

Musically Inspired Short Stories

A stylized illustration of a woman with long dark hair, wearing large headphones and holding a smartphone. She is wearing a dark long-sleeved shirt and dark pants. The background is a solid purple color.

Soaring and Unmuted

Southwest Miami Senior High
Class of 2026



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The following anthology contains creative writing short stories that were written during the 2025 - 2026 school year. Some may be true, while others were inspired by true events.

Soaring and Unmuted
Musically Inspired Short Stories
Written by students from
Southwest Miami Senior High's
Class of 2026
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The Soundtrack of Our Lives
Nestor Cedeño
Don't You (Forget About Me) - Simple Minds

It's the first day of school. Students enter their classrooms with a mix of determination, enthusiasm, caution, or uncertainty. When a classroom is led by a familiar teacher, students know what to expect. But what happens when they enter the room of a stranger—a teacher new to the school?

On day one, most are quiet, waiting for the signals that start the year—the ringing of the bell, followed by the four dings from the P.A. system, a "Good morning," the Pledge of Allegiance, and finally, the voice of their principal—their very own "Mr. B"—welcoming everyone to a new and hopefully exciting academic year.

The senior class—the ones who wear the crown—begin to recap their summers to one another. They share stories of places visited, adventures had, jobs started or lost, and of relationships that flourished or fizzled. Some keep their stories to themselves while others talk of days spent simply "recharging" in anticipation of their final year of high school.

Amidst this, this new teacher stands before them and says that they all have a story to tell—of a young life full of troubles and doubts, strange loves, or even tender things being worked on, and that every story—happy, sad, tender or rough—needs a soundtrack. He explains that whenever they hear a certain song, it anchors them to a specific moment, place, or person. Everyone has a life soundtrack; when the timing is right, a song plays in the background, the lyrics sing

in their ears, and the beat resonates in their hearts. It's that song that allows them to give everything—inside and out.

Inspired by this idea, and by the memoir “Love Is a Mix Tape: Life and Loss, One Song at a Time” by music journalist Rob Sheffield, this collection of short stories brings together a wide variety of music that serves as a backdrop to lives lived, emotions felt, and dreams chased. Each author accepted the challenge of writing about themselves, using this creative process to show a side of them that would likely stay buried.

Readers are invited to become listeners. Scan the QR code below to access the “**Soaring and Unmuted**” playlist, featuring every song in the order it appears in this book. You will read each senior’s words, as Rob Sheffield expresses, “perhaps surprisingly, with joy in your heart and a song in your head.”

The Class of 2026 hopes you enjoy each entry and that their words help you to not forget about them. May these moments—and their soundtracks—spark memories of *your* own life story. Who knows, before you know it, *you* might be dancing to a song that takes you back.



Southwest Miami Senior High
April 13th, 2026

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Soul &

Harmony

Nostalgia, Growth, Eternal Bonds,
and Tender Reflections

Why Can't I Find It?
Maximilliano Leon
Dust in the Wind - Kansas

I forget the exact day the question was asked, but I remember the feeling of it—how it made me question what it really meant and how it connected to me. My teacher didn't ask me directly, but the question was aimed at me all the same: What was a moment that impacted you? A story to tell, a moment to recall.

This should be easy, right? If I stopped to realize my "moment"—a moment of truth, a change, or a sudden flare of drama—I could rant about it. I could tell you about something someone said that hurt me, but that wouldn't define me as a person. It wouldn't explain who I am.

Even now, as I build up suspense for a great story, I realize that the memories I live are, as the song says, "Dust in the Wind." They feel transient, never impactful enough to define me. I could brag about my skill with the guitar or count my one hundred rejections from girls, and while those things build my character, who is to say those moments will linger? I am used to living life in the "safe lane," like a sidewalk next to a road, rarely merging into the crossroads. Most of that is by choice; I dislike sports, and I loathe taking orders from those who overstep their authority, as many adults tend to do.

I chose this life, yet there is always a reason why we act and speak the way we do. My parents are close to being helicopter parents; they are strict about my decisions. My hand has been held for most of my life—silver-spoon-fed—and life has "passed before my eyes of curiosity." I like to

imagine myself as the main character of my own show, but in reality, I often feel like a sidekick or a background character in someone else's life.

I haven't made an imprint on this world like I dream of doing one day. I often talk about moments as if I were there in depth, as if I had a sprawling life outside of mandatory school attendance—a taste of society and faces I don't yet know. As the deadline for this assignment approached, I was lost, confused, and alone in my thoughts. Suggestions from friends came and went, but all my possible answers faded away. "All they are is dust in the wind."

As the end drew near, I remained empty-handed. I felt disapproval, not from my teacher, but from myself. I couldn't bring myself to produce the expressive story everyone expected. Writing this, I reflect on how that question was a ponder on the definition of what it means to be me. The true meaning "slips away"—that one moment that a news reporter would scramble to cover for all the juicy details.

I could not find a single moment I felt was worthy—not one proud memory that affected me rather than my family or friends. But now, as I write this, I realize that the story I longed to tell is currently being written. I have an opportunity right at my feet. The story is incomplete; it hasn't reached its climax yet.

If you, the reader, could be proud of a single moment, would you try to understand why you felt that way? Or would you simply move on with life, acting as if you had accomplished something from it?

Back Then
Genesis Salasblancas
Time Adventure - Mathematicpony

Family has always been my greatest treasure, but my cousin, Angelina, has always been my heart. Just a year older than me, she was close enough to feel like my sister, yet just old enough to pretend she knew what she was doing even when she didn't. She lives in every corner of my childhood, her laugh echoing through almost every memory. "My Shary Angelina"—I love saying both names, even if she rolls her eyes every single time. Growing up beside her felt less like having a cousin and more like sharing a soul.

We made everything an adventure. We spent hours playing with dolls, building dramatic storylines that lasted longer than the actual games. We created dances we swore we would show our families, though we always forgot the steps the moment the music stopped. On weekends, we would sneak out to *TipTop*—our favorite Nicaraguan restaurant—to eat chicken and laugh at things that weren't even funny. We'd spend the rest of the night trying not to laugh too loudly in her room so my mom wouldn't scold us. Angelina watched every cartoon with me until our eyes were heavy, and she's the one who sat next to me during horror movies that traumatized me for weeks. When she got her first job, the first thing we bought wasn't clothes or makeup—it was Minecraft, because we wanted a digital world to build together, just like we'd always done in real life.

But it was the mornings—the slow, quiet ones before school—that shaped us most. Those early hours in the kitchen, brushing our hair with half-awake hands and eating

a quick breakfast while Adventure Time flickered in the background. The tiny TV filled the room with soft colors, and when the melody from “Time Adventure” began, everything seemed to pause. Even as kids, something in that tune felt like a message meant for us: bright, familiar, and strangely comforting. The routine was ordinary, but it felt sacred—a small ritual we didn’t know we were creating.

Then time did what it always does. It moved. It stretched. It shifted without asking permission. We grew older, responsibilities crept in, and eventually, I moved away. Suddenly, mornings weren’t shared anymore. There was no kitchen where we sat half-awake, no cartoons humming in the background. I didn’t notice the change all at once; it was gradual—a missed call here, a tired message there—until one day, getting ready alone, I realized how heavy the silence had become.

I tried putting on music to fill the emptiness. Without planning to, I scrolled until I hit it—the song with the melody that had cradled so many of our mornings. The moment it played, my chest tightened. I wasn’t in my new room anymore. I was back in that kitchen with her. I was back to being a little girl eating breakfast in slow motion, watching that tiny TV flicker. I was back to the soft glow of a morning that didn’t know it would one day become a memory.

That was the moment I realized something important: distance doesn’t erase people like her. It doesn’t undo years of growing up together or erase a bond built into your bloodstream. Time changes everything, but it also protects what truly matters.

Whenever I hear that melody now, something inside me settles. The song is more than nostalgia; it’s a

reminder of who I am and where my heart first learned to love. It reminds me of the girl who sat beside me every morning—the one who shared dolls, secrets, nightmares, and dreams. It reminds me that no matter how many new cities come between us, she is my before, my during, and my after.

The song was right all along: “Will happen, happening, happened.” Time moves, but love doesn’t. She is proof that some things don’t fade. No matter how far we go, we will always be “back then.” And that “back then” will always live inside me.

A Beep of Happiness and Memories

Alexander Barrios

PlayStation 4 Opening Theme

As a kid, I always fantasized about having my own video game console. I remember the moment I discovered a store near my *pueblo* that sold them—specifically the PlayStation 4—and computers. I was so happy; it felt like finding gold in the middle of nowhere. I still remember clearly asking my *abuela* and cousins for 30 Guatemalan *Quetzales*: 10 for the bus, 5 for the way there, 5 for the way back, and 20 to rent the console.

I remember walking into the store and seeing a row of PS4s available to play. At the time, I didn't even know what they were; I mostly went there to watch YouTube or download games on my phone. But one day, I got curious enough to ask the owner, Mickey, about playing. I followed him to the other side of the room, which was divided by a wall: one side for computers and the other for consoles. We sat in plastic chairs, and Mikey grabbed two controllers, handing one to me. He pressed the middle button, and that's when I first heard it: that fast, loud BEEP accompanied by a blue light. The system turned on, the PS4 logo appeared on the screen, and a calm theme song began to play.

Years passed, and I moved to the United States. I felt nothing but loneliness. I was an antisocial kid from a small *pueblo*, and the only friends I had ever known were the ones who lived right next to me. In Miami, everything felt strange; I was overstimulated and struggling to make friends. Eventually, my mom asked if I wanted to move in with my dad in Boston. I didn't hesitate to say yes.

On July 6th, 2017, shortly after I arrived in Boston, my dad took me to a Walmart. He had spoken to my mother about my situation and decided to buy me a console for my birthday. When he told me to pick out the PS4, I started crying and thanked him.

I began playing online and talking to strangers in game chats. One day, I was doing a delivery mission on GTA 5 by myself when I saw a player on the mini-map named “KingJostin777”. He approached me and said in Spanish, “*Ey, ey, bro, invítame a tu organización para que te ayude.*” (Invite me so I can help you.) I did. After the mission, I told him, “Hey man, we should play more often. I’m online every day.” He replied, “Sure, bro, same with me.”

That was the start of a friendship that lasted years. We became a duo, always playing the same games. I eventually introduced him to my dad over video call, and he introduced me to his mom and his little brother, John. My dad even gave me extra money to buy him in-game items, telling me, “That man is like your brother; you’ve never seen him, but you’re always happy when you talk to him.” It was true. We called each other “brother,” and he always started our calls with Panamanian slang: “*Qué sopa, nii brother?*” (What’s up, brother?) Eventually, I stopped playing because I had to repeat a grade, and my parents took my console away. I moved back to Florida with my mother and never got the console back. We talked here and there, but it wasn’t the same. The last time we spoke on the phone was the day I started 6th grade. I remember him saying, “*Cuídate, hermano, y no vayas a repetir el grado otra vez.*” (Take care, brother, and don’t go repeating the grade again.) I laughed and said, “I’ll try, man.” That was the last time I heard his voice.

A year later, I had a job and my own money. I bought a PS5 and a gaming computer. I looked up Jostin's profile and saw: "Last active: 11 months ago." I saw his little brother was online, so I figured Jostin had just made a new account. I messaged Jostin on Instagram but got no response, so I messaged John on PlayStation.

When John finally joined my party chat, I said, "Jostin?" He replied, "What? *Yo no soy Jostin, soy John.*" (I'm not Jostin, I'm John.)

I was in shock. His voice had changed from a little kid to a grown man who sounded just like his brother. I told him I was Alex, and once he realized who I was, he screamed excitedly. We talked for hours, but I was so caught up in the past that I forgot the most important question.

"And where is your brother?" I asked.

John went silent for almost a minute. Then, I heard him start crying. "*Manito, mi hermano ya no está aquí con nosotros.*" (Dude, my brother isn't here with us anymore.) I didn't understand. "What? Like, he doesn't live with you guys anymore?" Through his tears, he said, "Brother, he died."

My heart started pumping so fast I felt like I had been stabbed in the chest. I couldn't speak; it felt like a wire fence was wrapped around my throat. "No, John, you're lying," I whispered.

He told me the story. Jostin had been missing for four days. On a Thursday afternoon in 2022, John was watching the news when they reported a young man found dead in an alley. At that same moment, his mother got a call. She collapsed to the floor, screaming, "*¡No! No puede ser, mi bebé... ¡Nooo!*" (No! It can't be. My baby... Nooo!) His name appeared on the TV. He had been stabbed more than

15 times by someone they knew—a "friend" named David—just so he could join a gang.

I followed John on Instagram and saw a highlight named "*Vuela alto, hermano.*" (Fly high, brother.) I saw the stories from the funeral. To this day, I regret not talking to him more. I never got to say goodbye.

Part of me is still in denial. But every time I turn on my console, that loud BEEP brings back all the memories of happiness. I still have him marked as my "favorite" friend, and I still check his profile just to think of him as being here. That PS4 theme song isn't just music to me; it is the sound of my childhood and the sound of the friend I called my brother.

I miss you, brother. Rest in peace, "KingJostin777".

The Golden Boy and the Rusted Chariot
Damon Nieves
Vivir Mi Vida - Marc Anthony

The year was 2016. The Boy was sleeping alongside his Diamond Brother in their chariot as the Woman of Rust commanded the rusted beast toward their destination. “Vivir mi vida, la la la la...” The words were unknown to the boy, but as he stirred awake, radiant rays pierced his fragile eyes. As fast as light itself, his eyes shut, blurring the raging rays from his retina. Finally, the boy asked the Woman of Rust, “What are you playing?”

The Woman of Rust was singing along, unaware of her Golden Boy’s question. “A veces llega la lluvia...” The boy spoke louder, “Mami, what are you playing?” She didn’t hear his words at first, but noticing his movement, she turned down the Hispanic opera projecting from the rusted beast.

“What is it, baby?” she asked. The boy repeated himself for the third time: “I said, what music are you listening to?”

The Woman of Rust was delighted by her Golden Boy’s interest. “Oh, I am listening to ‘Vivir mi vida’ by Marc Anthony.”

“Okay,” the boy replied, asking no more questions. But before his mother could turn the music back up, the Diamond Brother woke from his drooling slumber. He looked at his brother and mother, but before the Diamond Child could utter a word, the boy interrupted: “Mami is listening to ‘Vivir Mi Vida.’”

“What is the song about?” the Diamond Child asked.

Presented with the opportunity, the mother explained everything she knew about the song and the singer's passion. Her words were like a sharpened blade cutting through the questions the Diamond Child berated her with. When she finished her lecture, she looked back at her Golden Boy and realized her words hadn't quite penetrated his mind; it was as if she were explaining the concepts of the universe to a squirrel.

A thousand small blades of grass passed by as the rusted chariot roared near the Green Castle—a castle centered on education and learning. The boy was not afraid, but excited. His Diamond Brother seemed indifferent, but nothing could hide the boy's own thrill.

“¡Voy a vivir el momento!”

Earlier, he had been annoyed by the song, thinking the words loud and abrasive, but quickly he began singing along with his mother. “¡Para entender el destino!” As soon as the boy began to sing, the Diamond Brother joined in, creating a small orchestra inside the belly of the rusted chariot.

To the boy, the Green Castle appeared like a second sun rising on the horizon. Nerves began to shake his form as he saw ten, twenty—no, a hundred children waiting for the castle gates to open. Before he could say anything, his mother gave him a kiss on the cheek and said in a caring tone, “Go have fun and make some friends, Damon.”

