

Flaco grabs Marta's hands and forces them over her head.

FLACO
You a woman now...I'm gonna make you
a woman now...

MARTA
No! Stop it, Flaco!

Marta screams and cries as Flaco rapes her.

FLACO
This is what you wanted....this is
what you wanted...stop crying!

Marta shakes her head in disbelief again and again. The pain.
The violation. The betrayal. The anger. All she can do is cry.

INT. JULIA'S KITCHEN - DAY

Linda and Julia are having coffee.

JULIA
Luciano and Victor are looking for
her. I should be with them.

LINDA
No. You have to stay here. She could
come home.

JULIA
It's a miracle no one got hurt last
night.

LINDA
No kidding. It could have been a lot
worse than it was. Don't worry she'll
be back. Victor told me all about that
punk. Marta's a smart girl. She'll
figure it out.

Julia goes to the sink to rinse out her coffee cup. The phone
rings. Julia picks up the yellow wall phone.

JULIA
Hello...

INT. LINCOLN HOSPITAL - DAY

The Riveras, Luciano and Jen are gathered in a sparsely furnished
waiting room. A young doctor, DR. FISHER, arrives to talk to
Julia.

DR. FISHER
Mrs. Rivera?

Julia stands.

JULIA

Yes.

DR. FISHER

Could you come with me, please? I'd like to talk with you in private.

JULIA

This is my family. We can talk here.

DR. FISHER

Okay...Well, the police found your daughter wandering the streets near Hunt's Point. At first, they thought...well, they realized she was the victim of a crime.

VICTOR

What happened to my sister?

DR. FISHER

It seems she was assaulted...sexually.

Gasps escape from Linda and Jen. Victor and Luciano each hold onto Julia.

JULIA

Did they catch the boy?

DR. FISHER

That's the problem. Your daughter hasn't talked since the police picked her up.

LINDA

Can we see her?

DR. FISHER

For now, just her mother.

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - DAY

Marta is lying on a hospital bed. The shades are drawn, the lights off. Julia enters. Marta stares straight ahead. Julia pulls a chair next to the bed and sits.

JULIA

Marta? I'm here, honey. I'll be right here. However long it takes.

INT. HOSPITAL CHAPEL - DAY

Linda and Victor are sitting in a pew in front of the altar. A wooden Jesus looks down at them from the cross. The chapel is empty.

LINDA
I haven't been in a place like this in
a long time, kid.

VICTOR
What's the point? Nobody's listening.

LINDA
That's not true. I prayed every day I
would see your mother again.

VICTOR
But we lost everything and now this.
It was stupid of me to build that
place. This is all my fault. I should
just tear it all down

LINDA
Don't you dare! What you did was
important because it mattered. To you
and to everybody else who helped you.
The casita gave you a purpose. A
reason to go on. Some people never
find that.

VICTOR
It's not worth it. It's not worth
this.

LINDA
Did your mother ever tell you how she
met your father?

VICTOR
No.

LINDA
We grew up on a sugar plantation. Our
parents gave us the best of
everything. Your mother was supposed
to marry an older man. A wealthy man.
Wilson was his name, I think.

Victor gives his aunt a surprised look.

LINDA (CONT'D)
Yes. Your father was a simple worker
on our plantation. He was a cutter. He
and Luly met and fell in love. Your
mother knew our parents would never
accept her choice. So, they ran away.
They started their little farm to
survive and it became their home. A
lot of bad things happened to them
along the way. But, you and your
sister came from that love. When
something is that special, that

important, you can't let anything
stop you.

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - DAY

Julia is still sitting with Marta, holding her hand.

MARTA
Mami?

JULIA
I'm here, honey. I'm here.

MARTA
I'm sorry, Mami.

JULIA
You don't have anything to be sorry
about.

Marta cries. Julia sits on the edge of the bed and pulls her daughter into her arms, gently rubbing her back.

EXT. CASITA - NIGHT

Victor, Mr. Cray and Luciano are sitting on the porch of the casita.

LUCIANO
I only understand so much about why
people do what they do.

MR. CRAY
Son, the boy was jealous, plain and
simple. He wanted to hurt you 'cause
you got everything he don't. You got
a good family, good friends.

INT. JULIA'S BEDROOM - DAY

Marta is home now, sleeping. Julia watches over her daughter.

EXT. CASITA - DAY

Victor nails the door to the casita shut and padlocks the front gate.

EXT. DESERTED BUILDING - NIGHT

Victor stands in front of the empty building, switches on a flashlight and carefully makes his way into the decrepit building through a loosely boarded-up window.

INT. DESERTED BUILDING - CONTINUOUS

Victor is trying to sneak down the hallway to Flaco's hideout. The creaky wood floor threatens to give away his presence with every step. Victor finally reaches the door and kicks it open.

INT. FLACO'S PLACE - CONTINUOUS

He springs into the room, ready for anything Flaco might try. But, there is no attack. A quick sweep with his flashlight confirms what Victor feared. Flaco is gone.

