



## The Price of Admission

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I didn't meet my father-in-law until eight years after I started dating the man who would become my husband. By then, he'd missed so much of our life—graduations, our wedding, our move from New York City to North Carolina. He was sent to prison when we were newly dating undergrads at Yale. Years later, he was deported back to Colombia. Although I'd never met him, he was both known and unknown to me—a notorious protagonist of several difficult, heartbreaking family stories. And yet, he was also absent, the subject of great silence. My in-laws told tales of the damage he'd done, but they also seemed not to want to talk about him.

I was no stranger to family silences, secrets, or shame. As a girl, I'd heard *A la gente le gusta hablar* often, a warning that anything I told someone could be repeated and used as a weapon against me down the line. I heard, too, *Don't go telling people all your private business*. And, perhaps, my least favorite: *You represent us as a reminder that I was a symbol of my family*. The way I behaved and looked, the things I said and told weren't really about

me—they were about the people I came from and showing others that we were good, deserving of respect.

We decided to fly to Bogotá for a scant three days during a short vacation my husband took off from his medical residency. Every child with living parents is one day haunted by the question, *How much time do we have left?* The question felt especially urgent for us. My father-in-law, whom I'll call Angel here, has schizophrenia and struggles with addiction. In Colombia, without support or family, he has been, at times, without a home. As a doctor, my husband knew the statistics about life expectancy and untreated schizophrenia, addiction, and homelessness. We couldn't dawdle.

Before we left, my in-laws advised me to be careful with Angel. I shouldn't trust him, or he'd take advantage—I had to stay alert because he lived in a dangerous part of the city. They worried my husband would be vulnerable because of his sympathy and feelings for his father—I had to be the levelheaded one. Their warnings made me anxious, but mostly I was curious. I wanted to meet the man my husband came from, the one who'd loved him and lived with him, who'd hurt him and left, and then, eventually, was taken away. He was a part of the story of the person I loved most, and he'd become a part of my story, too. I wanted one day to have a child, and Angel would be a part of her legacy: her blood, her origin story.

I am no stranger to a complicated family history. Growing up, I often felt that the life my mother and her siblings had led in the Dominican Republic was the stuff of legend,

more dramatic and intense than anything in the novels I devoured. Their stories were of adultery and jail time, betrayal and knife fights, hunger and poverty, splintered marriages, divided families, alcoholism, depression, and grief. In one story, one relative was thrown off a roof. There was so much violence, so many injuries and losses. The stories ended with the family arriving in the United States.

I realize now that elevating those family hardships into myths was one of the ways we coped. In these epic versions of the past, there were heroes and villains, plot twists, and devastating irony. It all seemed to hurt a little less if it was a capital-S story instead of the hard facts of their lives.

My father's family was from Cuba and Curaçao, and there were fewer stories about this side—more silence in response to my questions. Now I see this as a different strategy for dealing with a difficult past: doing what you could to bury the facts, to keep quiet, so that the stories and the pain don't get passed on.

It isn't lost on me that in becoming a writer I've tried to forge my own, different approach to family history. I try neither to sensationalize nor to cover up. I write to understand, to live inside experiences that interest me or excite me or haunt me. I write as a way to move away from shame.

Shame was one of my most constant companions as a girl—it is with me still. I took to heart the mission of being a respectable reflection of my parents and family because I could see why they worried so much about how they were seen. They'd been turned away from opportunities,

(Top Model)

Myth to cope

v.

silence

v.

Write (understand)

"other"

targeted by police, ridiculed by neighbors' gossip, and criticized for things they couldn't always control or hide. In one of my mother's stories of her girlhood, she was turned away from a cousin's birthday party because her clothes weren't nice enough—she and her brothers looked so visibly poor after their father was sent to jail. I believed myself a potential endnote to the family story, the apotheosis. I could be the one who lived the American dream, who made money and moved to a coveted neighborhood. I could earn out on the gamble the family had made when they came to this country. I could be the reason they'd endured so much pain.

When I got a scholarship to a selective, private school, the pressure I felt intensified. I wasn't rich like my classmates; I wasn't white. I was Black, Latina, a Brooklyn girl, a daughter and granddaughter of immigrants. I was an outsider, but I had the opportunity to become an insider maybe, if I could prove myself and succeed. When I thought of being "good," this was exactly what I envisioned: fitting in, achieving, gaining the approval of people in power, who, at the time, were my parents, my teachers, the white girls in my class. I became obsessed with appearances. I wanted to be eloquent, neat, and competent. I wanted to earn As, to get my curly hair to stay down and stay in place. I tried to avoid mistakes, any signs of weakness. I saw this as the price of admission, and I wanted to belong.