At that moment, the boy smiled a golden smile that would make the most blinding star jealous. He waved his Diamond Brother goodbye and jumped from the rusted chariot. Filled with light, he saw a Green Knight—an older woman with visible wrinkles but a strong spirit.

“Are you ready for your first day?” the Green Knight asked.

The Golden Boy responded quickly, “Today is my third year, but I am new here.” The Green Knight nodded and gestured toward the gates. But before the Golden Boy walked inside the Green Castle of education, he finally read its name: Marjory Stoneman Douglas Elementary School.

The Golden Boy had one final thought before he walked inside: “I wonder what that says?”

Sade, Dis-Moi
Maria Herrera
Sadness - Enigma

The fluorescent lights of the terminal felt almost too bright, but beneath the airport noise, the only rhythm I truly heard was the pulsing beat of the song in my head: “Sadness.” It was a slow, heavy chant that matched the weight of the history I was finally stepping into. I was nine years old, and the idea that I would no longer see my father’s side of the family through a screen was both unusual and deeply exciting. My godmother and I stood with our luggage, waiting for my aunt. The surprise had been carefully planned, and when we arrived at my grandparents’ house, the shock and tears on their faces made every moment of waiting worth it. My grandpa handed me his phone, and seeing my father’s relieved smile on the screen confirmed I had made it safely. The ancestral chanting in my mind faded into the familiar sound of family voices.

That evening, I learned what “dinnertime” meant in my grandparents’ home—soup first, then a heavy main meal. I wasn’t about to complain; I love food, though my grandparents’ cooking definitely had me thinking, *I’m so fat, bro...* Soon, the house filled with laughter as aunts, uncles, and cousins arrived. As night fell, a cool breeze drifted in through the window. I snapped a grainy picture of the city lights on my Nintendo DS, wanting to capture the view forever. When I finally went to bed, the anxious rhythm in my head had softened into a peaceful heartbeat.

The next morning, the sun warmed my face. I slipped out of bed and walked into the kitchen, where my

grandpa was already eating with my cousins. He told me my grandma was upstairs feeding the chickens. With what little courage I had, I climbed a stark, unusual staircase at the far end of the living room to find her.

On the second floor, the rhythmic, heavy synth bass of the song in my head amplified the beat of my heart. I peeked into a few rooms—bare concrete walls and scattered bricks—giving the space a raw, unfinished look. A low, resonant Gregorian chant seemed to hum through the silence, giving the empty space a spiritual weight. It felt as if those ancient voices were asking a profound question I couldn't yet translate: “Sade, dis-moi.” The answer wasn't despair, but a moment of haunting clarity; I wasn't sad, but I was feeling the forgotten ache of my family roots. Outside, the percussion softened into awe. My grandma's garden stretched before me, small yet somehow vast. She stood there feeding her chickens, and I stayed by her side until she finished.

The third day was peaceful. We visited an art museum filled with statues and paintings. One statue—a man sitting somewhere between thinking and frowning—looked like he understood the questions I hadn't yet learned to put into words. The day ended simply: snacks from a local store and a dinner of quesadillas and maracuyá juice.

The final day moved quickly. We visited a cathedral, and as I stepped inside, the chant in my head rose into something powerful. There she was—the Virgin Mary, the woman my parents had prayed to and the woman I was named after. Her golden frame glowed softly, and for a moment, everything felt still. I felt seen, protected, and unbelievably grateful. I cried when it was time to leave. It wasn't safe for me to stay longer, but I carried that moment

with me. As I prepared to return home, the song in my mind gave me its final blessing: “In nomine Christi, Amen.”

Life Keeps Moving
Moises Mejia
Cinco Pa' las Doce - Néstor Zavarse

I didn't know it at the time, but 2019 was the last New Year's I would ever spend with my entire family in Nicaragua. It was the last time all my cousins, siblings, and I were together in the same house, doing the same things we had always done. Back then, it just felt normal. I thought it would always be like that.

The house was loud, as usual. My aunts were huddled together being *chismosas*, trading stories and gossip that didn't really matter, but they loved it anyway. The smell of food was everywhere—pork, chicken, rice, and tortillas all mixing together. Outside, fireworks were already popping even though midnight was still an hour away. My cousins and I sat on the floor playing video games, pretending we weren't waiting for the moment our parents would yell for us to take family pictures. We always complained about the photos, but deep down, we loved the ritual.

About fifteen minutes before midnight, it was time to burn *El Viejo*. The adults brought out the "Old Man" figure we made every year—stuffed with sawdust, dressed in old clothes, and packed with firecrackers. We all stood around, watching the fuse. The fire started slowly, then suddenly everything blew up. Firecrackers went off inside the *viejo's* body, and the flames grew massive. My cousins shouted, my grandma crossed herself, and I just watched, thinking the explosions looked like the year breaking apart piece by piece.

Five minutes before midnight, we headed back inside. That's when my mom played the song she plays every single year without fail: "Cinco Pa' las Doce" by Nestor Zavarce. As soon as the first notes hit, the energy in the room shifted. It didn't matter how loud we had been a minute ago; everyone grew quiet. That song hits differently—it's sad and warm at the same time. Even as a kid, it made me feel something I couldn't quite name.

My mom pulled me into a hug while the music played. My brothers and grandparents hugged, too. In the back of the room, someone wiped their eyes, pretending the firework smoke was the reason, but we all knew it was the song. It makes you think about the passing of time and everything you lived through—the good and the bad. The lyrics acted as a countdown: "Faltan cinco pa' las doce, voy camino a mi casa..."

I felt like I needed to stop and pay attention. Somehow, I think I knew things wouldn't stay the same forever. Then midnight hit. Everyone started yelling and hugging before running outside to see the sky light up. The street smelled like gunpowder. For those few minutes, life felt perfect. But time doesn't care about perfect moments; it just keeps moving.

Now, looking back, I hold onto that memory extra tight. People moved away, life changed, and those traditions don't happen the same way anymore. Sometimes that hurts more than I expected. But the song is still mine. Every December, I play Nestor Zavarce's version. As soon as I hear it, I'm back in that house—the noise, the hugs, and the smell of the fireworks.

The song carries that last moment before everything changed. It reminds me that while people move on,

memories stay if you don't let them go. That song is a door I can open whenever I want to feel my family close again. It tells me to value the time I have, because time is both the best and worst thing we own. I value it now. Every single time.

The Perfect Christmas
Amanda Fuentes
El Triste -José-José

Years ago, when I still lived in Cuba and my whole family was together, Christmas felt completely different. I don't know if it was the feeling of having everyone you love by your side, but since leaving Cuba, Christmas has never felt the same. Maybe it's because my *abuclita* isn't there to arrive the day before and organize the party. Maybe it's simply because "home" doesn't really feel like home anymore.

Christmas in Cuba has its own magic. We celebrate on December 24th, and the party lasts the entire day. Honestly, it starts even earlier—the day before, when the family gathers to deep-clean the house, or even a month prior, when we put up the tree and lights. You could see our house from the corner, always glowing, with my grandmother giving instructions on exactly where everything should go.

On the big day, everything starts early. I would wake up to the smell of my mom's *cafecito*, have breakfast, and head out with my dad to buy the final essentials, like *cabezotes*—kind of like a pancake, but different—for dessert. By 10 a.m., we'd be back, and the house would already be full of people working, talking, cooking, and laughing.

By 6 p.m., everyone was showered and dressed in their brand-new outfits. The domino table was set, waiting for the first four players to sit down. The smell of *congrí* and *cerdo asado* filled the air.

If you've never been to a Cuban Christmas party, it's hard to explain that specific blend of happiness and chaos.

But right in the middle of that beautiful noise—the dominoes hitting the table and the roar of laughter—there was one sound I waited for more than anything else: my *abuelo*. He didn't need a microphone or background music. If someone mentioned a song or if the mood felt right, he would start singing. His voice filled the whole house; it felt as if even the walls stopped to listen.

Sometimes he began softly, like a secret between him and the music. Little by little, everyone would go quiet. When my *abuelo* sang, you had to listen.

I don't know if it happened exactly that Christmas or another one, but this is how my memory holds it: He stood up, took a deep breath, and began with those words that always seemed to carry a little bit of pain: “*Que triste fue decirnos adiós...*” Even though the song told a different story, in our house, it meant something else. It was my grandfather's way of putting his whole heart on display. I would watch him, completely amazed, thinking no one in the world could ever sing like him. No one.

Now, every time I hear José José's “*El Triste*”, it feels like Christmas comes back, even if for only a second. It's as if he's there again, surrounded by family, singing as if time wasn't real. The music enters slowly and softly, the same way he did, and his voice returns to my memory so clearly it feels like he's still with us: “*Qué triste luce todo sin ti...*”

The song has become a bridge—a way to step back into a moment that no longer exists in reality but still lives inside me. Even though my *abuelo* is gone, this song gives me a piece of him: his voice, his warmth, and his presence. It's an echo that never fades. That is why “*El triste*” will always be the soundtrack to that memory.

For My Beautiful Boy
Alison Garcia
Beautiful Boy - John Lennon

I have the sweetest, most angelic brother ever; he is literally my baby. You might think I'm talking about a newborn, but he's eleven years old and about to start middle school. He is officially hitting the stage where he's really growing. Do I like that? NOOOOOO. But that's a part of life. I'm sure other older sisters who have watched their brothers grow from infants to young men know exactly what I'm talking about. From holding him in my arms to now running out of breath trying to lift him up just to see if I "still got it".

Where did all the time go?

Enough about me crying; let me tell you about my brother. He was the answer to my prayers. When my mother was pregnant, I already had a sister, but I wondered what it would be like to have a brother. Would it be all cars, transformers, and video games? Before I could even finish imagining it, boom... my grandmother was yelling, "¡Ay Dios mío, tu mamá, vámonos!" I instantly knew my mom's water had broken. We rushed to the hospital, and there my beautiful mom was carrying my brother in her arms. She told me, "Look, it's your baby brother. Give him a kiss." My world lit up. Feeling his peachy skin, his delicate hands, and his soft hair felt like a dream.

Those first few months felt surreal. Every time I held him, he gave me a sense of life; he wholeheartedly gave me a purpose on this insane planet. Nothing else mattered but him. I'll never forget one day when he was seven months old. I was scrolling through movies, trying to find something to

watch, and I saw “Mr. Peabody & Sherman”. In one scene, the protagonist, Peabody, finds his son Sherman abandoned in a box in an alleyway and embraces him. As that scene played, it transitioned into the song "Beautiful Boy" by John Lennon.

Instantly, that became our song. Whenever he was scared, he would sit on my lap, and I would sing to him to remind him that when the "monster's gone and he's on the run," his sister is right here. Even at the beach, looking at the ocean, I'd sing it to him. He is quite literally attached to me. I would tell him how grateful I am for him and what he has done for me—he was just a baby, but he still gave me a reason to keep going. My parents would sing along with me to remind him who he is to us. That is our theme song to this day; it belongs to us and no one else.

I would call him a "beautiful boy", and he would just smile. I'd sing, “I can hardly wait to see you come of age, but I guess we'll both just have to be patient.” My brother is my Sherman—literally like my own son. Every time I hear that song, I realize he will never be that small again. But I know one thing for sure: I will always remind him to say a little prayer every day, just like his sister taught him.

He is my world and my reminder to keep moving forward. Every baby picture of him reminds me of that sweet little boy who wants me to succeed and tells everyone, “My sister wants to be a doctor.” I don't care if he's forty or eighty years old; he will forever and ever be "my beautiful, beautiful, beautiful boy."

Extrañaré a Mi Abuela
Liadis Mesa
Yo te Extrañaré - Tercer Cielo

When I think back to the time when my grandmother was sick, it feels like a quiet chapter that shaped who I became without me even realizing it. I was around seven years old, living in Cuba, surrounded by cousins and family members who all grew up together like siblings. My grandmother had been battling cancer for several years. Even though I was too young to fully understand what was happening, I could sense that things were changing.

The atmosphere in the house felt heavier, and the adults carried a worry that I didn't have the words to describe. My grandmother loved Christian music, and one of her favorite songs was “Yo te Extrañaré” by Tercer Cielo. I first heard it while she was still alive; it usually played softly while she cooked, cleaned, or rested. At the time, it was just another song to me. I never imagined how meaningful it would later become.

After she passed away, that song suddenly felt different. The lyrics made sense in a way they never had before, almost as if they were waiting for me to grow up so I could finally understand them. Hearing it again years later opened up emotions I didn't know were still inside me. The night she died is a memory that feels blurry and clear at the same time. I don't remember every detail, but I remember the heaviness. I remember the sadness on my family's faces, especially my mom's. When they told me what had happened, I cried a lot, even though I didn't fully grasp what

death meant. I only knew that something important was gone.

My family eventually took me to my other grandparents' home to protect me from the full weight of the heartbreak. What stands out most is the feeling of that moment—the confusion, the silence, and the way everyone seemed lost in their own grief. My grandmother was not just another family member; she was the core of our family. She was the person everyone leaned on, the one who held everything in place. Even at seven, I could feel that something big had changed forever.

As the years went by, I moved to another country and grew more mature, but the memory of that night stayed in the background. It wasn't until I heard “Yo te Extrañaré” again that everything clicked. The lyrics spoke about missing someone deeply and the love that remains after they are gone. Hearing it brought back small, everyday moments with her—her walking around the house, talking to us, or smiling.

The song didn't play the night she died, but it has become the soundtrack of how I remember her. It reminds me of the love she gave us and how strongly she influenced our family. I've realized something simple but important: when you truly love someone, they never completely disappear. Their influence stays with the people they loved and in the memories they created.

For me, that reminder is the song she used to play. My grandmother's strength and patience shaped all of us. Listening to “Yo te Extrañaré” now doesn't just bring sadness; it brings understanding and gratitude. It reminds me to appreciate the people who support us while they are still here. Remembering her is no longer painful; it is simply a meaningful part of my story.

What I Would Do Without Her

Andres Argueta

Best Part - Daniel Cesar

It was just another game day. We traveled to another high school to play against their basketball team, and my only goal was to bring home a win. During the game, however, I noticed a girl and her friends trying to get my attention. At first, I thought she was just trying to make me lose focus—and it worked for a bit. I couldn't sink a single basket and struggled to contribute to the team. Eventually, I managed to ignore the distractions for the rest of the game. Before we left the school, that same girl approached me. She looked calm, not nervous at all. She told me I played well and mentioned she'd seen me looking her way a few times. Before the conversation ended, I asked for her Instagram so we could stay in touch.

When I got home, the first thing I did was text her. I was nervous, but I told myself, "What's the worst that could happen?" It started with a simple, "Hey, how has your night been so far?" From there, the questions grew deeper. Short responses turned into long conversations that went back and forth until we were calling each other throughout the day. Talking to her never felt forced; it felt like I had known her for years. It became a part of my routine—something I looked forward to before and after practice. She had a way of making everything feel easy, and it motivated me to play to the best of my ability.

Eventually, we started seeing each other in person. Our first real date was incredibly special, even though it started out a little awkward. When I picked her up, the car

ride was so silent that it felt like an eternity to get to our destination. We walked around a beautiful park, took pictures, and grabbed some ice cream. We had a great time, but the moment that truly defined the day happened when we got back into the car.