INT. DESERTED BUILDING - NIGHT

Dejected, Victor walks down the grand staircase. He's about to climb through the window when he hears a noise. Victor switches off his flashlight, backs away from the window and hides underneath the staircase.

A few moments later, a thin figure climbs through the window. The figure heads for the staircase as Victor watches from below. He slowly emerges from his hiding place to see Flaco walk up the splintered and squeaky stairs. Victor switches on his flashlight.

VICTOR

Flaco!

Flaco turns toward the sound of his name. His eyes betray his fear at seeing Victor standing there. Flaco jumps for the window and wriggles through the loose boards.

EXT. DESERTED BUILDING - SAME

Flaco crawls out the window to the ground below and runs. Victor smashes his way through the boarded-up window and gives chase.

Flaco runs into the street and flips over the hood of a car skidding to a stop. He gets to his feet and takes off. Victor jumps atop the hood of the car and launches himself toward Flaco.

Flaco pours on an extra burst of speed and avoids Victor's grasp. The boys keep running. Flaco ducks into an alley. Victor slows down to round the corner after him. The fugitive splashes through puddles at top speed.

Flaco jumps up for a fire escape ladder and pulls it down. He scrambles up. Victor grabs the ladder and follows Flaco up the side of the building. He reaches the top, his feet crunch gravel as he searches for Flaco.

EXT. ROOFTOP - NIGHT

Out of the shadows, Flaco swings a pipe at Victor and connects. Victor collapses to the ground. Flaco kicks Victor in the side.

FLACO
We were supposed to stick together!
Asi hermanos. Remember?

Flaco raises the pipe above his head. Victor throws a handful of gravel in Flaco's face and jumps to his feet. He punches the disoriented boy in the stomach.

VICTOR
What about my sister, huh?

Flaco blindly grabs Victor and wrestles him to the ground. Victor throws Flaco off and gets to his feet. The enemies face off.

FLACO
She was begging me for it!

Victor starts to jump at Flaco, but sees he's pulled a switchblade. He makes a couple of feints at Victor. Flaco lunges. Victor deftly avoids the strike, grabs Flaco's arm and twists it.

The knife falls into the alley below. Victor wrenches the arm until Flaco howls in pain. He falls to his knees, defeated. Victor swings a hard right and knocks him out. He drags Flaco down to the street.

EXT. CASITA - DAY

A celebration is in full swing. It seems like the whole neighborhood is there. Music blares from a portable turntable and the playful laughter of children reverberate across the casita.

Mr. Cray sits on the porch, watching his community come together. Victor takes a seat next to the old man.

MR. CRAY
You give some of Mrs. Steptoe's okrie a try?

VICTOR
(frowns)
Too slimy.

MR. CRAY
Always hated okrie. My mama use to make me eat it. Could not leave the table 'til I ate every las' slimy bit. Mr. Cray looks over to see Mrs. Steptoe doling out food to the PEOPLE lined up, plates in hand.

MR. CRAY (CONT'D)

Help me up, boy.

Victor stands and helps Mr. Cray get to his feet.

VICTOR
Where are you going?

MR. CRAY
Go give that okrie a try.

VICTOR
Thought you hated it.

MR. CRAY
Maybe I did. Maybe I jus' didn't wanna
lissen to my mama. Been so long, don't
really know. Gettin' older, you find
out that your mama was right most of
the time.

Victor smiles as he watches Mr. Cray dodder over in Mrs. Steptoe's direction.

The boy turns his attention to the far corner of the casita. Jen is touching the base of a young apple tree. Victor jogs over to her.

JEN
I can't believe you planted it.

VICTOR
That's what you wanted.

JEN
I can't bake like my mom.

VICTOR
You could bring some apples home with
you.

JEN
That would be pretty cool. But, I'm
right where I want to be

Jen and Victor's kiss is interrupted by a tap on the shoulder from Linda. She throws up a peace sign. Linda hugs her nephew and then pulls Jen in for a hug as well.

LINDA
So, am I gonna get credit for getting
you two together or the blame?

VICTOR
I think Mami's cool with it now.

LINDA
She better be. Check it out, kids.

Linda points to Julia and Luciano walking hand in hand. They stop underneath a trellis entwined with ivy and kiss.

JEN

What about you, Linda? Where's your true romance?

LINDA

Kid, I've been burned so many times, I should have skin grafts. I've got no problem flying solo. Besides, I have my family now.

INT. CASITA - LATER

Away from the noise of the celebration, the Rivera family, Luciano and Jen stand in front of an canvas-covered easel. Victor steps forward.

Victor slips the canvas off the painting. It's the casita on a beautiful summer day with children playing and flowers in full bloom.

Looming over it all with arms outstretched, both presenting and protecting the casita, is Samuel, a peaceful and knowing smile on his lips.

Marta embraces her brother while the rest of the family comes forward to admire Victor's work.

FADE OUT