

What was that? It sound like someone's *culo* just open up and all this *shit* fall out. Look at him. Look at how he lookin' at me. That is violent, okay? This space needs to be safe. *I* don't feel safe.

MAMA

-- alright now, that's—let's come back together now-

BETA

[Cool. Dry to Ariela.] Why don't *you* leave, then, heffer? If you up in here, then some corner missin' its ho.

[Ariela is UP! She's about to lunge across the table, but Mama rises between the two of them just in time, a wall between crossfire.]

ARIELA

Aye Puto--!!

MAMA

Alright! Now, that we've got the conversation flowing—*[This quiets the small riot somehow, and after a hot second, Ariela sits back down. Crossing to an unused table with a decorative cloth over it.]* I think one of the nicest ways to get to know somebody is by sharing a meal together. So, I thought – and this can just be our little secret – but I thought, we could all sit down and break some bread together. Now, I bought us some pizza. It's some napkins and some cola--

[She pulls the cloth off the table. Beneath it are two large pizza boxes and some paper plates, napkins and forks. Before she can finish her next word, the kids are UP! They rush the pizza, devouring the contents. It's like a tornado blitzing through a trailer park, at once focused and chaotic, leaving nothing but a trail of wreckage behind. In a matter of seconds, all the pizza is gone, some pizza stacked up one piece on top of the other in kids' hands, some of it already in stomachs. But the quickness with which all of the pizza disappears should seem unreal. These are kids who are used to having to strike as soon as they find free food. It's a cacophonous chorus of HEY HEY THAT'S MINE and HANDS OFF FOOL and MOVE BITCH etc. During the chaos, Lady takes the opportunity to snatch the Emily Post book off the table and shove it under her shirt. Guilty, she runs out quickly. Class is over, there's no getting them to focus after this. This chaos should signify a minor passage of time. Once they've got their food, the kids cut out, leaving their survey papers behind and unfilled out.

When they are all absent, the music dies down, and Mama is left to clean up the damage. Ariela, who was the only person not a part of the pizza blitz, has spent this section of time calmly putting her things in her purse and basically primping and prepping herself to get back out into the world. She approaches Mama.]

START

ARIELA

[re. the kids who just stormed out.] *Animales.*

[Handing Mama her filled out survey.] Here you go, Miss A.

MAMA

Oh, thank you, Miss...remind me again?

ARIELA

Ariela.

MAMA

That's a pretty name.

ARIELA

Thanks. It's my real one. My mama took one look at me in the hospital --baby penis and all --and she was like "Ariela." I been servin' up real fish since before I could talk.

MAMA

Well you go right on. *[Goes about cleaning up the room.]*

ARIELA

Let me do that. You should not have to clean up by yourself. Those dumbass queens. It's like, get some manners already, you know?

MAMA

I got my work cut out for me, that's for sure.

ARIELA

I'm sorry I had to lose my *[Stops herself before saying "shit."]* -- get all loud in class. But, you know, you been around for as long as I have and you gotta fight for your own space, you know? It's like survival.

MAMA

Apology accepted, and let's try to be a little more gracious next week, alright Baby?

ARIELA

Okay.

Do you call everyone "Baby?"

MAMA

Only the people I like. *[A wink or something sweet.]*

[Ariela likes that. She likes it a lot.]

ARIELA

Do you, uh, do you think I could call you "Mama?" Not cuz you're old or nothin'. No, because, I mean, dang woman, look at you! You fine as hell! And, *lo siento*, but your butt is like an *event!*

MAMA

[Fun, in confidence.] I have always had a wonderful butt.

ARIELA

Is it yours?

MAMA

What do you mean, is it mine? It's on my body.

ARIELA

Sorry. Was that not polite?

MAMA

It was a little personal. But I get your meanin'. I've been dealin' with these God-given curves since I was a little boy. Even in grammar school, boys'd see me struttin' down the hall, they'd say, "Ooo, here she come. Here come The Body."

ARIELA

That's nice. "The Body."

So, do you got a husband? Or a girlfriend.

MAMA

Now, Baby, that *is* private, now.

ARIELA

Oh. Sorry.

MAMA

That's alright. But, I do like to keep a little of my self for my self. ~~*[Adjusting something on Ariela to make her more decent, like pulling her cardigan shut. It's both sweet and a little invasive. Motherly.]*~~ After all, a lady always holds a little something back. There. Now, aren't you pretty. ~~*[Looking around for her Emily Post book.]*~~ Now where did I put my--? ~~*I had a book when I came in here, do you see it? [Ariela shakes her head.] I swear, if my head weren't screwed on...*~~

ARIELA

I think it's really great what you are doing for these kids, being like a role model to them? *Mira*, I'm 33 years old, and I ain't never had not trans people to look up to. I mean, my *mami* was accepting of me, and she give me all this freedom and stuff, but like I kinda wished I had somebody giving me boundaries, you know? Then, maybe I would not had had all my surgeries right away. Because like I thought there was only one way to be a woman, you know? And like I wanted to move out and live with my pimp and like-- Jesus, if somebody had just told me "no"...

So, yeah, I think you can really help these *chicas*. Like, a lot.

MAMA

Thank you for your help, Baby. *[Meaning “thanks for helping me clean the room.”]*

ARIELA

[Terribly serious.] (if) You need anything at all – *anything--* you call Ariela. *[Unsure quite what to do with that, Mama just smiles politely. Ariela starts to leave, but then.]*
You coming back next week?