The moment I started the engine, a song came on the radio. The first lyric was: “Where you go, I’ll follow, no matter how far.” I sang along a little but then turned the volume down, feeling shy. She asked if I actually knew the song “Best Part” by Daniel Caesar. I told her yes, and that he was one of my favorite R&B artists. She told me how much music meant to her and that he was one of her favorites, too. She asked me to play it again, and we sang the rest of the song together.

After that day, I couldn’t get the song out of my head. It constantly reminded me of the way she smiled while we sang. I even started putting lyrics in my Instagram notes as a hint. I started with the line from the car, and the next day, I posted “If life is a movie, then you’re the best part.” I really hoped she noticed because I liked her so much, but didn’t know how to say it yet.

As Valentine’s Day approached, I knew it was time. I went to her house, and after we spent the day hanging out, I finally asked her to be my girlfriend. She gave me that same smile from the first day we met and said yes.

To this day, I am so glad she is in my life. She keeps me motivated and brings me up whenever I am down. I truly don’t know what I would do without her.

The Song Faded, But the Pain Remained
Santiago Gomez
Used to You - Luke Combs

It was early in the morning. My mom had woken me up at 4:00 a.m. for school, which at the time felt weird. My classes didn't start until 8:00 a.m., and I only lived five minutes away. Instead of going straight to school, we went to my aunt's house, which was within walking distance of the campus. My mom told me to go wake up my cousin, but as I walked away, I heard her voice tremble. I overheard her say that my grandpa didn't have much time left—his lung cancer was taking over, and his liver was failing.

I heard the words, but I didn't really process them. When I walked back into the living room, my mom was wearing sunglasses inside. As a kid, I didn't think much of it, but I later realized she was wearing them to hide her tears so I wouldn't worry while I was at school.

When school ended, my dad picked me up instead of my mom. As I got in the car, he asked about my day, but he had a look on his face I'll never forget. Suddenly, he told me my mom had to catch an emergency flight to El Salvador. He didn't say anything else, and his expression was heavy with a sadness I couldn't quite name.

Once we got home, I was in the middle of a homework assignment when my dad knocked on my door. He didn't wait for me to say "come in"; he just stepped inside. I remember the way he inhaled slowly and the way his shoulders sank before he spoke. He handed me his phone like it was something small and fragile.

On the other end was my mom. “It’s Grandpa,” she said softly, her voice shaky. She told me she had to get to El Salvador to see him because his time was running out. I knew he was sick. I knew the cigarettes he always had tucked behind his ear, and the bottles he poorly hid around the house had finally caught up to him.

As a kid, whenever Cartoon Network switched to Adult Swim at night, they would run those “Truth Initiative” commercials—the scary ones about how smoking kills. It was almost a routine. I’d see the commercial, then go outside to find my grandpa smoking. I would tell him what the commercial said, and he would let out that scratchy laugh that shook his shoulders and made his eyes water. He’d always say, “I know, I’ll try,” but he never did. The cigarettes, the liquor, and the cough stayed.

Knowing something and hearing it officially are two different kinds of pain; only one of them can knock the air out of a room. I didn’t react; I just asked my mom if she was okay and sat there staring at the floor. My dad put a hand on my shoulder and left me alone with the silence. Everything felt heavy.

I turned off the lights, pushed my homework aside, and put on my headphones. The first song that played was “Used to You” by Luke Combs. I had heard it hundreds of times, but I never felt it until that moment. It was as if the song was bringing me back to our memories, of him sitting in his old rocking chair on the porch waiting for me, or taking the long way home in his truck just to listen to the radio.

Grief mixed with love in a way I have never felt since. By the final chorus, tears were flowing—not just from the shock, but from the realization that I couldn’t change him, no matter how many commercials I showed him or how

many times I begged him to quit. The song faded, but the pain remained.

Losing my grandpa so young changed me in ways I'm still discovering. His death taught me that love doesn't protect someone from their own choices. It taught me how habits can swallow a person whole, and how powerless you feel watching someone you love disappear piece by piece.

“Used to You” reminds me to hold the people I love a little tighter and to say the things that matter before life takes the chance away. Because getting used to him being gone is something that will never truly happen.

2

Power Ballads

*Resilience, Ambition, Strength,
and Defying the Odds*

The Soundtrack of My Journey
Kevin Gil
High Hopes - Panic! At The Disco

When I stepped onto the plane that would take me to the United States, my heart was racing. I was scared and sad, but also incredibly excited. I couldn't stop thinking about my mom and grandparents back in Cuba. I remembered how my mom would read me "El Principito" every night when I was little. She always said I was going to do great things in life. I wanted to make her proud and build a better life for my family. Imagining how everything was about to change made me feel nervous and hopeful all at once.

When I stepped off the airplane, the first thing I saw was a massive map of the world. I thought, *wow, that is huge*. Looking around the airport, I saw a literal river of humans moving so fast. I felt very small and a little lost. Everything was new, big, and honestly, a bit scary. I worried about what my life would be like here. Would school be like the movies? I didn't know any English yet, but I told myself I would learn fast—maybe even very fast.

Then I remembered the song "High Hopes." It was my mom's favorite song, and it had become mine, too. Every time I hear it, I feel strong and ready to face anything. As I was boarding the plane, the lyrics played in my head like a secret magic spell: "Had to have high, high hopes for a living." I looked at my mom and told her I loved her with all my heart. She smiled, her eyes turning shiny with tears, and I thought, *okay, I can do this*.

As the plane took off, I watched Cuba disappear through the window. I felt brave despite the sadness. The

lyrics, “Mama said, fulfill the prophecy,” felt like a command to be courageous. I was leaving everything I knew, but I was also stepping into a dream. I wanted to build something good for my family and for myself.

When I finally arrived in the city, it was a total culture shock. People spoke so fast I couldn't understand a single word. There was English everywhere, and I felt like an extra in a movie where I didn't know the plot. But I leaned on "High Hopes." The rhythm matched my heartbeat. “Shooting for the stars when I couldn't make a killing.” I told myself I had to try, even if I felt completely lost.

I've had moments where I had to laugh at myself—like trying to order food and having the cashier look at me like I was speaking a different language (which I was!). But I did learn. I learned slowly—sometimes too slowly for my liking—but I kept trying. That song kept me going. Even when I wanted to cry or run back to Cuba, the music told me: “You can do it, keep going, don't stop.” Looking back, I realize this move changed me. I learned to be brave and to work hard. "High Hopes" is more than just music to me now; it's the soundtrack of my journey. It reminds me of my mom's words, of the home I left, and the dreams I am still reaching for. Every time I hear it, I feel motivated and full of courage. And sometimes, I still dance a little in my room, because that song makes me feel unstoppable.

Looking Back
Kevin Barrios
24 Songs - Playboi Carti

I was born in a country not known for having the best quality of life or the best opportunities for success. Although my family wasn't at the very bottom, we definitely weren't well-off. We faced many struggles, even though we had family living in the U.S. People around us assumed that because of that, we had it easy, but they were wrong. My mom tried her hardest to make our problems seem small so I wouldn't worry. She wanted me to live like a normal kid: worry-free and focused on having fun instead of stressing about things I couldn't control. But eventually, the problems became too big to hide. That was when my mom had to make the hardest decision of our lives: move to the United States. It was a choice that changed everything in ways I wouldn't fully understand until I got older.

At first, I thought, *Awesome!* But then reality set in. I realized I would have to leave all my friends and family behind, which was much harder than I expected. When my mom and I finally began our journey, things went well for the most part until we were stopped by corrupt Mexican federal agents. They forced the people traveling with us to pay around 300,000 Mexican pesos. That moment truly terrified me. Seeing them with weapons, looking anything but friendly, I honestly thought I wouldn't make it past that day. Even now, it remains one of the scariest experiences of my life; I can still feel the fear I felt in that moment.

After that, I hoped for smooth sailing. Things were calm until I arrived in Miami, where I faced the challenge of

adapting to a whole new world. I had to learn a new language and understand new customs. At first, I didn't think I'd ever be able to learn English. It didn't help that some family members said it was too difficult and doubted I could do it.

But I did.

While I was learning, I started liking the things other kids liked and wanted the things they had. When I couldn't have those things, it frustrated me. It made me feel out of place at times, but it also pushed me to keep improving myself. This feeling went on for a while, until one day I was listening to "24 Songs" by Playboi Carti. One line hit me hard: *"I can't believe we made it this far."* It made me stop and compare who I was when I left my home country to who I am now. I speak English almost perfectly, and I've embraced Miami's culture. Most importantly, I have everything I need. I say "most importantly" because I realize now that many people, even in my own school, don't have the things so many take for granted: food, clothes, a home, or loving parents. Realizing this made me appreciate my journey even more and understand how strong my mom and I really were.

We made it here even when people *"ain't believe nun' at all."* But this isn't the end. I still want to accomplish more than I can imagine. One day, I want to be able to say, *"Look, Mama, your son is a star."*

The Hustle and the Truth
Kevin Sagahon
Hollywood - Peso Pluma

There was nothing I hated more than this long, particular period of my life. Starting when I was just two years old, I grew up with nothing to my family's name; my father was in jail, and my mom, only nineteen at the time, had no one there for her. It wasn't until I was about eleven years old that I realized I needed to make a change to help my family. At that age, I started working in landscaping with a family friend. Even then, I knew all I wanted to do was provide for my mother and siblings. Since then, I have been working to help my family, but one thing always seemed to get in the way of my hustle: school. While I am forever grateful for the opportunity to study in this country, school never felt like the path God was opening for me.

The song "Hollywood" represents this moment of my life perfectly. The lyrics go: "No quiero acostarme, no puedo dormir / No puedo acabar, no me puedo rendir / Tantos recuerdos, logros que viví / Razones me sobran para sobrevivir." ("I don't want to go to bed, I can't sleep / I can't finish, I can't give up / So many memories, achievements I lived / I have plenty of reasons to survive.") These lyrics represent my life to this day. They remind me that no matter how tired I am, I can never quit because my family is counting on me.

Another verse says: "No todo es como parece / Neta, yo soy prueba en vivo / No me creen yo se los digo." ("Not everything is as it seems / Truthfully, I am living proof / They don't believe me, I'll tell them.") This reminds me of

how people often judge or think everything is okay without knowing the internal struggles someone is facing. This song, which I listen to every day, reminds me of the obstacles I've overcome with only the help of God. It brings back sad memories, but it also brings joy because I can see how far my family and I have come.

The song also touches on a deeper social reality: "Nuestra generación piensa diferente / Mira el presidente, otro más para la lista de corrupto..." Growing up as a young Latino kid was more difficult than it was for a "regular" kid. For some reason, we were seen differently. People often labeled me a troublemaker or a thief just because I was Mexican. This had a major impact on me and my best friend, Kevin Rubio, making us feel worthless. We got into many issues—fighting and playing with things we shouldn't have—simply because we felt like no one gave a damn about how we felt.

We eventually realized we needed a change, which connects to the final part of the song: "Me arrestaron a los 15 años por querer lograr todos mis sueños... Cuando me corrieron yo me sentí abandonado." ("They arrested me at 15 for wanting to achieve my dreams... When they kicked me out, I felt abandoned.")

This song relates to me because it takes all the downfalls we had as immature kids and turns them into a story of growth. It shows how happy we have become in what we do and how much we have matured. I hope reading this opens people's eyes to the fact that everyone's journey is unique, and we are not defined by our lowest moments, but by how we keep advancing.

Unlikely to Survive
Kevin Martinez
Drag Me Down -One Direction

Ever since I was a little kid, I navigated a life that seemed determined to test the limits of human endurance. I went through a series of rough, life-threatening challenges that made even the most seasoned doctors wonder how I was still alive. For years, the hospital wasn't just a place I visited; it was my second home. I became a regular, known by every doctor and nurse because of the sheer impossibility of what my young body had overcome. I remember one devastating event where I bled out so profusely that my hospital bed looked less like white sheets and more like a bright red couch. Four surgeries marked my childhood calendar, along with a stream of dangerous infections—one of which completely took over my eye, causing it to puff up painfully.

Then came the moment that truly pressed the limit. I was taking a powerful antibiotic called Vancomycin at home. Due to a terrible error by the nurse, I received the dose incorrectly. The reaction was immediate and terrifying: I lost my breath. I struggled desperately to pull in air, taking conscious, ragged gulps through my mouth. My worried mother drove me to the hospital as fast as she safely could, her face a mask of panic. In those terrifying moments, fighting for every single breath, a familiar song played in my head—a song that had become the unexpected anthem of my childhood: “Drag Me Down” by One Direction.

My childhood, defined by medical crises, found a specific kind of strength in those lyrics. I was constantly battling forces—illness, infection, and medical errors—all

trying to drag me down. But every time I survived, and every time I emerged from a procedure, I felt a defiant spark. The line, “All my life / I’ve been waiting for a moment to see / I was ready,” resonated deeply in the stillness of the hospital room. Every new challenge was a moment to see if I was ready, and every survival was proof that I was. I learned early that life will always try to bring you to your knees; the lesson wasn't to avoid the fall, but to overcome it and keep moving forward.

These experiences, though painful, forged my beliefs. The fact that I, a child who was statistically unlikely to survive some of those events, made it through, solidified my faith. While I fought hard, I truly believe that God helped me through it all. He kept me from being dragged down completely because He has a purpose for me—one that clearly required me to keep on living.

It was also in those hospital rooms, surrounded by medical professionals, that my future was subtly mapped out. Seeing the kindness, dedication, and incredible calm under pressure that those doctors and nurses displayed showed me what genuine strength looks like. They were real-life heroes who inspired me. This is why I feel called to work in law enforcement. I want to be that hero, willing to risk my life to save others, because I intimately know what it feels like to be the one who desperately needs saving.

I remember countless nights wishing for a “normal” life—to go to school and see my friends without scary, painful moments defining my existence. But looking back now, I realize those experiences didn't break me; they built me. I found strength not just in medicine, but in community. The lyric, “With your love, I’m going higher / I need you to know that I never could do it without you,” is a tribute to my

support system. My mom and dad were my unwavering rocks, but I also had an army of family and my entire elementary school checking in on me. That love kept me from sinking into despair.

The final, most crucial lesson came when I thought I was in the clear, only to find out I needed another surgery. It felt like all my progress was wiped out, and it crushed me. However, I learned that healing is not a straight line; there will always be ups and downs. It's not about the setback; it's about what you do next.

Pequeños Logros
Delenis Vázquez
Fé, Cojones y Paciencia - Eladio Carrion

I remember the exact moment I felt proud of myself this year. It wasn't about "fixing" anything in school—I've always done well there—it was more about finally giving myself credit. I was sitting at my desk after finishing another test I knew I passed, not because it was easy, but because I had put in the work. I wasn't stressing or second-guessing myself, and that alone made me smile. I put on my music, and the song started with the line, "Pequeños logros también los tengo que celebrar." It hit me right then: sometimes I forget to celebrate the things I do well.

The part that really made this year different, however, wasn't my grades; it was getting my first job. I remember getting the call and trying to act calm, but inside, I was jumping. It felt like my first real step toward independence. As the song played in my headphones, the line "Poco progreso es mejor que nunca progresar" made me think about how getting a job was about more than just money. It was about learning responsibility, balancing work and school, and realizing I am capable of much more than people assume.

Joining two clubs was another thing I didn't expect to be proud of. I've always been academically smart, but putting myself out there socially was new for me. Walking into those rooms felt strange at first, but I did it anyway. It challenged me in a different way—not academically, but personally—and that's something I didn't give myself credit for at first.