It took me years to see that what I thought of as goal-oriented was tainted, defined by the logic of white supremacy—the idea that there was something wrong with

Lack of  
privilege

Symbol

Affect of  
Cultural Oppression

Good  
= "white"  
"American"  
"American"

me, that I wasn't deserving of opportunity or dignity just as I was. Inside me, there was a voice that said, Because of who you are and your history, you will never be enough.

We met Angel downtown, in el Centro, a busy commercial area ringed by green mountains. I was stunned by how much he reminded me of my husband: it wasn't just their appearance, although they shared several features: a creased, broad brow, pouting lips, feathery lashes. It was the habits they shared that shocked me, the ways they seemed to mimic each other, although they'd been separated by distance and years. Angel swung his arms when he walked. He sang to himself during lulls in our conversation. He arched his eyebrows to begin a story.

I couldn't help thinking my husband would look like Angel someday, although not completely. I expected he'd look less battered and squeezed by life. Angel was leaner than in the photographs I'd seen—he was missing teeth, there were gaps in his smile. His clothes were simple, inexpensive—although I got the impression he'd dressed up for us. He was chatty and warm, delighted to see his son. He got my name wrong, but I didn't hold it against him. He led the way, showing us around the city that was now his home. I knew how special time like this could be: moments of togetherness and calm after so much hardship and loss. The day was pleasant, anticlimactic.

The next day, our second of three in Bogotá, we called Angel and couldn't reach him. We went down to el Centro anyway, and he never showed. We decided to make the best of it and explore the city on foot. We had a tinto

somewhere—coffee dusted with cinnamon, sweetened with panela. I was full of rage that he'd ghosted on us when we had so few days to spend with him after we'd flown across an ocean, and after all the years he'd already been missing. But I held my tongue, unsure whether we'd see him at all on our last day in Colombia.

We did. I don't remember if he explained why we couldn't reach him the day before. Either way, we didn't make much of it. I followed my husband's lead, and we carried on. We decided to go to a museum, and they posed for pictures together in the gallery. Angel wore a blue and white striped shirt, and he stood a foot shorter than my husband. In the pictures, he looks prim and small with my husband's arm thrown around him. It's as if their roles are reversed: my husband is the proud father, Angel the child who longs to be gathered close.

The rest of the day is a blur. We must have eaten—there are more pictures at a café. We might have had buñuelos or pan de bono. What I know for certain is that at the café, Angel recited poems. He read aloud from a collection I bought on the day he didn't show. After, we rode the bus until it was time for us to part ways. As the bus pulled up to Angel's stop, he asked us for money. My husband pulled out his wallet, rifled through, then handed him the pesos. They embraced and said goodbye. This was in the spring of 2016. We haven't seen him since.

When we first learned Angel would be deported, what we most feared was the prospect of going years without seeing him. Back then, while he was still serving his sentence, we

did what we could try to keep him in the country, but we had limited options, time, and money. My husband was in medical school, and I was earning a degree in writing. Still, we consulted with advocates to see if we could keep him—a permanent legal resident—in the US after he served his time. They were frank. It didn't matter that he lived with a serious disability and would be without familial support in Colombia; his parents, siblings, and children were all in the US. It didn't matter that we'd miss out on a future with him if he was sent away. He wasn't a Dreamer, or an asylum seeker, or a blameless child. His case wouldn't garner much empathy or leniency. He wasn't a good immigrant.

I understand the appeal of the idea of the "good immigrant." I've heard it used by immigration advocates, Latinx people, and my own family as they've worked to build a case for why we should be welcomed in the US, not only legally and officially, but also culturally, in a nation's narrative and account of itself. The impulse to prove our virtue has become all the more intense during the era of Trump, who has made a point of demonizing people of color and immigrants.

Immigrants are hard workers, we say. Immigrants work the essential jobs that keep America running. Immigrants are mothers and fathers, innocent children, good people who do not deserve to be separated from their families, put in cages, tear-gassed, or lost. In building these arguments, we lay bare how terrifyingly distorted our sense of justice is—our sense of mercy. No one should be put in a cage. Families shouldn't be separated. These rights are fundamental and aren't contingent on someone's presumed virtue.

Other  
=  
DAD  
~  
pure  
virtue

rights  
of  
humans

And the idea that we can earn our dignity is deceptive. When has virtue ever been sufficient to save Black and brown lives? Who gets to decide what virtue is or who is virtuous? And aren't we all much more multidimensional and messy than "bad" or "good"? Or is that complexity reserved only for white people—US citizens?

