

Fair Enough

2001

“¡Callate los pinches sicos! Usas el telefono cuando yo te diga!” That’s what he shouted.
(“Shut the fuck up! You’ll use the phone when I say you can!”)

That’s what he shouted as he slammed her head against the wall, over and over again. Each slam reverberating across the walls of the tiny apartment. Each slam, a physical manifestation of my uncle’s own insecurities. Boom, why can’t I provide for you? Boom!, why can’t I stop my drug addiction? BOOM!, why do I feel so weak? I sat there blank faced, 5 years old, next to my two other uncles, both 6 years older than me, just watching my aunt. She cried out the first couple of times: “Stop! Please just stop!” Tears crawled down her face, but after the fourth hit she stopped yelling. Her face twitching, disfigured with pain, the tears pouring, her mouth still wide open like it wanted to yell, to cry out for help, but it couldn’t.

What I felt at the moment, I don’t really remember. The fear had long since gone. This scenario was all too common, both in my family and just about every other household. Sad? I don’t think so. I was much too young and naïve to really know what sadness felt like. Hell, even the pity had left at that point. Why don’t you just leave him, I thought. Why in the world would you ever put up with this? By that point, my emotions were numbed. I knew of hate, fear, and aggression, but concepts like love and comfort escaped me.

What baffled me the most was the fact that my aunt just wanted to order a pizza on the phone. I counted 7 slams. Seven times her skull made contact with the wall. 7 + \$10.99, a hefty price for a pizza.

Sitting there, I wondered: Why? This isn’t right. This shouldn’t be happening. Why’d he always have to be so angry? I was too young to grasp my uncle’s emotions. Looking back now, it’s a little clearer where his hatred came from. The insecurity, the fear, the aggression—it all stemmed from a cycle that began long before my uncle’s birth.

He was born into an already-fractured family, no money, no status, and barely any food to eat. More brothers and sisters than you could count on two hands. His father was just as angry, or maybe even angrier than he was. Coming to the United States was his last ditch effort for a better life, and yet, it didn’t seem all that better. The hunger was replaced with racism, overwork, and exhaustion. I wonder if he thought the same things I did growing up. Cursing God, wondering why he wasn’t born into a rich family, why he couldn’t have a happy and carefree life, why in the hell it always seemed like he worked 10 times harder than everyone around him just to receive a tenth of what they got.

For the longest time, I thought that money could cure my family's problems. Too many times I heard a fight start with, "Because we don't have enough money!" and end with, "Because we don't have enough money!" And, to an extent, more money would have helped. Not having to be hungry, not worrying whether we could pay our next bill, not working 60+ hours a week to make ends meet—yeah, that would have helped. But that wouldn't have solved our problems.

No, a lesson on humility and care would have definitely gone a lot farther. More money would have just created more greed, and more separation within the family. If we could have just learned to be happy with what we had and to love each other, then it would have been so much easier to band together. To forgive each other and not berate ourselves for every little mistake we made. Wealth could have masked the pain we all felt, but it would never bring us the quality of life we all craved.

2004

It was midnight when the officer knocked on our door. My mother was frantic, with tears rolling down her face. I sat still, one eye staring at the television, the other on my mom and the officer. In her broken English she was giving a description of my sister, only 3 years older than me, because she had run away from home. In the following two hours, I had never before seen so much fear, anger, and determination on any face. It took two hours for my mom to find my sister.

My sister had made it 40 minutes outside the city, and she was staying with some boy from her high school. I was told to stay inside the car while my mom and her boyfriend, Marcos, went to knock on the door. But before they could get out of the car, my sister came out of the apartment with the boy. I'm not entirely sure what happened, or what kind of conversation they had, but at some point I saw Marcos grab the kid by the neck and my mom, panicking, trying to stop him. At the moment I was angry at my sister for making my mother worry so much, but the more I thought about what happened, the less I could blame her.

Skippping class, a bad attitude, running away, even getting pregnant at 14. No, she wasn't the perfect child, but she did her best under the circumstances. I was fortunate. When the brunt of our family's difficulties hit, I was too young to really understand and internalize what was happening. My sister felt every little impact with full force. Her asthma was always worse than mine, the anxiety rampaged through her body, and she never really had an outlet for her depression. On the surface, it would be easy to label her a bad child, weak, or irresponsible, but she was so much more than that. She was and still is undoubtedly one of the strongest-willed people I have ever met. Her mind is beautiful and bright, and with the cards she was dealt, I can think of very few people that could come out as successful as she did.

I was fortunate, though. She was my only other blood sibling, but I grew up with two uncles that were more like brothers than anything else. At the very least when I got angry I could fight my uncles; when I was anxious they were there to tell me to stop being a pussy; when I was sad they always had a story to cheer me up. So many times I prayed that my sister could have been given a

better chance. Or at least an outlet for her emotions. I wished somebody would have told her that things were going to get better. But, unfortunately that's not what happened.

I wish I could say my sister was the only emotionally distraught teenager I knew growing up, but she wasn't. There were easily at least another ten girls I knew that went through similar struggles. I wonder what would have happened if I had learned to properly talk with my sister. I wonder if she could have gone through with her college application. If she wouldn't have developed such bad chronic depression over the years. If she could have realized her full potential, instead of falling into the continuous cycle that so many Hispanic women fall into. She'd committed so many errors, and nobody ever told her that it was ok. That nobody's perfect. That it's through failing that you get stronger. She received her master's degree in cosmetology, but she's so scared of failing now that she won't even think about opening a salon. If only somebody had taught our family how to communicate and embrace each other. Then maybe things would have turned out a little better.