There wasn't one big, dramatic moment this year; it was more like a steady build-up. Working at my job, keeping my grades up, and showing up for club meetings, all at the same time, made me realize I'm stronger than I thought. One afternoon, walking home with the song playing again, I thought about everything I had handled. I realized I rarely tell myself "I can't." I just figured it out. And that is something to be proud of.

This song became the soundtrack to all those moments because it reminded me to appreciate who I am becoming. The feeling of the music matches how this year went: growing quietly, handling things people don't even notice, and proving to myself that I am more than just "good at school." I listen to it when I'm tired, when I'm heading to work, or when I'm studying, and it always brings me back to the reminder that I am building something for myself.

That's why the song sticks with me. It's the voice in the background hyping me up while I'm leveling up in my own way. It's the soundtrack of me finally being proud of myself—not for changing, but for growing.

Employment
Josiah Gonzalez
Everybody Wants to Rule the World -
Tears For Fears

Once upon a time, I decided I needed to make money to save up for a new car. I had never had a job before, so navigating the search was a bit of an obstacle. I looked in many different places, but nothing felt right until I saw an advertisement for Walmart. After some online research, I applied for an open position. I walked into the interview nervously, but I left feeling confident, knowing that, at the very least, it was a valuable learning experience.

A few days later, I received an email: I was hired. I was excited and ready to start on my scheduled day. When I first entered through those automatic doors as an employee, I felt a bit lost until a manager introduced me to my department and the coworkers who would be training me. Those first few weeks were difficult; I didn't know how to navigate the store or tend to the displays correctly. However, with proper training, I eventually got the gist of it. I began helping customers at a faster rate and became a reliable member of the team, ensuring my area always looked its best.

Everything was going smoothly, but one thing stood out to me: the constant sound of music blasting overhead 24/7. It didn't bother me, as they mostly played classics. One Tuesday night, at approximately 5:24 p.m., I was feeling particularly tired. I had clocked in at 4:00 p.m. and spent the

first hour neatly organizing my department as customers streamed in.

By 5:28 p.m., I was looking around at my department, seeing several clueless customers searching for what they needed. As I was restocking products, a woman about five feet tall with blonde hair and a cheeky smile approached me. Usually, when a customer approaches, I brace myself for a question that might make me rethink my career choices. But this woman's question was simple: "Excuse me! Can you let me know where I can find the restroom?"

Just as I was about to respond, a beautiful, familiar melody hit my ears, the speakers belted out: "Welcome to your life..." I stood there for a second, thinking about how ironic it is that music can speak for you at the most random times. I pointed the woman toward aisle one, and she thanked me before departing.

As I went back to restocking cold beverages, "Everybody Wants to Rule the World" continued to play. The room felt more alive; the song brought a sense of presence to the aisles. In that moment, I felt a surge of pride in the help I was able to give and the place I had found for myself.

Crushed by the Wheels of Life
Abraham Gonzalez
Be Somebody - Thousand Foot Krunch

In my early school years, back in eighth grade, I was pretty naïve, so innocent that if someone told me a secret, I couldn't keep it at all. My head was a mess of chaotic thoughts. Everything I read, saw, and heard was changing me unbelievably fast as puberty kicked in. It felt like my childhood happiness was suddenly replaced by a long stretch of irritability and depression. Even a simple conversation with my parents would turn into a shouting match.

But those changes slowed down for a moment when I met *her*. For a solemn boy like me, meeting a girl felt like a stroke of luck—and the fact that she was beautiful made it even better. What drew me in was her radiant smile and eyes that made her the hunter and me the prey; she could kill me with a single look.

She was smart, confident, and had a solid group of friends, but she wasn't the typical extrovert. My introduction to her was subtle, so subtle she barely noticed me at first. We were randomly paired for a presentation project. During the actual presentation, she stood right next to me; her elbow brushed against my side, and I swear I almost fainted.

Eventually, I gathered the courage to confess my feelings. I was rejected. Afterward, I completely fell apart. My appetite vanished, and I felt like I was decaying from the stress. But after weeks of misery, something unexpected happened: she came back to me to reconsider. It felt like she opened a door where I thought there was only a window. She was like an angel carrying me to heaven.

I accepted her, though it felt like I was a last-minute option. One afternoon, when I tried to initiate a "couples moment", things went south. She seemed so embarrassed that she was almost crying. When I asked what was wrong, she confessed it would be her first kiss. I was shocked—this "goddess of beauty" had no experience? The tension became so thick that we just went our separate ways. I didn't even walk her home. I felt like a total failure.

Four days of silence followed. I was sure I had messed everything up. I finally cornered her in the school weight room to talk, and she admitted she was just too embarrassed to look at me after what happened. We talked for half an hour until the coach found us. That night, I called her just to hear her voice. For the first time, I heard real excitement in her tone. We saw each other twice more before everything changed.

Out of nowhere, she was gone. Rumors spread that she had moved away with her family. I never found out if she forgot to contact me or if it was intentional. I didn't know if the move was a surprise to her, too. My world crumbled into a cruel silence. It was a hard lesson to learn: don't put too much hope into one thing, or you might get crushed by the wheels of life.

The Pride of the Dojo
Jacob Franco
Mortal Kombat Theme - The Immortals

When I look back at the beginning of my karate experience, it was a door that opened up to opportunities I never imagined. The spark that ignited this path was watching “The Karate Kid” with my family for the first time; it was captivating. At the time, I was decently athletic but very indecisive about which sport to commit to, so I immediately asked my mom to sign me up at a dojo. I don't recall many specifics of my first class, but I focused on basic moves like front punches and kicks combined with bodyweight training. Sit-ups, in particular, were my weakest exercise. To me, the challenges of that first day felt like excruciating pain, but I never complained. I saw the pain as progress toward ranking up and earning higher-tiered belts. However, my internal focus was misguided because the belt wasn't an accomplishment of personal growth, but a trophy to show off my superiority. This mental focus on pride would later lead to my reckoning.

As I continued my journey, I was trained by two senseis. One was older with white hair, and the other was younger, in his 40s. The dojo environment was generally playful outside of practice, but training was serious. We trained regularly on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays. Fridays were optional days exclusively dedicated to weapons training and gymnastics. The available weapons were the bo staff, nunchucks, dual sickles, and the katana—though the sword was reserved for black belts. On these days, we also practiced flips and various gymnastic moves. After the school

year ended, the dojo hosted summer camp sessions. I spent many hours playing Pokémon on my 3DS and trading cards with other kids. Honestly, I was quite manipulative back then, sometimes secretly transferring Pokémon from my friends' consoles to mine to build my own collection. My mentality was, "It's only stealing if you get caught."

The camps also featured events like Nerf wars, laser tag, and bowling. I remember an incident in a laser tag gift shop where kids used mini-tasers on each other until they started casting blame; I even pretended to play-tase someone just to get them in trouble. Another time, my friend and I riled up a group of older kids until they snapped, grabbing us by the feet and hanging us upside down. While my friend was close to tears, I was laughing until our sensei intervened, at which point I quickly resorted to a fake crying act to save myself.

The most exciting part of the year was our annual karate show. Performers were assigned a solo, group, or assist role. I was selected for a solo act. Four performances stand out in my memory. The first was a skilled kid who performed an incredible nunchuck routine to a Michael Jackson song. Then came my part: a solo act set to "Techno Syndrome" (the Mortal Kombat theme). I started with dual sickles before switching to continuous kicks, breaking boards in a left-right flurry, culminating in a final break with extra boards. Next was the nunchuck performer's sister, whose expertise with the bo staff was so rapid it resembled Darth Maul's lightsaber. The final act, usually performed by the younger sensei, involved breaking wood on fire for a truly astonishing conclusion.

In my last year at the dojo, laziness set in, and I started skipping classes. Eventually, students who had joined

after me caught up and earned the same belt. Though I felt no animosity toward them, my pride was stricken. My original trophy-focused mentality became a grave for my motivation. I thought giving up was the only option. The idea that someone could reach my level when I had put in more initial time was intolerable, so I quit.

I didn't regret the decision until I reached middle school. The choice I made planted a self-sabotaging seed in my mind: to quit when challenged by peer success. I later revisited the location only to find the dojo had closed. To this day, it remains my biggest regret. Looking back, I realize the only two things I should have done differently were to accept the situation and work harder.

Where I Want to Be
María de la Torre
Dónde Quiero Estar - Quevedo

I still remember the day I left my island. The sky was bright, the waves stretched endlessly, and everything I knew felt like it was folding behind me. Growing up there, I thought life would always feel small, predictable, and safe. But moving to a completely new country for school changed everything. Suddenly, I was surrounded by people, places, and rules I didn't understand. It was exciting, yet terrifying. Every day, it felt like I was walking on unsteady ground.

I walked to school that first morning, carrying a backpack heavier than my courage. I thought of the streets I grew up on, the beaches where the water touched the clouds, and how different everything felt now. "*Crecimos donde el mar está a la altura de las nubes.*" That was home. That was my comfort. But here, there were no familiar streets, no warm ocean breezes, and no friends who knew every corner of my world. I had to find myself in a place that didn't know me yet.

Those first weeks were full of moments that tested me: a wrong bus taken, a homework assignment misunderstood, a teacher calling on me too fast for me to find the right words. I tried to laugh it off, but inside I felt the distance growing. I missed the comfort of knowing exactly who I was in a place that knew me, too. Here, I felt like I was rebuilding myself from the ground up. In the middle of that confusion came a thought I didn't want to admit: *Estoy donde quería estar, no donde quiero estar.*

I am where I wanted to be, not where I want to be.

It was the truth. I had dreamed of this opportunity, fought for it, and prayed for it. But wanting something doesn't mean it will feel easy once you have it. I kept telling myself that discomfort didn't mean failure; it meant growth. Even so, some nights I lie awake thinking about my island, the soft rumble of motorcycles on the road, the faces that recognized me instantly, and the ocean breeze that carried every memory I'd ever made.

But I kept going. Slowly, almost quietly, things began to shift. I learned the rhythm of the school day. I found a few people who made me laugh. I discovered shortcuts home and how to speak up even when my voice trembled. Yet, with every small victory, another thought sat heavy inside me: *Estoy labrándome el futuro que en el pasao nunca tuve.*

I am carving out the future that I never had in the past.

It reminded me that all this struggle had a purpose.

I wasn't lost.

I was building something new.

Still, the adjustment came with its bruises. There were days I felt invisible and days when I felt too visible—times when I felt guilty for leaving, and others when I felt guilty for wanting more. But even when loneliness hit hard, I held on to the truth that guided me quietly: *No se me olvidan mis raíces.*

I don't forget my roots.

My identity wasn't slipping away; it was stretching to make room for everything I was becoming.

The real turning point wasn't dramatic. It happened on an ordinary afternoon, walking home from school as the sun dipped behind the buildings. I caught myself looking straight ahead, not down at the ground, and I realized that

something inside me had shifted. I was no longer just surviving the change—I was shaping it. As I walked, a reminder slipped in naturally: *Las cosas caras... pero el tiempo es oro.*

Things are expensive... but time is golden.

It hit me differently that day. It wasn't about money, but about how every moment I spent doubting myself was time I wasn't getting back. If I wanted this new beginning to mean something, I had to start valuing each step forward, even the ones that felt unsure.

For the first time since I arrived, I felt like I was exactly where I needed to be—even if it wasn't always where I wanted to be. With that realization came another truth: growth always asks for something in return. I had traded comfort for opportunity, and familiarity for possibility. Even though it hurt, I didn't regret it.

Now, looking back, I understand why this moment still lives inside me with so much force. It was the beginning of seeing myself differently, the beginning of learning that distance doesn't erase love, and change doesn't erase origin. I realized that I could miss home deeply and still move forward courageously.

Even today... *al día de hoy presumo de mis cicatrices, pero echando de menos mi isla y su clima.*

To this day, I show off my scars, but I still miss my island and its climate.

Those scars are proof that I didn't give up when everything felt overwhelming. They are proof that I walked through uncertainty and came out stronger—proof that my story didn't end when I left my island; it expanded.

And the message that stays with me—the one that shaped this whole journey—is the truth I carry now with confidence: *Soy dueña del qué pasará.*

I am the owner of what will happen.

Closer to the Top
Diana Salas
The Climb - Miley Cyrus

The studio was quiet except for the sound of my breathing and my shoes hitting the floor. I had been trying for what felt like forever. Headspring after headspring. Kick-up after kick-up. My arms were burning, my legs hurt, and my confidence was fading with every failed attempt. The Illusions Dance Team tryouts were getting closer, and all I could think was: *What if I fail? What if I'm not good enough?*

When I got home that day, I dropped my bag and went straight to my room. I didn't want to talk to anyone. I sat on my bed, and the tears started before I could stop them. I felt completely defeated, as if all those weeks of practice meant nothing. Everyone else made the tricks look so easy, but for me, they felt impossible. My dream was right there, yet still so far away.

I opened my phone and scrolled through my playlist, trying to find something to calm me down. Then I saw it: "The Climb" by Miley Cyrus. I hadn't listened to it in a while, but I pressed play anyway. The soft guitar started, and Miley's voice filled the quiet of my room: "I can almost see it, that dream I'm dreaming."

That line hit me hard because it was exactly how I felt. I could almost see the lights, the stage, and the Illusions uniform, but I was stuck at the bottom of the mountain. Then came the words that changed something inside me: "There's always gonna be another mountain, I'm always gonna wanna make it move..."

I started crying again, but this time it wasn't just from sadness. It was like something inside me woke up. I realized it wasn't about being perfect; it was about not giving up, no matter how many times I failed. I listened to the song over and over that night. Every time it played, it felt like it was telling me: You can do this. Keep climbing.

The next morning, I looked at myself in the mirror with puffy eyes and whispered, "Don't give up." My body was sore, but I went back to the studio. Every time I fell, I got up faster. Every time I got frustrated, I remembered the lyrics: It's the climb. I wasn't just practicing moves anymore; I was proving to myself that I could keep going.

When tryout day came, my heart was racing so fast I thought everyone could hear it. I took a deep breath and remembered the part of the song that said, "It's not about how fast I get there, it's not about what's waiting on the other side..." When they called my name, I stepped forward and danced. I gave it everything I had. My tricks weren't perfect, but I danced with my heart. In that moment, I understood something I'll never forget: it's not about dancing with fear, but dancing with love.

A few days later, the team list was finally posted. My hands were shaking as I looked for my name. When I saw "Diana Salas", I covered my face and started crying. These were tears of pride for everything I had pushed through.

The whole ride home, I thought about the nights I cried and the times I almost quit. It was crazy to think that just weeks earlier, I felt like a failure. The relief was overwhelming. I realized the real win wasn't just seeing my name on the list; it was everything I had learned about myself. I learned that I'm stronger than I thought and that progress isn't always pretty. Sometimes you have to break

down a little to build yourself back up. It wasn't luck or coincidence; it was my effort, my heart, and my fight.

Now, every time I hear "The Climb," I remember that night I almost gave up. That song reminds me that the hardest moments are the ones that make us stronger. There will always be another mountain, but as long as I keep climbing, I'll always get closer to the top.

I Waited for You
Yoselin De León
Yo te Esperaba - Alejandra Guzmán

It was the moment I'd been waiting for since my mother had me: I'd always dreamed of dancing with her at my Quinceañera and sharing this special moment with her and all my family. The day had come, the special moment was happening, the lights dimmed, and for a brief moment, the entire room was still. The first soft notes of "*Yo te Esperaba*" (I Waited for You) began pouring from speakers around the room, and I felt my mother gently tighten her hand around mine. I might have been nervous, but my heart was racing from the enormity of everything that song represented. As we began to dance, I noticed tears shining in her eyes. The lyrics referenced waiting and love that existed even before my arrival, and in an instant, I understood that this was much more than just a dance. It was my mother's way of saying how long she imagined this moment would last, sharing how proud she was, and how much she would always love me and be there for me when I needed her.