MAMA

Of course I am. Why wouldn't I?

ARIELA

We get a lot of these volunteers come through here. After they see us, we don't never see them again.

MAMA

Well Mama's coming back. And that's a promise.

ARIELA

Okay. Bye, Mama.

MAMA

Bye bye now.

END

[Ariela smiles big. Exits.]

Mama sits, exhausted. She sees the board that reads: “You Are Something Other Miss Darlin.” The lights in the room turn off, startling her. In the semi-dark, she looks at a clump of trashed paper napkins in her fist. She uncrumples one, folds it nicely as if it were made of the finest cloth, places it on the table in front of her, and smooths it down. An idea is born.]

*

[Bus stop. Immediately after class. Lady waits for the bus, hunched over the Emily Post Book. She's engrossed. Beta, at a distance, leans against a wall, trying not to look a part of anything. After a moment of posturing, giving a performance of self for anyone around, Beta inches close-ish to Lady, careful not to look like he's talking to her.]

BETA

Hey.
I said Hey!

LADY

[Closing the book and hiding it up her shirt again.] Hey me or Hey someone else?

BETA

MAMA
Alright?

LADY
Okay. Mama. Thank you. Okay.
Bye Ariela. You're pretty.

BETA
You be alright, Mama? *[She nods.]* I see you? *[She nods again. He upnods to Ariela as he leaves.]*

[The big old room belongs to Mama and Ariela now.]

START

MAMA
Miss Vargas.

ARIELA
Sorry I'm late.

MAMA
You don't have to apologize for lateness, just say "Excuse me." Unless, of course you hurts somebody or let them down. Then an apology might be in order.

ARIELA
This isn't class. Don't lecture me outside of class.

MAMA
Why not? You've been telling stories out a school.

ARIELA
What's that spose to mean?

MAMA
Drop the performance, please. The only way you get to *act* with me is *proper*. What's goin' / on?

ARIELA
Act? Act like / what?

MAMA
Why did you tell my T?!

[Beat.]

ARIELA

I don't know what your problem is. I already told you, trans girls are some of the most devious things on the street.

MAMA

Then why did you come here today?

ARIELA

For Charms.

MAMA

Well you're too late. Charm is finished, Baby.

ARIELA

I'm not your baby. You are not my mama.

MAMA

Of course not, you're a grown woman.

ARIELA

So? I'm grown, that mean I don't need a mama? I thought you understand me. We got everything in common, you know? We both too old for this world any more. This whole time, I am right in front of you, you can't even *look at me*—

MAMA

I see you. I have always / seen you—

ARIELA

Beta? You gonna be *Beta's* best friend?! Beta don't need you. *I* need you.

MAMA

Beta needs more than you could ever know.

ARIELA

Why? Because he's a mess? I can be a mess! Shit, look at me, I *am* a mess!

MAMA

You are *not* a mess. I been lookin' at you this whole time, and I see a strong woman who has used her head to stay alive for twenty years on the street. ~~You know *exactly* what you're doing at all times. And if I haven't been as worried about you as some of these other lost babies, then I *am* sorry. But I see strength in you. I see survival in you. I didn't think I needed to worry about you.~~

ARIELA

I don't want you to worry about me. I want you to care about me.

MAMA

Attacking me when my back is turned is hardly the way to get me to care / about you.

ARIELA

I do what I have to in order to survive.

MAMA

How does droppin' a bomb on the middle of my Charm Class help *you* stay alive? Did you think about what it would do to the other kids in the class? Did you think about what would happen to them when they lost this place?

ARIELA

Did you think about them when you promised them a Tea Party that didn't exist? Or a story of your life that was never fucking true?

MAMA

I'll *make* it true!

ARIELA

It was just another story. You're so full of fabulous stories, but ain't none of them is true.

MAMA

If they published that article with your name attached, *you would be killed. Do you understand that?! Those boys in blue would make you disappear.*

ARIELA

Who's going to miss me?

Social services? Drop in center? Don't you know I'm too old for that shit? You older than 23? Sorry, bye bye. Food Bank? You don't have no food stamps? *Hasta*. You want a place to live? A doctor? Free needles? Free any-kind-of care? Sorry, you ain't a kid, you ain't a senior, you don't got no HIV? *Don't you know?! Don't nobody has time for you unless you are young, old, sick, or dying.*

But you're right. You don't got to worry about Ariela. I *know* how to survive. When I went out and got my HIV, I knew *exactly* what I was doing. Now I got housing. Now I got a doctor, medicines, social services, food delivered every week to where I live. I got put in a stupid job, even. I don't have to go on the streets hardly no more. People are helping me get my hormones. I have entire organizations helping me be the woman I have always known I am. *All* these people paying attention to me. And all I had to do was start dying.

So, yeah, I know exactly what those policemen would do to me. But sometimes you *have* to kill yourself in order to survive.

END

~~[Mama takes Ariela's face in her hands. Ariela recoils, thinking she's going to be slapped, maybe. But Mama gently takes towelette from Ariela's Ziploc baggie, tears it open, and wipes away Ariela's tears, taking some of her make-up with it. She smooths away the sadness, the layers. She looks at this girl in her hands.]~~