

Niñas de Casa

Getting ready for work at the dollar store, Celeste pulled a loose fitting khaki shirt over her dark blue pants to hide a small waist that gave some men the wrong idea about her. Like the day manager, a sweaty heavysset Americano who always snuck up behind her when she was stocking shelves or taking a quick bathroom break. “Oh, I was worried. I couldn’t find you,” he would say, brushing his soft body against her in the corridor between the back and the front of the store. She avoided his pale eyes as much as possible; they seemed to unclothe and dissect her at the same time.

She had had to get a job to help the family when her brother brought home his pregnant seventeen-year-old girlfriend. To Celeste, it was a tolerable job compared to the other intolerable “offer” to work in the hot, grease-covered kitchen of the burger place Papá had been at for years before he’d moved on to a real sit-down restaurant next to the mall. Enduring embarrassment and even discomfort at the dollar store was bearable because it was walking distance from her family’s apartment and the hours were flexible enough that she could keep going to vo-tech school at night and complete her nurses’ assistant course within a year.

She had arrived in this country from the island as an awkward, pimply preteen with her parents and older brother Camilo. He’d had a more difficult time adjusting to the U.S. than she did; he left behind a big circle of friends and a novia while she only had one dear amiguita from school. At fifteen, Camilo was too old to fit in and he didn’t seem to try too hard either, always getting suspended for fighting. But she, being the compliant girl that she was, respected her teachers and elders, dedicated hours to learning English and earned good grades from middle

school on. She even went to catechism though she was the oldest girl to make her first holy communion among the more than 200 little children.

Celeste's naturally long nails fingered the gold cross and religious medals on her chain as she stood before the mirror remembering that day. "I'm so proud of you, mi niña; it's so good that you stuck with those classes," Mamá said, putting her sun-stained hands on her face before tightly embracing her. Celeste loved Mamá's smell and breathed deeply to take in the mariposa perfume made from Cuba's national flower. Papá had handed her an assortment of rainbow-colored carnations; he was wearing the ill-fitting suit the catholic agency had given him in Miami years earlier. They were there all four together as a family. But soon they would be six.

She wondered if her almost-sister-in-law Kati wanted her to be godmother to the baby; they liked each other, were about the same age, had attended the same schools but had already had two very different lives. Kati had a rose tattoo above her left breast and was violently thrown out of her house after Camilo got her pregnant, and then she dropped out completely. Celeste wasn't against babies, she just wanted to do all things right, at the right time.

The last time Celeste went to church, she found herself at the altar, in a coffin, dressed in white for her funeral mass. The store manager had cornered her one too many times in the break room. The last time, he took and broke her, a good girl, una niña buena de casa. Choked to death by thick alien fingers, she was never to nurse or hold her new niece. Not even nineteen, she will always be eighteen in her senior photo with a blue crystal rosary hung around the frame and assorted santos' candles beneath. Some of the family's mighty grief was spent convincing Kati to name the baby after their niña. But Kati refused. Even so, they dedicated themselves to raising another good girl just like their Celeste.

For her mami and abuela, Magi was the sun and the stars. “Una muchacha buena, rebuena,” abuela’d say to anyone in shouting distance, embarrassing the petite young woman with hazel eyes and a mass of black curls pulled up high on her head.

“Never, not once, did she bring me any problems to the house,” her mami proudly proclaimed. “On the contrary, my Magi liked to help people.”

It was true. Magi massaged her mami’s sore feet from standing all day at the beauty parlor and she also always held onto abuela’s arm when they walked together. Magi even watched her cousin’s twin babies on weekends for free because she knew Irene was going crazy from missing so much school and was starting to get careless with them.

While mami and abuela would spend most of their limited telephone conversations sniveling about the tragedy and injustice of his imprisonment, Magi was the one who wrote her papi long letters to ease his time. They all lived convinced that their Magi was so good, so smart that she would know better, that she would steer clear of the disaster that was cute lil’ Jova. But his sob story and year in juvenile detention charmed the honor student right off her feet.

She wrote to her papi saying *I can change him*.

Papi understood the impulse; good girls always try changing bad boys.

Lil’ Jova gave Magi some weed, showing her how to inhale, making silly faces she found irresistible, reminiscent of ones her papi made when she was little. Jova showed her a lot of things her papi should have warned her about, like when Jova convinced her to sell pills for him.

“Babe, I’m eighteen now. I can’t get caught again, ma—no more juvy for me.”

And she couldn’t bear to lose him too.