She leaned closer and quietly said, "This song tells the story of how I waited for you." At the time, I didn't understand what she meant until the song washed over me and I translated the lyrics in my mind: "*I waited for you while everyone and everything was moving slowly around me.*" I quickly realized that this wasn't just a song to her; it was her heart, poured out loud. As we danced together, I could hear the feelings in her breathing. The lyrics about dreaming of a baby's face and loving a child before knowing them suddenly made me see my mom in a different way. She wasn't just my

mom at that moment; she was a woman who carried hopes, fears, and dreams before I was born. With every slow step we took, it felt like I was beginning to understand her again.

As the music played on, my mom lifted her gaze to mine, and for the first time that whole evening, I witnessed the emotions she had long suppressed: the pride, her apprehension about me growing up, and the past she carried from before I came into the world. The lyrics in English echoed lightly in my head: *“I dreamed about your face before I ever saw you.”* And her smile wavered, and I sensed a shift within me. I understood that this song symbolized not just her past, but our present. As she held me close, steady and warm, I came to sense the enormity of her protection, her loving action, even when I was unaware. And in that space on the floor, dancing under the glow of the lights, I moved through the moment as the bond between us settled deeper, as though the song was weaving the two of us together line by line.

Whenever I hear *“Yo te Esperaba”*, it draws me back into that moment, her arms around me, the soft music, and the sense of being loved long before my arrival into this world. The dance evolved from a tradition at my quinceañera into a reminder of both my mother's love in light of her patience and strength. The song still follows me, not in the background but as a gentle nudge, reminding me of my origins and the person who has been by my side since the beginning of my journey. And even in moments when I grow and have more independence, that dance reminds me that, regardless of how far I go, there is always a part of me that wants to come back to her.

As the music played on, my mother looked up into my eyes, and I finally saw how she had been feeling all this

time: pride for me, fear of me growing up, and memories from before I was born. The English lyrics of the song kept playing over and over in my head: *"I dreamed of your face long before I ever saw you."* While singing, my mother slightly quivered with emotion, and a shift occurred within me. I began to realize that the song was not just about her history, but about our present. Her arms wrapped around me with warmth and support were a testament to the many ways she had protected me throughout my childhood that I was unaware of or simply never acknowledged. In the moment of dancing beneath the lights as we were, I understood our connection had grown deeper than before. Each line of the song reinforced our connection through its culmination.

Every time I hear the song *"Yo te Esperaba"*, it transports me back to the moment I shared the lyrics with my mother, the feeling of being loved before I was born, and the feeling of being wrapped in her arms while listening to the soft music in the background. The dance we did for my quinceañera became a reminder to me that my mother's love was built upon a layer of strength and patience; it wasn't something that happened by accident, but something that took time to develop and grow. I will continue to have a relationship with the song; it will not be something that I hear in the background as part of my life; instead, it will serve as a reminder of where I have come from and to whom I can look for support from the very beginning. The dance will also be a reminder of how unbreakable the bond between my mother and me is, and that no matter how far apart we are or how much independence I gain, there will always be something that brings me back to her.

Blessed Be the Name of God
Ruth Fernandez
Who is This Man? - Joseph O'Brien

My boyfriend's mother had cancer. She passed away last week, just two days after my birthday. We knew she was in critical condition from the moment the doctor called and said, "I have heavy words to shout..."

She was a lovely, sweet mother, a wonderful friend, and a woman of enormous faith. She went through chemotherapy, surgery, and then chemotherapy again with a dignity and strength that came solely from her trust in God. Seeing her remain radiant with joy, even amidst the mighty winds that struck her life and her family, was truly moving. Throughout the year she battled the disease, her attitude never changed; she remained a vibrant woman who refused to let her faith waver. She continued to loudly proclaim, "Blessed be the name of God."

The day she went home to be with the Lord was sad, but also beautiful. The atmosphere was filled with boundless love, tears, and spontaneous laughter sparked by memories. Almost the entire church paraded past the house to offer support and say, "See you soon." Seeing the family's grief was heartbreaking, but hearing them praise God was heartwarming. I heard the family and the church say with one voice: *"Blessed be the name of God. You can give, and you can take."*

Hours earlier, on the bus ride home, a song I had never heard caught my attention. The vibrant guitar and the melancholic yet captivating vocals matched my mood perfectly. I was already home when my boyfriend called; his

voice broke as he told me his mom—his everything—had died. The lyrics of that song were the first thing to echo in my mind as I processed his words. I immediately called my mom, and we drove to his house to be with him. As we drew near, the sound of guitars and mixed voices seemed to play in my subconscious.

When we arrived, the sound of my footsteps stood out as I ran into the house. Our inner circle of friends was already there, offering warmth. I expected to find my boyfriend broken and defeated. He was devastated, yes, but not defeated. I watched him fall to his knees and say, “Blessed be the name of God. Naked and with nothing I came from the womb, and naked I will return to dust one day.”

Two days later, at the funeral, guests were asked not to wear black, but rather light colors. The ceremony was held in a beautiful setting filled with the fragrance of flowers. People gathered, sharing coffee and stories. Eventually, my boyfriend stood up to speak. He, who I knew was silently grieving, exhorted everyone in the room to trust in God’s perfect plan, even in the midst of the storm.

At that moment, I couldn’t understand it. I knew what he was clinging to, but his faith impacted me so much that all I could think was, *“Who is this man, praising God when his mother is gone?”* If I’m honest, I think I would have cursed the One who, in my mind, had taken something so precious from me.

Days turned into weeks, but time didn’t diminish my surprise. The chords of that guitar kept repeating in my head. Every day, I expected him to finally give up—to explode like a time bomb of pain. But he did not sin, and he did not curse the father he loved. Like an old, broken

cassette tape, I kept repeating, *"How could he hold onto the sovereignty of God?"* I understood God's love, but the firmness of his faith confronted me. I wondered: *What would I have done?*

As time passed, the sound of that guitar has played in my ears almost every day. Now, I find myself, along with the others, genuinely saying with complete understanding: "Blessed be the name of the Lord. Every little blessing I have has come from his hand, and no matter what happens, his love endures forever."

Querolobebe de la Abuela
Alessandro Reyes
Someone You Loved - Lewis Capaldi

The kitchen floor was clean, but my steps echoed in a familiar void. At fourteen, just fifteen days before my fifteenth birthday, my mind was in a state of artificial euphoria. I had spent my childhood longing to be with my grandparents in the United States, whom I only knew through food parcels and financial support. They visited us for three or four days at a time—hardly enough to develop the deep affection I desired. Because my sister had already crossed the border, my parents and I prepared to follow.

We began to sell everything: the house, my father's car, jewelry, my computer, and even my old toys. Everything I owned was disappearing, but it was for a greater purpose: a new opportunity and a reunion with my sister, uncles, and cousins. My mind was eager for the adventure awaiting me across Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala, and Mexico.

But the problem was her: my grandmother in Cuba. She was the only one who had always been physically present in my life. Since I was little, she called me her "*Querolobebe de la abuela*"—a loving, invented name that defined my place in the world. Leaving her meant leaving behind the moments that made up my life: preparing *buñuelos*, reading books, and watching our favorite shows at seven o'clock. Most of all, I was going to miss her support and her "*jodedera*"—her silly joking.

The last time I saw her was on my birthday, the day before I left. We walked to the bus station—the *guagua*. She embraced me, sending flying kisses that reached my skin like

light doves trying to find their way back to the nest. She told me not to forget her, to be careful on the long journey, to study hard, and to never lose sight of her love. I was too young to fully understand; it was a bitter, sad farewell. As the bus pulled away, a sharp fear throbbed inside me: I wondered if this was the last time I would ever see her.

The next day, the adventure began. After traveling for ten continuous days, we finally reached the United States. Meeting my grandparents, cousins, and sister was amazing—a different world and a new home.

But as time passed and I settled in, I realized someone was missing. I stopped watching shows and playing Sudoku. My grandmother wasn't there. The nights grew long with tears and prayers. Paradoxically, I struggled to call her. Every time I heard her voice, it hurt even more. The calls became less frequent. She suffered from the distance, and I adapted, but with a hole in my chest, wishing she were with me.

The pain of this newfound loneliness found its voice in Lewis Capaldi's "Someone You Loved." The lyrics "I'm starting to get used to being someone you loved" rang in my head. My suffering wasn't just her physical absence; it was the stripping away of my identity. Capaldi's broken voice and the melancholic piano became the soundtrack to my long nights of adjustment.

"Someone You Loved" is an unforgettable memory of that transformation. It helped me understand that migration isn't just progress; it is a deep absence one has to learn to live with. The piano is the slow rhythm of my sleepless nights. The song reminds me that my suffering is valid and that I have to build a new identity from scratch. I am no longer the safe "*Querolobebe*"; I am a teenager

standing across a distance that my immigration status has placed between us—a bridge I cannot yet cross back over.

It has been three years since I've seen her. That bus stop felt like a point of no return, a feeling that matches the song's emotional crescendo. Music has become my companion on this empty road of adaptation—a continuous whisper of the bravery required to move forward while my heart still yearns for the shelter of my abuela.

The Best Part of My Day
Joshua Chun
Could I Be the One? - Al Green

One time at school, I found myself in awe of a girl I just couldn't keep my eyes off of. Every Wednesday, my bus would take a little longer to pick me up, so I'd wait with a few friends. She would occasionally pass by and say hi to us. At first, I didn't pay much attention, but over time, I started to notice her everywhere. She was slowly becoming the best part of my day. I thought she was beautiful and loved the way she dressed, which I eventually mentioned to a friend. I thought nothing of it until I found out my friend had told her. To say the least, I was embarrassed.

My heart felt like it was going to beat out of my chest. I was scared, but also excited to see what would happen next. She ended up getting my number and texted me, saying she appreciated what I'd said and that I had made her happy. We started talking from there. I found myself constantly waiting for her messages; a simple "hello" or "how was your day" made me feel special. Day after day, we had conversations that never seemed to end. I discovered so much about her—the bands she listened to, the foods she loved, and her favorite hobbies. We started hanging out every day at school, and we only grew closer. I realized quickly that I was falling for her, so after three months, I asked her to be my girlfriend. She said yes, which was one of the happiest moments of my life.

I will always be grateful for her; she has been there for me through all my hardest times.

A few months into our relationship, I had my first interaction with her parents over dinner. As we all sat at the table, her father asked me about my future plans and how I was doing in school. As much as my girlfriend told me not to be nervous... I was terrified. I acted pretty awkwardly at first, but I eventually loosened up. I found my comfort by eating everything they offered me—which, by the way, tasted amazing. It all worked out in the end; her parents really took a liking to me, which felt like one of my biggest accomplishments.

I love music, especially soul and oldies. While shuffling through a soul playlist, I came across an artist named Al Green, and I haven't been able to get over his music since. His songs speak to me more than anything else I've listened to; the vulnerability and openness in his voice reflect exactly how I feel. He isn't afraid to sing about love and hope.

His song "Could I Be the One?" always seems to play when I'm around my girlfriend. It perfectly encapsulates my mood when I'm with her. The way he asks that question points directly to my heart; it gives me a sense of hope and wonder. It feels as if that song was written for the exact moments we've shared, like holding hands for the first time or our first kiss. She makes me incredibly happy, and I want to be there for her through everything. I want to be her pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.

A Thousand More
Maday Cespedes
A Thousand Years - Christina Perri

When soulmates meet, it's like two different people merging into one—one house, one life, one flesh. That is what I've seen my entire life. My parents have set an incredibly high standard for me when it comes to love and dating. They have endured pain, grief, and financial struggles, yet they still choose each other every single day.

After three kids, losing jobs, moving countries, and arguments that could ruin a whole day's mood, they always manage to set aside their pride. They change for each other, support each other, and critique each other with unconditional love. Looking at the way they treat one another, you could easily conclude they have already loved each other for a thousand years.

I remember when I was little, my dad had to leave for three months for an "important job opportunity" that was actually our path from Cuba to the United States. During those months, my mom suffered waiting for his return, and I missed him terribly. It was just the two of us. I used to count down the days until his arrival; every hour felt like a day, and every month felt like a year. Eventually, we crossed the border from Mexico into the United States and have lived in Miami ever since.

In 2017, they had my sister. She was a challenge from the start—hard-headed and testing my parents' patience every year. Because she was such a difficult child, I never thought I would have another sibling. But one day, my parents pulled me aside.

“We have to tell you something,” my mom said. Time stood still. Honestly, I was scared I was in trouble. Then she said, “I’m pregnant.” I started laughing, thinking it was a joke, until she pulled out a positive pregnancy test. My eyes teared up. At that moment, I didn’t want another sibling; we weren’t in a great place financially, and I thought one sister like Mia was more than enough.

As the months went by, my heart softened. When the gender reveal arrived, everyone screamed as the countdown hit zero: *3... 2... 1*. Blue confetti dropped over us. A baby boy.

On October 15, my dad texted me: “Mami is having contractions; we are on our way to the hospital.” My heart raced. Around 9:50 a.m., he Face Timed me and showed my mom holding the baby. My heart jumped with excitement. He was the cutest thing in the world—pure beauty. I remember leaving school and heading straight to the hospital. I sat by his crib and stared at him for hours. I never thought I could have so much love in my heart for someone so small until my brother was born. My heart literally expanded to make room for him.

He is one year old now and growing so fast. Sometimes I wish time could stand still so he could stay little and happy forever. But he will keep growing; we will watch him run, go to school, and eventually get married, just like we will with my sister. Being an older sister feels a lot like being a mother in that way—you don’t want them to get old, but you love watching who they become.

“A Thousand Years” was the ringtone my mom and dad used for each other for years. That song perfectly describes their relationship and the love I have for my entire

family. I have loved them all for a thousand years, and I will love them for a thousand more.

3

Alternative & Indie

Transformation, Philosophy, Identity,
and Hidden Truths

Not Noticed: A Mental Health Story

Kailyn Caceres

No One Noticed - The Marias

Growing up, my mental health was very affected by my family environment and the many challenges I faced at a young age. As a young child, I remember my parents constantly arguing and calling each other names. My father worked as a personal fitness coach and trained many people, especially women. One of those women was actually a friend of my mother's and would often come to our house and sit at our table for dinner. Later on, my mother would discover that her so-called "friend" was two-timing her with my father. This betrayal led to my parents' divorce.

Now, my mom was never the cheating type. A little narcissistic, maybe. And it started to show after my parents got a divorce, when my mom ended up having many boyfriends. She was always the type to put the men in her life before her own kids. Her First boyfriend was this tall, perfect-looking military man with a seven-year-old daughter. But what no one noticed was that he would smoke a lot and would try to get my mom to join him. He was also an alcoholic and would take us to random people's houses so he could have a good time.

My mom and "Military Man" finally broke up after a couple of months.

After "Military Man", there was a weird guy from California who would constantly buy us stuff. My sisters and I found it weird, because we didn't even know this guy! In fact, no one in my family ever found out about him; my mom was always all alone, so she didn't care where the guy even was.

He didn't last.

After "California Guy", there was the "Douche Bag". This guy basically told my father that my sisters and I were an inconvenience in his life, and that he only cared for my mom and no one else. It wasn't right for my mom to continue talking to him, but she did.

