

The Hrisaca Estate

The American Dream

The vanishing bronze rays of the afternoon caressed her face; the summer heat remained despite the sun fading far into the horizon of the Pacific Ocean. The tender heat urged her to sleep—a well-deserved rest after her long trip.

Despite the late hour, students at the University came in and out of the buildings as if it was rush hour in New York. The youthful students passed through the concrete paths in their polished bikes—others strolled within the immense gardens, as if it was Time Square. A scenery she only knew from her books and imagination. Walking through the grass or concrete—the students didn't care despite the signs: *Do not step on the grass*. They couldn't be bothered; their faces spoke only of ambition. Their smiles couldn't contain their excitement—their eyes conveyed the fiercest determination.

She soon began to feel the infectious excitement as well, sharing the same juvenile ambition—the American Dream. The sought-after prospect of endless opportunity, a path that could only lead to a better life. Unable to contain her excitement, she clenched her book underneath her arm and began to slowly walk beside them—following a gray concrete path surrounded by the greenest grass she had ever seen. She couldn't help but smile, seeing the brightly colored flowers that adorned her path.

Soon enough, she arrived at a grand entrance—a door several meters high engraved with all sorts of classical Greek architecture finishes. The door was framed with what resembled Greek Doric Columns, one of them with a golden plate with the inscription: *University of California San Diego - Chemistry and Biochemistry Faculty*.

“Looking good!” a tall young man said looking at her brand-new blue jeans and colorful green loose shirt. She waved at him, looking at his football collage jacket as he passed through, leaving only a trail of fallen leaves and the echoes of his genuine complement.

“Altamirano?” a man dressed in a gray suit asked from behind her back. “Lucia Altamirano?” he continued with a particular Hispanic accent she hadn't heard before.

“Yes, can I help you?” she asked as she turned, meeting the man's fern-colored eyes.

“I am Professor Drake Emergale. We have been exchanging phone calls, haven't we?” he enquired with a smile that was barely visible through his gray mustache.

“Right, we have, haven't we? I am terribly sorry for my rudeness,” she apologized, glancing at a particular scar in his right eye—a scar she assumed was made by an animal due to it having three slashes that went from his eyebrow down to his bottom eyelid.

“Do not worry. I am glad you are enjoying the campus. You can call me whatever you like; I am used to having a thousand nicknames,” the professor continued.

“Right, Professor,” Lucia replied out of respect.

“I am honored to show such a distinguished student our science faculty,” the professor expressed as he began to walk ahead of her, heading towards the entrance of the Chemistry building. “I do hope you decide to enroll—I am certain you will become someone of great value to the scientific community of this university,” he affirmed with certainty, giving firm steps ahead of Lucia.

“The honor is mine, sir. Thank you for—” Lucia began to say.

Just as she gave her first step following the professor, a hissing sound startled her, making her drop her book *The woman in Black* on the ground. Underneath her feet, a snake with lemon colored stipes and army-colored scales slithered past her white tennis, hiding underneath a rock in the green area beside the concrete path. After following it with her eyes, she turned towards her book, picking it up and cleaning it with her hand.

Lucia lifted her face, and realized the professor was nowhere to be seen—the campus had become silent, leaving her with the sound of the breeze and fallen leaves. The sun’s warmth disappeared within an instant, replaced by a cold she had never experienced. She looked around, searching for the liveliness she had yearned for, unable to find anything other than a gray sky and a strong gust.

After turning in every possible direction—unable to see a single soul—Lucia looked once more towards her feet for no reason other than an impulse. She was unable to see her own feet—a dark object now covered them.

Lucia raised her face slightly, sitting in an uncomfortable wooden chair that made her back ache in pain. She quickly realized the object in front of her was an old and dusty wooden desk filled with piles of books and unorganized papers. It held academic books, such as *CRC Handbook of Chemistry and Physics*, *Textbook of Physical Chemistry* and *General College Chemistry*. Alongside them were plenty of novels such as *Firestarter* and *Maus*.

Despite the piles of dust, papers and books, something caught Lucia’s attention, right in the center of the desk. It was a small oval-shaped paper on top of a newspaper of yellowish paper with the heading: *Revolucionario es quemado vivo por ejército nacional*.

Lucia carefully grabbed the oval-shaped paper, simply glancing at the newspaper. It was a burnt image; a black and white portrait photograph she had never seen before in her life. She picked it up, blowing on it to remove the dust. Her surprise and confusion fought over her head just as she realized it was her own portrait. Dressed in a white dress, the image showed her smiling, hugging a man she had never seen—the man’s face burnt out of the picture.

Despite not being able to see his face, his attire was particularly interesting to her. He wore a wide dark hat, a white shirt, dark pants with an odd mid tone pattern in the sides, and around his chest was a peculiar long belt holding bullets.