Before long, Magi’s AP classmates knew she was the one with the good stuff and lots of it. Jova said to pitch it as “better than their prescribed speed shit.” Magi was blind in love and in

trust; she couldn't see that Lil' Jova was not educable nor interested in reform. She especially couldn't see that he was making some bad deals.

"It was terrible luck, such terrible, terrible luck that she was with that delinquent when the car was shot up," through tears, mami tells papi over and over again.

Abuela waits her turn. "Instantly gone, our niña," she'll say. "At least she didn't suffer, a mercy for sure."

Xiomara was no longer a girl but had always been a good one en casa. She had stayed on the unrelentingly more oppressive island until the last parent died. Then she was an orphan, a woman without familial obligations—free of duty. The greatest risk she had ever taken was using all her little money to buy a space on the neighbor Rufino's unsteady boat—four days lost at sea while sun, wind or rain assaulted them, sometimes all at once, were well worth the price of a new life.

Once resettled and then settled, she charged forward trying marriage. Twice. She found it difficult for two grown people to get used to each other and it was especially challenging for Xiomara since she would have to adapt to the husbands' "real" families.

A failure at marriage, she tried living together too but the same problems surfaced. What commitments could she require of her first novio when he had so many obligations himself? Three children from three different mothers—all of them calling, texting, asking all the time for money for food, clothes, diapers or just a ride, just this time. "Sí, ya, ok," he'd say but it was never only one time.

Xiomara's second novio's children were grown, with children of their own and didn't want her at the family gatherings because it was the legitimate grandmother's place.

She resigned herself as not lucky in love and because she had no progeny, there were no uncomfortable attachments to the men. No reason for them to communicate with her even though she was a sweet, good woman.

After all of the drama of husbands and boyfriends, Xiomara came to the realization that she only needed her doggie, her painting (she discovered a talent!), her opera CDs and books on spirituality which kept her mind nourished. As a woman resigned to aloneness, it was her pleasure to help people, volunteering to spend time with elders twice a week—she liked listening to their stories, sometimes she offered her own. Everyone at the nursing home —viejitos and staff alike commented on her affectionate, caring manner. How could she suspect the young neighbor she called *un bebe*?

Xiomara didn't know that some monsters come with baby faces. He knocked on her door late one night.

"I'm sorry to bother you, Miss. I don't have my keys. Can I wait inside 'til my family gets home?"

It was raining heavily. The wind tried to shut the door but she was a good-hearted woman who had been brought up as a *niña de casa*, with some culture, a well-mannered, good person who he strangled almost to death—saved her to rape her all night.

But she finished the job the next day, taking all the pills she had in the house.

Roxana felt heart sick; that's what the aching, tight chest and cried out burning eyes had to be. And especially her brain hurt; she couldn't concentrate at school and ultimately brought home a mixed report card that her parents weren't happy with in the least.

What did they expect? A on top of A on top of A, all the way down the column, that's what they expected, she thought to herself. She had done it so many times before, her teachers talked to her about college, like it was a given, but now Roxana was thinking of other things besides getting good grades and making her family proud. It all started with the murder of Celeste, her co-worker at the dollar store.

Why hadn't Celeste said something about that asshole manager? Over and over Roxana asked herself this question on the way to, while at and after work. Before long, she messed up the register drawer count a couple of times and her hours were cut. Still she thought about the times they worked together. How they both rolled their eyes when the brute (Celeste didn't agree that he was brute, just strange) inevitably called one of them into the back for some stupid thing or other. Roxana considered him slow and basically harmless, definitely not as mean as their woman manager who never smiled. Celeste worked mostly days so Roxana only saw her on every other weekend when they were scheduled together. They weren't that close, but all of a sudden this person she knew, talked to and laughed with, was gone. She liked how Celeste used to paint her nails and thought her Miami accent was "super cute" though Celeste said she couldn't hear it herself. Roxana tried to remember a sign, any sign that would have led her to say something, but like Celeste, she was expected to not make a fuss. It was expected that a "pretty young thing" like her would attract unwanted attention. That was what the police officer said when he questioned Roxana about the manager, whose self-inflicted gunshot splattered blood over Celeste's still body and throughout the break room.

"Didn't he harass you too?" Roxana thought he was accusing her of something but she wasn't sure what.

It was so hard to go back to the store; her father said he understood and wondered if she shouldn't be working at night at all.