That is, until they broke up.

For a while, my mom went through a stage of having a new boyfriend every week, until she finally met the person who would become my stepdad... We'll call him the "Uber Driver". I first met my future stepdad in the hospital. My mom had told me she had gotten an Uber driver to take us home, which was weird because we actually drove there. So, I went outside of my room and screamed, "Uber for Damaris!" When we locked eyes, I walked the Uber driver to my room, and we all sat there awkwardly. After my doctor's appointment was over, he dropped us off at our car and followed us home. I was still clueless, and when we got home, my mom finally explained to me that he was her new boyfriend. I'm glad she met him, because it was getting old having a new stepdad every week. Eight years later, and they are engaged with a one-year-old boy... my little brother.

Meanwhile, my dad ended up marrying some other woman that he also had a secret relationship with while still being with my mom. I love my stepmom, but I feel bad that she has my dad as a husband.

During my time in sixth grade. I was bullied the whole year, which affected me deeply. I ended up having to visit a therapist, where she told me and my mom that I was likely to become self-destructive. My mom disagreed and immediately took me out of therapy. It was a mistake because she didn't notice.

Seventh grade was all online, and everything became a virtual connection, which was a relief to me. Around that time, my relationship with my dad wasn't the best. What can I say? I was a moody teenager who didn't like my stepmom at the time. So, what did I do? What any other rational teenager would do... I ended up running away from home for a short time. I was found pretty quickly, though (more like my dad called me and I folded under pressure and told him where I was hiding).

During eighth grade, I transferred to a new school where the atmosphere felt even more isolating than while at home. In search of belonging, I gravitated toward a crowd that shared my penchant for rebellion. I would eventually do what "Military Man" tried to teach my mom every day, and wouldn't even bother with my schoolwork. At the same time, my sister started getting bullied by some dumb kid. So, what did I do as an amazing older sister? I beat him up and got three days of CSI for my efforts, plus a referral. But it was totally worth it because after that, he left my little sister alone.

It was that same year when I experienced a traumatic event with someone I trusted. When I tried to speak up about it, no one believed me. I would cry myself to sleep every night, reliving that awful moment every day. I felt like no one noticed how much I was struggling and hated my life because of it. I felt a deep sense of abandonment, left to navigate the aftermath of my trauma without the protection I expected from those around me. My parents chose to never tell my family. I don't know if they felt ashamed, embarrassed, or both. But because of that, I never told my parents anything else... I closed off. I started having those self-destructive thoughts that the therapist once warned my mom about. When I pushed myself to confide in someone

about things, instead of receiving encouraging words, the trust was broken, my mom was told, and I was taken to the hospital, where I ended up staying for a week. No one tried... to read my eyes... I lost it, and I wish it weren't true.

Ninth grade brought a very unhealthy relationship. The person I was with would stray 24/7 and treat me like an object. Even then, I always made excuses for their actions because I was blinded by infatuation and manipulation. That relationship drained *everything* out of me, yet no one noticed that something was off.

I wish someone *had* noticed, because I was so over being lonely.

Tenth grade was nothing crazy. Okay, maybe a little, as I almost got sent back to the hospital for writing about the way I felt (just like I have here). My dad berated me and even compared my life to that of my stepmom's, telling me that "she had it worse". I told myself to shut my mouth from then on.

Thankfully, eleventh grade was an amazing time! I met the person who would become my best friend, and then I met my boyfriend that same year. They're both my absolute favorite people. They're the ones who have helped me through everything, and it's because of them that I am doing a lot better mentally. I love the people I now have in my life, and I'm excited to see their faces every day. As for my relationship with my dad, it has grown a little better over time, while my mom finally found *her* person as *I* found mine. Someone who reads my eyes and actually... finally... notices me.

It Was a Blessing in Disguise
Michelle Ramirez
Reflections - The Neighbourhood

It was a Sunday late at night. The sun had just gone down, and I was in bed when I received a text from my boyfriend. He said, "We need a break." At first, I was relieved; I thought a break meant there was still hope for us to work out and come back stronger than ever. Unfortunately, not even ten minutes later, he officially broke up with me for good.

My heart shattered. The worst part was that he ended it over text—not over the phone, and not face-to-face. It truly hurt because I really thought he was different. He seemed like he cared more than most guys our age, and I genuinely loved that about him. I even thought we were "endgame"—super cringe, I know, but that's what I believed.

Every time I saw him in class or in the halls afterward, the same lyrics played in my mind:

"I see my reflection in your eyes... so close, so close, yet so far away... I don't know how to be solo, so don't go, oh, no, just stay."

Seeing him was a constant reminder of that night. At first, I thought the only way to forget him was to play with someone else's emotions just to numb the pain. But then I realized that I'd rather lose somebody than use somebody. That wasn't who I was. I decided right then to move on from him and from my old self. I wanted to be someone I could be proud of—someone who wouldn't spend her life reminiscing about a guy or worrying about what others thought.

The process was hard. At first, all I did was cry every night over what we had. I didn't know how to move on until one day, while scrolling through TikTok, I saw a Bible verse:

“What’s meant for you will come without chasing. You don’t have to force it or fear losing it; all you have to do is stay still and trust Him (Psalm 46:10).”

That was my turning point. I realized that if God allowed me to be hurt in that way, it was because that person was never meant to be in my life. God removed him to protect me. I decided to move on for good. I didn't want to forget him entirely—because he was a lesson I needed to learn—but I wanted to let go of the parts of me that missed him. I would still help him if he ever needed it, but I would never go back to him.

Little by little, with God by my side, I found it was possible. I didn't just move on from a guy; I moved on from the "old me" who lacked self-respect and allowed herself to be thrown under the bus. I am now a girl who respects herself and has given her life to God. I'm not perfect—no one is—but I am growing. I've realized it truly was a "blessing in disguise." Everything happens for a reason, and I am thankful for that relationship because it brought me closer to God and helped me realize my worth.

A Story About Letting Go
Christopher Sifonte
La Inocente - Mora

I met a girl at my job, and from the first day, something felt off in a way I couldn't quite explain. It wasn't anything dramatic—just that strange pull you get toward someone without knowing why. She had a presence that lit up the room, and even though I tried to act like nothing was happening, I was a mess inside. It was that classic mix of nerves and excitement that you can't hide, no matter how hard you try.

In my head, that first shift plays back in slow motion. She was laughing, and I was trying not to look too obvious. Nothing happened right then, but something definitely started. There was an "innocence" about her that wasn't actually innocent—a calm that felt like it was covering something much bigger. She seemed perfect at first, but I learned quickly that not everything that shines is gold.

Over time, short hangouts turned into long talks. I'd catch myself wondering how much of what she told me was true and how much was just the character she liked to play. Still, I stayed. I was stuck between what I wanted and what I already knew deep down. She said she was ready for something real, but I could see the leftover pain sitting behind her eyes. I didn't want to end up as just another sad chapter in her story.

The first time I went to her house, I felt like a stranger in a place I didn't belong. There were pictures on the walls of someone who had clearly been important to her, and it made me feel like I was stepping into a space I wasn't

meant to occupy. Her mom was kind, but she had a look in her eyes like she was trying to figure me out. I tried to be funny, but the truth was my nerves were killing me.

She sat next to me and put on some music. That's when I heard the song. She sang along quietly, the lyrics seemingly part of her. I remember looking at her and wondering if I'd ever mean that much to her.

Eventually, everything fell into a routine. She'd text, call, and tell me she missed me, only to disappear out of nowhere. Being some combination of dumb and in love, I kept making excuses for her: She's busy. She's stressed. But understanding someone else's struggle doesn't always help you save yourself.

Slowly, I admitted what I didn't want to see: I was losing myself for someone who had been broken long before I showed up. She wasn't a bad person; she just wasn't ready. Not innocent, not guilty—just human, with scars that still hurt. When things ended, it wasn't loud or messy. There was no big fight or betrayal. It was just a late-night message saying she didn't want to hurt me and thought it was better to stop. The calm way she said it hurt more than the breakup itself.

I tried to move on—hanging out with new people and staying busy. But for months, every time "La Inocente" came on, it was like peeling a bandage off a cut that never healed right. Eventually, I learned a lesson I didn't want: you can love someone deeply and still not be enough for a person fighting battles you can't see. She taught me that you can't fix someone who isn't ready to fix themselves, and sometimes the person you want most is the one you have to let go of.

I don't blame her. She wasn't a villain or a saint. She was just a person trying to get through her life. And honestly, so was I.

A Rose with Thorns
Lorena Linares
Andrea - Bad Bunny

For a long time, people doubted her. At a young age, she didn't truly know who she was until now. She finally realized her worth as a woman, what she deserves, and the kind of people she should surround herself with.

Even though my name is not “Andrea,” I feel like Bad Bunny's song describes me and so many other women in the world. I have grown used to people leaving me behind, but I've learned that it is simply a part of life. People are always going to talk. The song contains many meaningful phrases, but one stands out: “Lo malo siempre se sabe y lo bueno nunca se cuenta.” People will always spread the negative things about you, but they rarely mention the good. I believe that is the sad truth of the world we live in.

I once had a best friend to whom I gave everything—even my heart. She was mischievous, and looking back, she often looked at me with malicious intent and jealousy. She wanted me all to herself. She created lies about me and convinced my other friends to stop talking to me. After a year, she came back into my life, and because I didn't have the mentality I have now, I took her back. I thought she was the only person who liked me. It's sad to think I ever called her a friend; she made me feel horrible about myself. While I never wished her harm, the pain she caused changed me. I remember looking in the mirror and not recognizing the person looking back. My days felt rainy even when the sun was shining outside. But I grew from this experience, and it made me the stronger person I am today.

The song “Andrea” is about a woman who is misunderstood—a strong woman who refuses to listen to those critiquing her. She is a woman who puts on a smile while hurting, who yearns for respect, and who is tired of being crumbled to pieces. This song came out when I was going through my own heavy ups and downs. When I listened to it the first time, I had to play it again and again. It hit me in exactly the right place. I saw my own life reflected in those lyrics. I’ve always felt misunderstood, and I’ve watched people assume they knew who I was. Through this song, I learned to stop caring what others think. I learned that you don’t have to be perfect or prove yourself to anyone. You just have to be yourself.

This song has helped me develop in many ways. The way I used to obsess over people's opinions doesn't even cross my mind anymore. Recently, I went through a breakup with someone I loved after two years together. At first, I felt like the world was falling apart. But time heals, and I am doing better now. This song reminds me that I have value. Even though young love is beautiful, it hurts, and that pain has made me stronger than I ever was. Being let down multiple times has made me more aware of who I allow into my inner circle. I have built walls to protect myself, not out of fear, but to ensure that the person I am today is never crumbled again.

I Still Hear the Whispers
Angelica Girón
I Don't Wanna Be Me - Type O Negative

During my sophomore year of high school, I made a huge mistake. In retrospect, things were nuclear, and I should have taken the warning signs seriously. My friend of six years (let's call her Faye) told me about her friend, whose real name is Sean, and how annoying, persistent, and a total creep he was. Eventually, Sean and I met through Faye. One of the first things he asked me was, "Do you have a boyfriend?" Mind you, that same day, Faye had shown me messages of him hitting on her. He had a reputation for being creepy, and I should have known better, but I wanted to give him the benefit of the doubt.

We're all human, and we make mistakes, right?

That year, I unfortunately shared a biology class with him. Since I had no other friends in that class, we became acquaintances. At one point, he asked me for the Instagram handle of a girl he liked. I gave it to him, and within weeks, they began dating. I noticed an extraordinary change; this girl had seemingly turned a creepy, uncomfortable guy into a civilized member of society. I was genuinely proud of him and eventually considered him a friend. For a while, everything was fine—no weird comments or issues.

But by Senior Sunrise, the relationship had ended, and Sean became a parasite, nagging me nonstop to hang out. My original plan was to secretly go to the event with my actual friends, but I accidentally tipped him off when he asked to play Roblox the night before. I figured there was no

way he'd show up at the last minute. Not only did he show up, but he made me drive him there.

Once school truly started, I finally found room to breathe. We began parting ways as I actively avoided becoming his new "bestie". However, whenever we did speak, he felt it necessary to catch me up on every intrusive thought he had. His conversations revolved around three things: people he had "beef" with, inappropriate comments about me with shameless undertones, and insulting people based solely on their appearance. I grew irritated with his ego and prejudice, so we finally unfollowed each other and cut ties.

A few days later, I heard the rumors. People were saying that Sean had cheated on his ex-girlfriend with me. The moment I heard it, only one thought filled my head: *I don't wanna be me anymore*. Sean's ex-girlfriend had gone out of her way to accuse me, and suddenly, people I had never met were gossiping about me. I was outraged. Eventually, Sean couldn't handle the backlash, abruptly left the school, and the rumors died down—or so I thought.

Two weeks later, a new rumor circulated, accusing me of things I never considered doing. Two steps forward, three steps back. It had gone too far. I was so physically upset that I actually felt sick before typing out a public statement on Instagram while confronting the girl responsible. She lied to my face about starting the rumors, leaving me feeling like hell.

However, making that post actually helped. Many of my friends replied, called, and supported me in person. I am extremely grateful for that, especially because I was so sure that people wouldn't want to be seen with me. My self-esteem took a massive hit, and the wound is still fresh. As of now, I

still hear the whispers occasionally, and in those moments, I still don't wanna be me. But I'm recovering, slowly but surely.

It's Okay to Stop
Lorena Rodriguez
Paradise - BTS

The classroom clock ticked louder than usual, each sound reminding me that my paper was still empty. "Write down your future career," my teacher had said. "Where do you see yourself in ten years?" Around me, everyone's pens moved quickly: doctor, business, fashion designer. Meanwhile, my page stayed blank.

I tapped my pencil, hoping inspiration would appear. It wasn't that I didn't care; I just didn't know who I was supposed to become yet. My teacher walked by and paused beside me. "Lorena, need help getting started?" I forced a smile. "Just thinking." She nodded, though she didn't look convinced. When the bell rang, I hid the empty paper in my backpack.

That night, the question followed me into bed. *Where do you see yourself in ten years?* It echoed during homework, meals, and quiet moments. People say not having a dream means you're lazy. But what if you're just tired from trying to be something you aren't?

I grabbed my phone and opened my playlist. Music always helped me breathe again. I stopped at "Paradise" by BTS and pressed play. The soft opening felt calming, like the world had slowed down. Then the lyric came: "It's okay to stop." It wasn't telling me to push harder or chase something I didn't understand. It gave me permission to rest.

I thought about all the nights I'd stayed up late trying to prove something, even when I didn't know what that "something" was. I had believed that stopping meant failing.

But maybe paradise wasn't a dream job or a destination. Maybe paradise was just peace. Maybe it was letting myself breathe without guilt.

The next morning, I woke up to the pale blue light filling my room. I played "Paradise" while getting ready. The line about not running without knowing why stayed with me all day. School was the same—crowded hallways and endless conversations about college. When my friends asked about my major, I just told them I was still figuring it out.

At lunch, I opened the notebook I'd been avoiding. Instead of writing a career, I wrote: "My dream is to learn how to live without needing one." It looked simple, but it felt honest. I closed the notebook and took a slow breath.

After school, I walked home slowly. The air smelled like rain and grass. I watched kids playing tag on the street, laughing, not thinking about plans or futures. They were just living. Maybe that was what I wanted, too, to live without the pressure. As the sunset turned my room golden, I put on my headphones and sang along to the song. My voice cracked, but I didn't care. It felt freeing.

