

High School Short Story Winner

Hed: Summer

By Tina Xia

In English, my name means summer. *Verano*, they call me. *Chicano*, *Mexicano*, *Cubano* all sound the same when rolled off different tongues. It's reassuring to know at least they understand I'm from a different heritage. Which one is up to interpretation—names don't matter too much anymore.

In Miami, everything's a bit off-kilter. I've heard stories of valedictorian rags to riches, 15-minute glories of some Norwegian yodeling supermarket guys making it onto the big stage, you name it. None of them come from Miami-Dade. All we care about is tomorrow's worries and yesterday's regrets. My dad and I are simply wallflowers on a canvas of yellow and orange. Sometimes the identity gets lost amid the coloring. Other times it is purposefully forgotten.

Summertime is quite enjoyable, once you get used to the heat and all. The palm trees sway to the clinks of wine glasses, and I make sure to hit the waves once every month to cool off. It's sweltering hot, but it's the only thing I know to be true. School without air conditioning is also a constant, but even the good grades can't keep me awake for long.

After yet another draining day of school, I kick open the door to my dad's house and quietly pad up the two steps to my room. *Casa* in Spanish is home; to me, I only live in a house.

My room is messy, as it should be. Dad used to call me gay when I had all my clothes neatly organized into the compartments I stole from the shelter. I decided to make my room as messy as possible, to hide my money and my ego—my money in my underwear drawer, my monochromatic ego in the closet.

I set my bag down and open up the CommonApp website. It's a brand-new name in the industry, and a little strange to use, but we're told to get used to it because apparently it isn't going anywhere. Senior year is a drag, but this is the last pit stop. And no matter how many times I squeeze my eyes shut, once I reopen them the website history still doesn't change, the dates don't change, my future doesn't change. I've made up my mind to care for my papá and attend the community college nearby. He's the last one I've got, and though his drinking is excessive and has spiraled into oblivion, he's still *padre* to me. One of my counselors once wanted to investigate my strange behavior

induced by his actions and made the mistake of inviting my dad to a discussion. He threw the bottle behind her head and called her a couple names she'd never forget. Rookie mistake, I call it. Idiot school system, he says.

As I begin to formulate my incomprehensible second paragraph of my even worse essay to community college, I hear a loud belch coming from a couple feet away. Bracing myself for the impact, I clench my shoulders together instinctively. The blow comes swift. It hits me in the same place it hit me yesterday. I watch as the bottle spins, going off-kilter, my dad laughing at my misery.

“*Verrraano—hijo.*” He swears my name like it causes him pain. I inch my fingertips to my head to feel the exact spot where it hit me.

“Hi,” I say meekly. I shut my eyes and hate how weak I sound. It's a desperate syllable lost in translation, but what's gone is gone and done is done. “How was finding a job?”

“Don't talk about that,” he slurs, pushing his tan hand toward my face. I duck.

“Papá,” I try carefully. “Do you remember what today is?”

Mamá died today. Not today, but seven years ago. It drops like a boulder every year. If he would just show some decency this year, maybe things would change, we could turn over a new leaf, be a new family that cares about blood...

“No,” he replies flatly. “*No sé nada*, and stop.” I can see the uneasiness transcending in his wrinkles and my nostrils flare. He knows exactly what I'm talking about, but it hurts him.

“Do you ever wonder if her death hurt me, Papá?” I ask quietly.

“That *puta* died on her own accord, selfish. Left me with a mess, *no dinero y—*”

“And was your best friend for 20 years,” I finish, voice cracking at “friend.” “Tell me you think about her, sometimes, once a week, a couple times a month, even twice a year. Tell me you didn't forget last year and the year before and all the stupid years before that. Tell me—”

“I can't tell you anything!” he roars, his eyes bright but teary. He swings his fist so fast, so hard at my upper arm, easily concealable, that I don't see it until it passes. My neck

jolts upward for a second like it's disconnected, my eyes shut, my tongue splays out. And I go to the floor.

He takes this opportunity to tell me how ungrateful I am, he needs money, he saw my CommonApp and wanted to throw my laptop into the ocean. The pounding in my heart has not stopped, but I hate how his words sound. Hot tears gather in my eyes. People at school name me labels because I'm not like them. Keep some gringos company, become a chew toy, get spit out. They see a boy who's half dead, one arm out, more blue and purple than tan skin— someone not worth saving. I guess that's the education system: Treat only the ones who *look* like they should be treated.

But maybe I'm not what they think. I read a little every day before bed and I write poetry and I live the American dream and my English teacher loves me to bits. Says I'm a philosophical genius. Maybe I like soccer and flirting with teachers and the gringos, where I can pretend to be a shred of a life. Maybe if my papá weren't like this, life would be okay. You know, if he picked up his work and fewer bottles, and if Mamá didn't have to drive off that...or if my aunts cared and didn't smoke pot all day, and if my life was an actual *story*. It's a one-dimensional nightmare—*sin esperanza*, they'd say. But that doesn't mean I don't want to change.

Maybe it's the fact that I've already resigned to caring for a father who's already gone to heaven; maybe it's the fact that he's already a corpse in limbo; maybe it's the fact that today is the anniversary of the dead. Maybe it's nothing.

But I'm done with it.

I stand up. The walls come flying to the ceiling and the drawers are flipped upside down. I grunt in agony as my name gurgles around in his tainted mouth, lips shiny with the cheap liquor he bought from Winn-Dixie. My anger comes pulsating in waves like those I used to see on the shore before she died. I used to see a lot.

"What's your problem, Papá?" I shout.

"*Nada. Solamente quiero money,*" he replies.

"No," I respond curtly. His face turns red with fury.

"What did—"

“No!” I scream, fists forming by my sides. My voice feels raw. He raises his left fist to swing but I catch it before he makes it land. If I decide to follow through, I do it today.

“I’m applying to some school in California,” I say as calmly as I can while setting his fist back down. I make sure to stare unflinchingly into his eyes to solidify my statement. His eyes widen into pans as he blinks successively to make sure it’s not a nightmare.

“Wh—?”

“I can’t take care of you anymore. I need to go to college, get a girl, find a job. One day I’ll tell you *lo siento*, but at this moment I can’t. Drink your bottles, do your thing. Just clean up the mess after,” I say, detached. His mouth hangs open a little, and I hesitate to tell him to close it before flies go in.

“Get out,” I say as an afterthought.

“*Esta es mi casa*,” he says, indignant. “You can’t leave.”

“I can do whatever I want, Papá. Let go,” I reply.

“*Hijo!*” he screams out of frustration. It’s sharp and slices through me. I freeze. “Don’t forget the money,” he finishes with a twisted smile.

“Fine,” I reply. I swing my backpack, purposefully hitting the rickety laptop that weighs more than me, and walk down the steps of my house. It’s not the first time I’m going back to the shelter, but it’s the first time I’ve gone in four years. Before, I didn’t know what to say when those people behind the screen asked about me, who I was, where I came from. Before, I said my name, I was me, I came from the womb.

Now, things are different. Perhaps one day it’ll be an action I regret, a brash decision creating a blotchy spot on my wallpaper, but for now, it settles its way into my heart. My life is my own, and my mamá is standing by my side. I have let go of Papá and my fingers are loose.

My name means many things. It means summer, it means heritage, it means a first-generation, low-income, bruise-bearing son with a childhood of cheap beer and broken bottles. My name means my casa, my mom’s love, my story. My name is me reaching out my fingertips to a tomorrow I cannot yet fathom to see.

My name is Verano, and I am ready to face *el mundo*.