Lately Roxana had been fussing at home. Mamá attributed her talking back—under her breath, of course—to too much freedom. As if Roxana had time to be free—school all day, work at night and then cleaning up around the house after her spoiled brothers who never picked up a damn sock, shoe or shirt on their way out of the house for God-only-knows-where and until whatever fine hour they felt like. And neither one got criticized for bringing home a disappointing report card. Papá actually praised Rafa for standing up to the bully harassing Kiki even though they both got suspended for a week.

The grumbling got worse when her classmate Magi was shot up. Roxana couldn't understand how such a smart girl could let herself get caught up with that known fool. Third period English with Ms. Brown was the A.P. class that Roxana had together with Magi—that and the same lunch schedule. Roxana remembered the essay Ms. Brown made Magi read aloud; it was about how she used to translate for her family all the time, even when she was really young. There were a couple of other kids in class who identified with that but Magi's essay was also funny because she described scenarios when she had no idea what was said and she'd make all sorts of crazy stuff up. It was clear that Magi was the best writer in class; maybe that's why she said she wanted to write a book. That's a book Roxana would have loved to have read.

Whether she was doing dishes or folding clothes, riding the bus or just walking through the chaotic hallways between classes, Roxana tried to sort out all the feelings reverberating in her head. Her parents always wanted to know where she was at all times, yet, Rafa and Kiki wouldn't even answer when Mamá made her call their cell phones when it is really late. Celeste's murder and Magi's, within weeks of each other, knocked something loose inside

Roxana. Of course, there had been grief counselors brought to school; everyone who had classes with Magi had to listen, but these people didn't know her, know that she was popular even before Jova got to her. Everybody loved Magi though Roxana noticed afterwards that nobody was really that close to her. Except him. And wouldn't you know it, that fucker survived?

The last straw for Roxana was when she learned that her neighbor, that nice lady Xiomara was dead; her suicide note left horrible details. All Mamá could say was "La pobre, you should go to the mass for her, miya. I won't be able to get off work, but you should go." It wasn't even a special mass, only her name was read out, Xiomara Gómez Prado. Just like the mass when Celeste's name was added to the prayers of the faithful—her mother and grandmother bust out in tears and wailing so loud they had to be escorted out of the church, they were that wrecked.

After hearing Xiomara's full name out loud now, Roxana was struck by how little she knew about her too. She used to walk her small white dog around the block, always stopped to say hello to the neighbors sitting on porches or stoops. Roxana's mother once commented on the pretty flower-covered tote bag Xiomara carried, and within a week, she painted one for her. Roxana sat immobile through the rest of the service, progressively getting agitated while thinking hard about her recent dead, killed, she reasoned, because they were defenseless females. Why in the hell did Xiomara let that punk in her house, anyway? Roxana was sure it had something to do with being nice.

She had forgotten the words to the prayers and ignored the collection basket passed around her. Roxana wondered why her own mother had tried so hard to make her into a *niña de casa*. She even believed now that Mamá had, in fact, prepared her for harassment—"Put on lipstick before you go out!" "Smile and don't use foul language, that's for loose women," "Wear

bright colors, nice young girls like you should always use colores alegres,” along with the numerous reprimands about her bad posture, chipped, unpainted hands and sloppily brushed hair. It was always something, and not just her looks but everything; she had to be a well-liked, nice girl, all while earning good grades, helping in the house, and above all, being respectable.

When the young man seated in front of her turned around to share the sign of peace, Roxana stared wildly. She shook her head and wondered aloud, “Why peace when there is war?” Good girls like Magi, Celeste, and even la pobre Xiomara, were casualties, groomed by some bullshit about being nice. Roxana understood this and its significance for herself. She immediately wanted to yell. To stand at the ambo and preach would be even better, to tell all the niñas in church, at school and in the street to listen up, and know that the rules of la casa weren’t made for their own good because they required unquestioned obedience. Putting up with so much shit (Roxana could already list a thousand stupid things) requires too much concentration.

Roxana bolted out of her seat and left the pew, muttering to herself; people looked at her contorted, grimaced face. She didn’t care to be pretty anymore; she knew that sapped energy she could use to read between the lines of the niña script. Better to learn how to kick ass, she thought; better to fight with teeth and nails and to see clear-eyed into danger. To understand the power of a scream, of the “No” she did shout out as she pushed open the big glass doors with a force that made the priest pause abruptly and the congregation turn in disapproval. As Roxana rushed through the church narthex and stepped purposefully out into the street, worries about what others thought did not even cross her mind.