A few days later, my teacher handed back our papers. When she reached me, she paused. "Yours was different," she said. My heart dropped. "Bad different?" She shook her head. "Honest. You don't need all the answers yet." For the first time, I actually believed her.

Now, whenever I listen to "Paradise," I remember that blank page and the fear of the unknown. But I also remember the peace that came when I accepted that it's okay not to have everything figured out. My worth isn't measured by how fast I choose a future, but by the person I'm becoming right now.

Maybe I don't have a dream yet. Maybe paradise isn't at the end of some perfectly planned path. Maybe it's here, in the pauses and the breaths. And when life feels too loud, I press play and hear the line that changed everything: It's okay to stop.

The Promise That Made Its Way Back
Angelina Delgado
La Promesa - Melendi

There are times in our lives when dates become landmarks. Days usually blend together without us noticing, but June 18, 2025, stands out as a permanent chapter in my memory. It was a turning point—the day I realized love still exists in the heartless generation I was born into. It started as a promise disguised as an ordinary moment. I felt as if my story with a certain person had been written long before we met. Then I heard our song: "*La Promesa*" (The Promise) by Melendi.

I realized then that love arrives softly but changes everything in the blink of an eye. From the moment I saw him, something in me paused. It wasn't overwhelming or dramatic; it was quiet, calm, and steady, as if my soul already knew he was meant to be there. We didn't talk much that first night, as it was getting late. But the next day, I received a call from an unknown number. I didn't remember giving my number to anyone, but something told me to answer. We talked and laughed, and in the silences between his words, everything finally felt like it had settled into place.

I was witnessing the beginning of something beautiful. He made me feel safe and understood effortlessly. I felt truly seen. Melendi's lyrics began playing over and over in my head: "*Yo te prometo que yo seré quien cuide tus sueños, y cuando tú estés despierta, el que te ayude a tenerlos...*" (I promise I will be the one to guard your dreams, and when you are awake, the one who helps you reach them). I knew I never wanted to leave his side. I wanted to protect him from the world and help his dreams become a reality. June 18th

was the day I met—not just a boy, but the man who would become my home.

However, love—even the kind that feels like a promise—doesn't always start smoothly.

After that perfect start, he suddenly disappeared. No explanation. No message. I waited day and night, staring at my phone. Hours turned into days, and days turned into a week. The silence of the late night felt heavy. I thought it was over, that I had imagined the connection, or that I was the only one who felt it. It hurt in a way I wasn't prepared for. After a week of silence, I decided that if he could walk away that easily, I had to move on. Yet, deep down, I felt our story wasn't finished.

On the morning of July 18th, I was getting ready to go to dinner with friends. I was trying to act as if nothing had happened, even though I felt broken inside. Then, my phone rang. It was him. My heart raced with a mix of anger and relief. When we finally talked—I mean, *really* talked—I realized that sometimes people disappear not because they don't care, but because they are overwhelmed or scared of how important someone has suddenly become.

The lyrics of our song came rushing back: *“Jamás te haré una promesa que no pretenda cumplir, jamás me iré a la francesa”* (I will never make you a promise I don't intend to keep, I will never leave without saying goodbye). It reminded me that real love finds its way back through the distance and uncertainty.

August 24, 2025, will forever be the day I realized he was truly the one. It was the day the future stopped being something to fear and became something to look forward to. That was the day I heard the words “I love you” leave his mouth, and I realized love is a vow written in the quiet spaces

between moments. As the song says, when a man loves a woman, he knows it from the moment he sees her, regardless of the obstacles in their way.

Now, we are officially dating. We are stronger, more honest, and more intentional. The silence of that one week taught us exactly how much we didn't want to lose each other. July 18th was the universe giving me a sign that promises aren't always broken by distance; sometimes, they are proven by it. Everything since then has been proof that some connections don't just happen—they stay.

The Love War
Jose Suarez
Besos en Guerra - Morat

This story begins like many others, where authors create a tense atmosphere to introduce a half-baked character, only to brazenly jump back several hours. Putting all that aside, my story begins on a bus full of juniors and seniors headed back to Miami. There I was, wearing a black cap and dark glasses to hide a profound disappointment—a sadness that surpassed even Napoleon's when he entered a burning, empty Moscow, realizing all his effort had been reduced to ashes. You might ask, “How does someone get to that point?” Well, like any good author, I'll give you a flashback so you can jump on board this train.

Rewind fifteen hours to a lunch meeting in the fifth building of my school. We were preparing for a trip to SeaWorld—a fun, but not-so-cheap, little trip that marked a turning point in my life. I was surrounded by my friends: Nelson, Isabella, Marie-Luise, Victoria, Nicholas, and Alexandra. And then there was the woman responsible for the chaos of this story: Josephina.

I had been trying to get closer to her for a while, even though the connection seemed to be fading, and it was becoming clear that something more might not be possible. But as the saying goes, “aunque adviertan al soldado, si está enamorado, en guerra morirá.” I saw this trip as the ultimate strategy to achieve my goal—much like the Germans thought they could breeze through Belgium to defeat France, only to get bogged down halfway.

Once on the bus, the second part of my plan began: get close, manipulate the seating, and ensure we both slept leaning against each other. But familiarity is a dangerous thing. By midday, my friend Nicholas had bought his girlfriend a stuffed, dressed-up rabbit—a plushie that, to me, looked like the embodiment of Lucifer. However, it gave me an idea. I made Nicholas leave his girlfriend for a moment to take me to the store where the plushie was made. After spending \$80 on the "furry" of her choice, I decided that would be the last time I'd ever do something like that.

By 6:00 p.m., I had managed to separate from the group to be alone with her. Picture us on one of the park's docks at sunset, the expensive gift waiting patiently in my backpack. I was certain she was "la experta en robarle latidos a mi corazón." I felt invincible. But I had forgotten that a single shot can change everything—or in this case, a single sentence. Before I could even speak, she turned to me and said, "I hope you're not planning anything strange, because I already said I only see you as a friend and nothing more."

You can imagine how grateful I was for my sunglasses, hiding the "ruby-red" eyes that resulted from the most expensive love affair I'd ever attempted. And so, we return to the present: sitting alone, feeling as if I'd been dragged across a field like Hector behind the chariot of Achilles. Pero confieso que no me arrepiento y, aunque estoy sufriendo, puedo estar peor.

Looking back on this dramatic narrative, I realize this experience was proof that life has its ups and downs. The most important thing is to accept defeat with honor and have the strength to correct past mistakes. We must keep our eyes on the future while keeping our feet planted in the present—holding onto the past for its lessons, rather than letting the

past hold onto us. After all, if there's one thing I agree with, it's that "history teaches us that man doesn't learn from it."

My Love is Vengeance
Christopher Mairena
Behind Blue Eyes - Limp Bizkit

It was a simple afternoon. I was in the shower, playing music through a mini speaker I'd bought a few days prior. Everything seemed fine, for the most part. But in the days leading up to this, I had received several calls and texts from family suggesting my grandmother was sick. She was in her advanced years, just shy of eighty-five, but she had always been active—waking up early for brisk walks and cooking healthy meals. Yet, in those calls, I heard something off. My aunt's usually cheerful voice sounded monotone, deflated. I took it upon myself to see what was really going on. I grabbed my keys and cold-started my trusty Honda Civic.

As I drove toward her house, I saw something that made my blood run cold. It wasn't my grandmother's home; it was the hospital, specifically the emergency room. I tried to tell myself she had just fallen; she had fallen numerous times before and miraculously recovered without a broken bone. With that hope in mind, I turned on the radio. A song I hadn't heard in years suddenly filled the car: "Behind Blue Eyes."

A wave of nostalgia hit me. I remembered my grandmother playing that song while bathing me when I was little, and the times my father and I bonded over it in the car. I turned the volume up, casually singing along, but for the first time, I truly noted how deep the lyrics ran. By the time I arrived at the hospital, the radio had switched to a Latin variety show. I grabbed my hoodie, put on my AirPods, and hit repeat on that Limp Bizkit song, needing to hear it again.

That's when I saw my mother. She was sitting on an outdoor bench, hands buried in her hair, wearing an uncharacteristic hoodie despite the heat. I walked up to her and gave her a small pat on the back, but when she looked up, I saw the bloodshot eyes of constant tears. A chill ran up my spine. I asked what had happened, and the news hit me like a physical blow: my grandmother had been diagnosed with Stage 4 leukemia.

My mind went into overdrive, the words repeating like a mantra. I snapped out of the shock and rushed past her into the emergency room. As I speed-walked past others in distress, I thought to myself that no one knew what it was like to feel these feelings—not like I did.

Once I reached Room 617, I heard it: *Beep... Beep... Beep...* The dreaded loop of the monitors. My stomach dropped, and my throat felt as if it were wrapped in barbed wire. I took a deep breath and walked in. The room was silent, filled with family members standing in a gloomy hush. My grandmother lay motionless, wires coming from her arms and legs, in a state of half-consciousness. Her eyes fluttered open, and when she saw me, she tried to cry.

I spoke to her softly, a broken whisper asking how she felt. She couldn't respond, but her fingers twitched once in a while—a tiny sign I chose to view as hope in a dark hour. Every breath she took was a question I wanted to ask, but I knew I wouldn't get an answer. For the first time in my life, I didn't want the peace and tranquility I usually crave. I wanted words, sounds, a murmur—anything to know that the woman in that bed wasn't gone.

Instead, I only received silence. A silence I grew to fear and dread. The song, the sadness, and the emptiness of

those lyrics finally made sense: “No one knows what it's like to feel these feelings like I do... and I blame you.”

The Angel
Leydiam Estevez
A Veces - A12 El Aldeano

I climbed to the rooftop that afternoon, the city stretching endlessly below me—gray and humming with distant noise. A weight pressed on my chest, a mixture of frustration, doubt, and longing. A green and gray angel walked with me through the silence, and I spoke to it quietly: “*A veces tengo que hacer de tripas corazón.*” The words wrapped around the rooftop, around the clouds, and around the memories I couldn’t escape.

The clouds drifted slowly, forming shapes that reminded me of hopes, fears, and moments I had tucked away. “*A veces subo a la azotea a mirar las nubes y veo aquellas figuritas que dibujaba el deseo.*” Each figure held a memory—choices I had made, people I had lost, and risks I had taken. The wind carried a rhythm, soft and insistent, like the pulse of my own heart. The city below faded as I moved through the layers of the past, understanding that pain and longing were inevitable parts of the journey.

I remembered staying late at school to finish projects, the quiet dread before presentations, and the emptiness after failing to reach a goal. “*A veces pienso que aún estás, que no te fuiste.*” Even when something or someone disappears from your life, they leave traces that guide you. Every mistake, every regret, and every moment of fear was a thread weaving my resilience together.

Walking through the streets later, I noticed the small gestures I had always made and the way I looked for signs from the people around me. “*A veces hago gestos, creyendo*

que me miras.” I realized that searching for validation outside myself was far less important than noticing my own strength. The quiet awareness of my patterns gave me clarity; I could finally see how my emotions had been shaping me all along.

Pain and longing mixed with glimpses of hope. “*A veces sueño que te cuento los secretos de mi infancia, que tenemos un hijo y le enseñamos a decir ‘Gracias’.*” Imagining these impossible moments revealed truths about my values and my deepest desires. Even dreams carried lessons, showing me how to move forward when life felt uncertain.

The rooftop became a place where fear, hope, sadness, and determination coexisted. Resilience was not about ignoring vulnerability; it was about carrying it with purpose. Every step forward, every breath, and every heartbeat was proof that strength could coexist with feeling. The gray city below no longer seemed overwhelming. The world felt lighter, as if it finally understood the quiet courage I had been nurturing.

Looking back, that rooftop moment was a turning point. It showed me that emotions, doubts, and memories were not weaknesses—they were guides. They shaped my actions, my decisions, and my interactions with others. Each moment from that day transformed into wisdom, a way to navigate uncertainty and find growth.

Even now, the green and gray angel walks with me. “*A veces pienso que tú no piensas en mí y que, para estar junto a ti, no nací.*” Life brings uncertainty, but strength comes from embracing those feelings and letting them guide your choices. Every challenge is an opportunity to practice courage, reflection, and honesty. The angel reminds me to

carry my experiences with purpose, using them as fuel instead of chains.

That rooftop, those clouds, and the green and gray angel remain with me—a living soundtrack in memory and action. Every decision, relationship, and risk carries the lessons I discovered that afternoon. Life is complex and often painful, but strength is learning to move forward, guided by moments where hope and fear coexist, intertwined and real.

Patience
Yamilet De León
Good Days - SZA

I was lying on my bed, staring at the ceiling and wondering if I had even made the right choice. I remember hearing “Good Days” by SZA, listening to her repeat, “I still want to try, still believe in good days.” I lay there letting those words sink in, realizing how badly I wanted exactly that—not perfect days, but good days. Days when I didn't feel stuck, confused, or trapped in the same cycle. Days that were peaceful again.

My life wasn't always like this. I was caught up in a relationship where I felt lost and confused. At first, it seemed like love. He would say all the right things, making me feel special and like I was the only one (at least, I thought I was). But the relationship slowly turned into something heavy. I felt like I had to be cautious with every word that came out of my mouth, careful not to make him mad. I'd apologize for things that weren't even my fault just to keep the peace. I stopped seeing the people I was closest to, stopped dressing the way I liked, and started doubting myself constantly. I thought that if I just tried harder and followed his lead, he'd be happier. But love shouldn't feel like constantly proving your worth. Yet I stayed. I stayed every time, knowing I shouldn't have. I stayed because I saw all my friends in relationships and didn't want to be the only one without one.

The night everything changed wasn't dramatic. I was sitting in my car after another long fight; my head was pounding from all the back-and-forth. I was exhausted from the crying and from hearing the same excuses over and over again. My phone automatically connected to Bluetooth, and

“Good Days” started playing. The first line, “Good days in my mind, safe to take a step out,” hit me so deep. I sat there listening to the lyrics while scrolling through my photo albums from a year ago. I saw how happy I had been, how healthy and pretty I looked. I realized then that I didn't feel safe anymore, not with him, and not with the version of myself I had become. But maybe I could feel safe again with myself. That was the moment I knew I had to choose myself for once.

Leaving wasn't easy. It was confusing and painful. I didn't leave my room for days; it was a mess, and I had dried-on makeup on my face. One morning, I finally told myself, “Enough is enough.” I asked myself what I was doing; I should feel relieved; I should be out with my friends instead of being stuck. Months passed, and I started going out more with family and friends. I finally felt like myself again, but better. I hadn't realized how much I missed being me.

That's when I met my now-boyfriend. It wasn't some crazy “love at first sight” moment; instead, meeting him felt peaceful and different. It felt as if I had known him for years. He was calm and kind in a way that felt unfamiliar but safe. He didn't need to control me or question everything I did. He just wanted to know me—not the version I had learned to hide.

At first, I didn't trust it. I kept waiting for the same patterns: the anger, the manipulation, the tension. But it never came. He never made me feel like I had to shrink myself to fit into his world. He encourages me to speak my mind, stand up for myself, and chase what makes me happy. He listens, not to reply, but to understand. That's when I realized that love isn't supposed to make you feel anxious.

It's supposed to feel peaceful, like coming home after a long, hard day.

Sometimes I still think about the old version of me—the girl who thought love meant losing herself. But I'm proud of her, too, because she had the strength to walk away. She believed there were good days ahead, even when she couldn't see them yet.