2008

It was the middle of the night. I was pretending to be asleep, and there she was, walking, each step heavier than the one before, until she stopped, staring right at me. Apparently she'd been doing this for weeks, but I never realized it. At least, not until my uncle told me. If memory serves me correctly, this was the second of many mental breakdowns my mom would have. Barely in her thirties, she had already worked her body to exhaustion. Everything she owned, everything she had accomplished, every little luxury my family was allowed to have was because of the sacrifices she made. She came here, fifteen years old without a high school education, not speaking a word of English, but she managed to forge a life out of nothing, thanks to sheer will and determination.

Yet, for some godforsaken reason, everything began to slip away from her. Her boyfriend of seven years cheated on her with a string of women, so she kicked him out. Our finances reached their breaking point, and we lost the house my mother had worked so hard to buy. That broke her.

I wasn't frustrated then. I wanted to help her so desperately, but I had no idea how. Twelve years old and not once had I heard the words "I love you" addressed to anyone in my family. We were raised to be tough, ignore everything, and do your job. Emotions only held you back, or so I thought. And so that's how I dealt with the situation.

She pulled me aside one day. She apologized for not being a better mother. For not being able to give us a more stable life. She told me how she left my father years ago because he put a gun to her head and threatened to pull the trigger. She kept apologizing, and all I wanted to do was tell her how wrong she was. How she was the only reason I could put up with all the bullshit we had dealt with. I wanted to tell her how much I loved her, but nothing came out of my mouth. The silence lasted maybe five minutes. We sat outside just staring, the both of us. And finally, I just walked away. After all, I had an algebra test to study for.

2012

For the first time in a long time, I finally had some time to rest. Family life was starting to settle down for a bit. The school year had just ended, and I found myself with nothing to do but think. I kept wondering how I could help the family, how I could make everyone happier. But then I started to dwell upon the lives of my friends at school. Now, going from fifth to sixth grade, I was blessed to have the opportunity to attend the best private school in Georgia, The Westminster Schools of Atlanta. It was there that I really began to see the insignificance of money with regards to real happiness. I remembered my friend John telling me how his father had just secured a multi-million dollar merger for his company, but also how his dad was an abusive and raging alcoholic. I remember Charles telling me about his father's newly-opened hospital but also how his entire family life was falling apart. I remember Sebastian talking about his father being ranked as one of the best brain surgeons in the Southeast, but how his parent's divorce started aggravating his chronic depression and anxiety. I lay on my bed, just thinking, amazed at how they had all the money in the world—yet seemed so miserable.

Journal End

Mr. Maiz: "So, what do you think?"

Influential Rich Man (IRM): "That's an interesting life Mr. Maiz. But, why are you here again?"

Mr. Maiz: "I want to save people. I don't want anyone else to grow up like I did."

IRM: "So, how do you plan on doing that?"

Mr. Maiz: "That's what I was hoping to discuss with you. There are a couple of angles I think we could play with. But I think we need to improve education first of all."

IRM: "And how do you think that will help?"

Mr. Maiz: "Well, not the education itself as much as the environment of the schools. If we could build supportive communities within all schools, it would help give children a home away from home. A place where they could speak about their problems and not be judged. If they just had an outlet, then maybe they wouldn't have to carry all their anger and frustration everywhere they walked. Then maybe, they would be able to focus in school and not feel like the whole world was crashing around them. They wouldn't lash out at their teachers, and in return the teachers wouldn't be as burnt out. We could save these kids before it's too late."

IRM: "Talk is cheap. Give me a plan. How do you expect to execute this?"

Mr. Maiz: "Well, that is the hard part, isn't it? We'd have to destigmatize mental disorders first of all. There's nothing wrong with depression, yet you're looked down upon the second someone hears you're depressed. As if you're incompetent. Like you're weaker than everybody else. But that's not the case. We have to make people realize it's okay to talk about these kinds of things."

IRM: "You failed to answer the question — give me a plan."

Mr. Maiz: "Well if we could somehow move away from aggrandizing things like wealth and pride, and learn to appreciate the power of humility and love..."

IRM: "Let me stop you there. You aren't the first person to think of this. But what you're looking for isn't as simple as it sounds. You're looking for an entire cultural shift, a revolution of the mind, if you will. But, what you have to understand is that greed is what drives this country. Greed is what makes us number one. In order for there to be a number one there has to be a number two. Not everyone can win. To dispose of greed, you would have to reconstruct the very foundation this country was built upon. Are you prepared for that struggle?"

Mr. Maiz: "Well surely not by myself; that's why I'm here. If you could lend me your help, I think it could work."

IRM: "Ohhhh, I'm much too old for that. My friends and I, we've had our struggle. We've lived our lives and quite frankly, we're tired. We're comfortable right now. To support such a change would undoubtedly disrupt our lives a great deal."

Mr. Maiz: "But that's not fair!"

IRM: "Life isn't fair... Look, you've made it this far. You've seen the ups and downs of life. You've made the proper sacrifices and educated yourself. You're still full of energy. It's up to you young ones to solve this one. My time's almost up. But, hey, look at the bright side: once I'm gone, someone has to take my spot. Perhaps that'll be you? Then you can change just about anything you please."

Mr. Maiz: "Fair enough."