People  
and  
Value  
- Rose  
- Triumph

→ Who has the right to keep a secret here?

→ I often think about what we lose when we deny the complexity of our stories, our families, and ourselves in service of some victorious narrative—the desire to declare ourselves triumphant, worthy, palatable to whiteness. I think about the testimonies and self-expression we lose, as well as the opportunities to accept ourselves and connect to one another.

Victorious  
narrative  
- standard

During my years in private school, I slipped into a deep depression. The pressure to be good, to prove myself, was a vise that was ever-tightening. In my life at home, I was also lonely and hurting. My parents were unwell, and they harmed me, as they harmed each other and themselves. I did what I could to hide my misery, and I was convinced I was doing a good job. I still participated in class; I earned good grades; I was chipper and compliant, and sharp when I needed to be. And yet, there were days I hid under the cover of my black hoodie, pulled over my uniform, and I scrawled sad lyrics on the inside of my forearms in pen and slumped in corners with my headphones on, listening to devastating songs. The people who cared about me were paying attention—my teachers, my friends. One girl, whom I'll call M here, told her mother I was depressed, and her mother approached my

parents after a school recital. She told them she was worried I'd hurt myself. She said she thought I needed help.

I didn't overhear the conversation, and so I don't know what my parents said in return. I only know what they said to me. They told me to be careful with M and not to talk to her anymore. They reminded me of the risks of going around telling people my business. They didn't ask if I was depressed. They didn't ask if I needed help.

This was not the last time something like this happened. Other friends, other adults, sought to help me, but no one got through. My family closed the door on any outside intervention, and I, too, felt that I had to cover up my problems, anything that reflected poorly on me, on us. I stopped being friends with M, although I never explained why. We used to talk about *Buffy* on our long train rides home. We used to dance in the halls and crack jokes and curl our bodies around each other and nuzzle together during after-school meetings. But I started to see her only as someone who'd exposed me, who'd nearly ruined the performance I believed was the only way I could survive.

One  
= many  
(family, culture)

By the time I learned I was pregnant in my thirties, I'd spent more than a decade trying to unlearn my obsession with being good. I'd staged several rebellions, some small—cutting off all my hair, getting a tattoo. Other rebellions were tremendous—declining to go to medical school like my parents wanted me to, moving out of my childhood apartment at twenty-three so I could have more freedom, living with my boyfriend before we were married. I began trying to tell the truth about my inner life and family, even

the unseemly parts, in the way that I knew how: through writing.

And yet, being pregnant triggered an old perfectionism in me. I wanted to be a good pregnant person just as I wanted to be a good mother. I even felt the urge to be a good patient, as if my doctor's visits were tests I could score an A on if I gained the "right" amount of weight and did prenatal yoga and took my vitamins and managed my stress. I was smug when people noticed that my ankles weren't swollen or that I had plenty of energy for someone in the third trimester. I took credit for these things as if they reflected only how well I could follow the rules. I did little to acknowledge the role of luck and privilege—the randomness of my genes. I still wasn't over needing the affirmation that I was doing things right.

When my due date came and went, and my doctor scheduled a labor induction, all my smugness dissolved. I was finally confronting what so many pregnant people face at one point or another: a lack of control over my own body and experience. I knew I couldn't make myself go into labor spontaneously, but I tried anyway. I ate fistfuls of dates; I drank herbal tea; I walked for miles and miles in the humid, mid-Atlantic heat. I did all the things I'd been told to do, and still, nothing worked. I sobbed and sobbed and blamed myself. This was the underside of my arrogance, my self-satisfaction—if things went wrong, I could just as quickly turn and decide I was no good.

The induction wasn't wanted, and I was devastated. Still, my daughter came, leading my husband and me into an entirely new life. This is what has surprised me about

motherhood—how near mourning is to joy. As I've watched my daughter grow, I have celebrated her and adored her, and I have also grieved. I've grieved the things I've lacked as a daughter, as well as the things I won't be able to give her.

She is still too young to ask about Angel, but she won't be for long. I don't know whether she'll ever meet him in person, but I don't believe they will be close. It is a loss for her, for him, our whole family.

I wonder what stories we'll tell her and how we'll explain who Angel is, what he's been through, and what it has meant for all of us. Other people are missing in her life, other relatives whose reputations precede them. How will we explain their absence? How will we describe who they are and how they came to no longer be in our lives, her life? Will we manage to avoid the tropes of heroes and villains when we tell her about the people she comes from, the ones she knows and the ones she never will? I hope so. What I'm certain we will say to her is this: You don't have to be perfect to deserve a good life. You don't have to be good to be missed.