Lucia placed the photograph on the desk once again, daring to lift her head to see what was in front of her, beyond the desk. She could only see empty student desks in front of her. They had spider webs all over them; the wood had begun to rot, and an odd smell stroke her nose, making her stand up from her chair.

Lucia quickly began to turn her face in all directions, desperate and anxious of something she couldn't see. She ran towards the exit of the classroom, slamming the door of the open, only to find an endless hall of polished white marble and student lockers to the sides.

Lucia threw her heels aside, running in her bare feet across the halls of the school while wearing a black suit and a brown vintage patterned skirt, unable to find anyone, unable to hear a sound other than her naked feet on the cold stone.

Room after room, she would open every single one across the endless hall—only to find the same room she had left previously. With each repeating room, her calls for help would get louder, the only validation of her efforts being the feeling of opening her mouth as wide as she could, and the occasional reflection of her in the glass and white marble. She yelled and screamed, forcing her jaws open with both hands—biting her own fingers until she felt her phalanges.

The unchanging sky cursed her perception of time; without knowing how long had passed, her running became an endless walk. Lucia decided to enter the room, one last time—determined to feel something, or at least reassure herself she was alive.

Unable to think of anything, Lucia grabbed a fountain pen from her desk. She thought for a second, breathing heavily, thinking that she had to force sound out of herself, or turn insane.

She grabbed the pen with her right hand and placed it above her left hand—tiny droplets falling from the pen's tip unto the center of her hand. Seconds, minutes or perhaps hours passed as she stared into her right hand holding the pen, slowly rising it above the left one—each centimeter higher taking all her conviction to get there.

With tears in her eyes, she yelled—without a single spec of sound being heard across the gigantic halls. The pen's ink suddenly turned dark red as it mixed with her blood. She had pierced through the skin and a bit of muscle. Even then, no sound was heard besides the wind and the dripping of the ink.

She did it again, and again—just to hear the noise of her blood spilling onto the floor, the cracking of her own bones, the fleshy tearing of her muscles.

Again and again, she continued, until the pen's metal tip broke completely. Her left hand had a clear hole from which she could see the ground underneath her hand—around it a puddle of blood and ink.

Seeing with her own eyes her fruitless attempt, she dropped the pen and placed both her hands in her mouth, drinking her own blood mixed with the ink. She began to force her mouth open with both her hands, contorting her jaw and face beyond recognition. She dislocated her own jaw, ripping apart the skin that held her lips together, pulling out and swallowing her own teeth as she did—now walking through the halls and rooms, leaving small droplets of blood and ink with every slow step she gave.

“Ms. Altamirano?” the professor asked.

He was right behind her once again, without her even noticing. She quickly turned to see him, as her humanity suddenly returned to her—a glimpse of hope shining in her blood-covered eyes.

Just as the light in her eyes returned, she remembered her atrocious new face. The horrible lengths she had gone to—she was ashamed of even looking at him. She hid her face, mumbling words that the professor couldn't understand while walking away from him.

“Allow me,” the professor begged, reaching for a white napkin in his suit. “I am terribly sorry for your loss,” he consoled her, cleaning her tears without the napkin getting any blood on it. Lucia saw the clean napkin with disbelief, suddenly daring to look at the professor's face. “You should head home,” he continued, smiling at her normal face covered in tears.

Lucia opened her eyes, feeling a tender warmth as she leaned her head on a glass window. Without warning, she smashed her head towards the glass as a sudden stop sent her up her seat—saved only by her security belt. The bus stopped, and as she regained sense of where she was, she felt as someone gently placed something in her lap.

“¡Última parada!” the bus driver yelled with a rough voice as Lucia massaged her head.

“No wonder you fell asleep,” the young man alluded, placing a book in her lap while looking at its cover: *CRC Handbook of Chemistry and Physics*.

“Shut up,” Lucia remarked aggressively, taking the book away from his sight and putting it on her olive-colored side bag.

“Yes, you are welcome,” the young man ranted, crossing his arms.

“Lalo, just try, please. Come on, it is getting dark,” a young adult implored, touching both of their shoulders from the seat behind them.

The three brothers stood up from their seats, grabbing several bags and suitcases with them—the young adult carrying most of Lucia’s things. She led the way, looking outside the bus towards the street with mistrust. Eduardo, on the other hand, had an uninterested look on his face—deeply invested in his *Game & Watch* while passing across the bus seats. Contrary to both of them, the young adult’s excitement was something Lucia couldn’t comprehend.

They jumped down into the cobbled floor, seeing a few rustic houses not too far away from the bus stop. It was nothing impressive, neither were the houses, compared to the ones in Arizona. Most of the furniture within the bus stop was built out of dust and rusted metal. The wooden waiting bench seemed as fragile as the shattered glass all over the floor. The last standing ovation to the ancient town's glory their grandmother talked so much about was a crooked metal sign saying: *Bienvenidos a Coixtlahuaca*.

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