Now, every time *SZA* sings, “I still want to try, still believe in good days,” I smile. I believe in them because I'm living them. That song will always be my reminder that it's okay to start over, it's okay to choose peace, and it's okay to believe that love can be gentle. The song that once played when I was broken now plays when I'm happy, and that means everything to me.

Not This Again
Israel Fernandez
I'd Rather Pretend - Bryant Barnes

A light caught the corner of my eye, and I wondered who it was. A friend? A hater? I looked back and saw nothing; the light had vanished. I searched the area, hoping to find it again, until I heard someone say, "You had your phone flashlight on." Oh... I dropped the thought and moved on, not caring anymore.

A week passed without anything out of the ordinary. Then, while sitting in class, I felt a tingling sensation on the right side of my face, as if someone was staring at me. I turned around and found myself face-to-face with a girl. She was looking directly into my eyes, and for a second, I almost choked on the air I had just inhaled. She was beautiful, with long, dirty-blond hair, brown eyes, and a perfect smile. It was like being a photographer and capturing the picture of a lifetime.

"Are you okay?" she asked with a half-smile, looking concerned since I was practically choking.

"Yeah, I'm fine," I managed to say. "Do you understand how to do this assignment?"

"Yeah," she replied. She stayed there for a while, smiling and laughing at my stupid jokes.

As days passed, I noticed she kept looking at me. I suspected she liked me, but the doubt stayed in the back of my mind. In a world that can be so misleading, I didn't want to trust my own eyes. I knew that second-guessing myself wasn't the best way to live, but I was scared to find out if I was right or wrong. So, I decided *I'd rather pretend*.

Every time I saw her, even in the halls, she looked my way. I tried to piece the signs together, but I was overwhelmed by mixed feelings. I wanted to know if what she felt was real because I was starting to feel something, too—but I wanted to ignore it. It was a feeling I wasn't used to. People might think it's weird for a teenager not to have felt this before, but my past experiences were different. I didn't want to be deceived or heartbroken again. These were the reasons I chose to pretend she was just a friend, even though it was hard.

Deep down, I wanted to show her I cared, but my mind held me back. My heart kept reminding me of past relationships that showed similar signs and ended badly. One day, she eventually told me that she loved me. But I had seen these signs before, and I wanted them to go away. It didn't matter what she said; I was terrified of getting hurt.

I told her I needed time. I could see that she was hurt, but I wasn't ready to take a 50/50 chance on my heart. I slowly drifted away, distancing myself because I wasn't ready to be with anyone. I could still feel the old pains, and they hadn't left me yet. That is why I chose to believe she was lying to me.

Soon after, I found out I was right to be cautious. I was told she already had a boyfriend and was just playing with me. I hadn't noticed him because he stayed in the background, part of the game they were playing. By the time I found out, I had already moved on and didn't care. It was just a reminder that I should always be more careful of my surroundings.

Sweet Dream
Sophia Hidalgo
Video Games - Lana del Rey

My life has always felt like a puzzle with a missing piece. I was always searching for that one person to make me feel complete—someone who would understand me on a deeper level and provide a sense of warmth just by being there. And one day, I met someone. Or at least, I thought I did.

We were sixteen, sitting side by side on the sand as the wind came off the water and tugged at my hair. The sky was painted a warm, faded pink, and everything felt soft, as if time were running slower just for us. He was next to me, his arm brushing against mine.

“Swinging in the backyard, pull up in your fast car...”

The lyrics replayed in the back of my mind, shaping the memory even though there was no car and no backyard—just the shoreline and the steady rhythm of the waves. Something about the song fit: the ease, the warmth, the feeling that everything had finally fallen into place.

He was talking about something simple—his plans for the weekend, or a new game he was obsessed with, but the actual words didn't matter. What mattered was the tone. It was calm and comfortable. He wasn't trying to be anyone but himself, and that felt perfect to me. Every time he looked over, I felt that small, certain spark that tells you this is a rare moment.

I remember resting my head on his shoulder. He didn't make a joke or pull away; he just let it happen. A quiet certainty settled in my chest, something gentle and solid. That feeling is rare at sixteen, when everything usually feels

rushed, awkward, or too loud. But there, nothing was confusing. We were just there, and it felt right. “

Heaven is a place on Earth with you...” The lyrics washed over everything, the waves, the light, his hand finding mine. It was a memory that felt whole, as if my entire life had been leading to it.

Then, the chorus changed. *“I heard that you like the bad girls, honey—is that true?”* It slid in like an interruption. In an instant, the light shifted, the color drained, and there was a sudden, violent motion. My eyes snapped open to the dimness of my room and the cold flatness of reality. My phone buzzed before I could even sit up. A notification lit up the screen.

It was him. He was smiling, his arm around someone else. Not me. Not the girl whose head fit perfectly on his shoulder. I stared at the picture longer than I should have, letting the truth hit me bit by bit. He looked happy. He looked real. And she looked like she belonged there.

The version of him from the dream—the one who held my hand on the beach and looked at me like the world had slowed down—never existed outside of my own head. It’s a strange feeling when you realize your mind gave you something your real life never did.

In the quiet that followed, I realized I wasn’t only dreaming about him. I was dreaming about a version of myself that felt chosen, wanted, and understood. Waking up felt strange, but the clarity that came with it was the actual turning point. The dream showed me what I wanted; reality showed me what I needed to outgrow. Maybe that’s what self-discovery looks like at sixteen: not a perfect moment on a beach but learning how to let go of the version of your life that only exists when your eyes are closed.

Dear, Not Dear, J.
Camila Hernandez
August - Taylor Swift

Salt air; rust on the benches; my feet hurt inside the heels I refused to take off because I wanted to stay with you just a little longer. We kept walking loops around the square—as if stopping would make everything real.

You handed me the wrong earbud on purpose. The cable pulled us closer, and suddenly I couldn't look at you without feeling exposed—like you could see the version of me I keep locked away. I have always been more brain than heart, but with you, my brain finally got to relax. I could talk the way I actually think. I caught myself laughing too loudly, cutting in to finish your sentences, and feeling that sharp rush when someone understands you before you even explain yourself. War, galaxies, stupid theories—all of it felt natural. I wasn't performing. I was just there. And for a second, I believed what I wasn't supposed to believe: that if two minds fit, the rest of the world would follow.

Later, we crossed a line I had promised myself I wouldn't cross. I won't spell it out, because the point is what it meant to me. A window cracked open. The A/C hummed like distant waves. My own heartbeat was louder than it should have been. You lowered your voice and asked, "Are you sure?" and the question didn't feel like doubt. It felt like permission, like a charm I could hold onto. My head said *safe*, and I listened. *Never have I ever before*, I thought—not like a confession, but like a cliff I chose to step off.

Then came the sentence that opened the crack.

You said it casually, like you were talking to a friend. But I did not see you as a friend. You told me about *her*. The girl you had always wanted. The girl who promised would come back. The girl you almost chose. You said you wanted something "steady" before you left, and the way you said it made it sound simple—like a plan.

My stomach dropped. It was instant. The night didn't change, but I did. In one sentence, I went from feeling chosen to feeling convenient. I realized something I didn't want to admit: the connection I felt with you might have been real to me in a way it wasn't real to you. I had given you the most private part of me—my mind, the way I think—the part I rarely let anyone near. I thought that kind of connection meant I was irreplaceable. Suddenly, I could hear the truth underneath my own excuses: wanting you was only enough because I thought you wanted me back.

We walked back as if nothing had happened. Pink neon from the bakery spilled onto the sidewalk. The asphalt still held the day's heat. My left heel clicked like a metronome while I kept my face calm and my thoughts loud. You talked about plans and goodbyes like it was normal.

And that is how a moment turns into a memory while you're still inside it. That is how a summer can start slipping away before you even admit it was summer. I kept acting fine, but inside I was already becoming the girl I hate, the girl who cancels plans "just in case." The girl living for the hope of it all. The girl waiting for a call, as if it could justify what my body already knew.

So, here is the letter I never sent.

“You didn’t choose me from the same place I chose you. I didn’t come here to be ‘for now’. I came because I thought we spoke the same language. I gave you parts of myself I don’t give away easily, and you treated them like something temporary. You didn’t owe me perfection, but you did owe me clarity. If what we had was just a summer, call it a summer. If it was just a wave that comes in and leaves, call it that. But don’t look at me like ‘forever’ while you keep your real plans in your pocket. Don’t hold me as if I matter and then speak like I’m an option. Don’t make me feel like we’re saying, ‘us’ when you already know you’re leaving.”

Now, "August" plays in normal places. A restaurant. A red light. Old earbuds. You come back for a second—not because I miss you exactly, but because I remember who I was then. A teenage girl in her first love, convinced that being understood meant being chosen. Convinced that if you said, “Meet me behind the mall,” I would go, because that version of me thought hope was a kind of proof.

But it wasn’t.

You weren’t mine to lose, I tell myself now, because it stops me from rewriting the past into something kinder than it was. And still, I have to admit the smaller truth hiding inside: you were never mine.

I’m not writing this to punish you. I’m writing it so I don’t punish myself. I’m writing it so I don’t confuse connection with belonging ever again. So, if August slips away, it is because time does what time does—not because I made myself smaller just to keep a story alive.

The Soundtrack of Betrayal
Eric Mesa
You Are the Stranger - J Crist

The hallway was dim, lit only by a flickering overhead light. My footsteps echoed against the floor, the sound oddly rhythmic, like the opening bars of a song I knew too well. In my ears, the electric rhythm guitar of J Crist's "You Are the Stranger" began to pulse, its stereoized richness filling the silence. The crisp, warm bass followed, grounding me in a moment that felt both cinematic and surreal.

It was sophomore year, and the air was thick with the kind of tension only high school drama can produce. I had trusted them—two classmates who had once felt like brothers. We shared jokes, secrets, and the kind of naive loyalty that only youth can afford. But something had shifted. There were whispers behind my back, glances that lingered too long, and a sudden coldness that replaced our usual laughter. I didn't want to believe it at first. I brushed off the signs, convinced it was just stress or a simple misunderstanding.

But betrayal doesn't knock; it crashes in.

I remember the moment it became undeniable: a group chat I wasn't supposed to see, screenshots sent by a mutual friend, and words that cut deeper than any blade. They mocked me, dismissed me, and twisted me into a distorted version of myself. I stood frozen, phone in hand, the low hum of the bass in "You Are the Stranger" vibrating through my chest like a warning. The song didn't just play—it spoke. The rhythm guitar surged, each note a revelation.

I walked into class that day with a new kind of silence. It wasn't the quiet of confusion, but the stillness of clarity. They looked at me, unsure if I knew. I did. And in that moment, they became strangers.

The music shaped the atmosphere. The electric guitar sliced through the air like the sharp edge of truth, and the bass wrapped around me like armor. The classroom, once familiar, now felt like a stage. Every movement and every glance was a sequence scored by the soundtrack in my mind. The betrayal wasn't just an event; it was a scene.

I didn't confront them. There was no dramatic showdown or shouted accusations—just a quiet withdrawal. It was a decision made in the rhythm of the music. I chose distance. I chose self-respect. I chose to let them fade into the background noise.

In the weeks that followed, I found myself returning to "You Are the Stranger" again and again. I didn't listen out of pain, but out of recognition. The song had become a mirror, reflecting not just the betrayal but the strength I found in its aftermath. It was more than a track; it was a companion that understood what words couldn't express.

I discovered J Crist through a mobile game, Trial Xtreme, and he had unknowingly scored one of the most important chapters of my life. His vast discography became a landscape I explored with respect, but "You Are the Stranger" remained the anchor. It was the song that marked the moment I learned to choose my circles wisely—the moment I understood that not everyone who walks beside you is walking with you.

Even now, I listen to it often. Sometimes I hear it in quiet reflection, other times in loud rebellion. It reminds me of who I was and who I became. The rhythm guitar still

resonates, the bass still warms, and the memory still lives—
not as a wound, but as a defining scene in the soundtrack of
my life.

The Quiet I Can't Outrun

Alana Navarro

I Love You - Billie Eilish

The door clicked shut behind me, and suddenly the house felt too still. Just an hour before, I had been laughing and talking, pretending everything was fine. My friends always made it easy; they filled the space around me with noise and movement—something bright enough to keep the darker thoughts pushed into the corners. But the second I got home, the silence swallowed everything again. I dropped my bag on the floor and lay on my bed without even turning on the light. The glow from my phone screen was the only thing stopping the room from disappearing completely. I hit play on Billie Eilish's "I Love You" because it matched the mood that always hits me after a night like this: soft, slow, and honest in a way I avoid being out loud.

As the first quiet notes drifted through the room, my mind slipped the way it always does. It's like flipping a switch I don't control. One second, I'm here, and the next I'm somewhere else—stuck in a memory I didn't ask to revisit or frozen in a feeling I thought I had escaped for the night. My thoughts get tangled and messy, becoming too loud for a room that is otherwise silent.

Listening to the lyrics, I felt that familiar pressure in my chest. It wasn't sadness toward a person, but sadness toward myself—the kind you can't explain because it doesn't come from anything specific. It just exists. It's a weight you carry quietly.

I stared up at the ceiling, watching shadows shift as the music played. Sometimes I don't even know where my

mind goes. I blink, and I'm suddenly replaying a moment from years ago, or imagining something that hasn't happened, or thinking in circles until I feel like I'm sinking into my own head. I don't mean to do it; it just happens whenever the world gets quiet enough for me to hear myself.

With my friends, it's different. They laugh and joke, keeping the energy bouncing around. Being with them is like stepping into a warm light—not because everything is perfect, but because it's bright enough to drown out everything I don't want to feel. But when I'm alone afterward, it's like walking into a dark room after staring at the sun. Everything feels sharper. Deeper. Too real.

"I can't escape the way I love you" drifted softly through the air. I realized that the song didn't have to be about a person. It could be about anything that refuses to leave your mind: a past version of yourself, old habits you don't know how to let go of, or feelings you keep trying to outrun.

The melody slowed, and my mind spiraled, jumping from memory to worry to nothing at all. My heartbeat matched the rhythm without me even trying. It was like the song wasn't just playing; it was speaking to the parts of me that disappeared inside my own head. But as the music reached its softest point, something changed. Instead of fighting my thoughts, I let them pass. I listened to the music, to my breathing, and to a silence that didn't feel as threatening anymore. For once, I didn't try to shut the thoughts out or distract myself. I just let myself exist in the stillness.

When the song faded out, I stayed there, staring into the dark. My mind wasn't quiet, but it wasn't screaming either. It was just... there. I realized that maybe these

uncomfortable, lonely moments are when I actually learn something about myself. This is where I can hear the things I mute during the day and admit the things I pretend not to feel.

It is the space between who I am around other people and who I am when the noise is gone. It reminds me that even when my mind jumps, spins, or drifts into places I don't understand, I always come back. I always return to myself.

The quiet after everything ends isn't easy—it never has been. But I'm starting to see it differently. It isn't a punishment; it's a moment where I can finally hear what is going on inside my own head. That makes the silence feel less scary and less empty. It feels more like a place where I can learn to sit without disappearing.

Trapped in the Downpour

Juan Deleon

Skyfall - Adele

It all started on a Thursday during the summer while I was getting ready for camp. I was packing my swimming clothes because we were going on a field trip to the Venetian Pool in Coral Gables. I wasn't even supposed to go because I didn't know how to swim, but my friends convinced me. They told me there was a shallow side to the pool and that everything would be fine. I still had my doubts, but I told them I'd go anyway. As I was walking out the door, my mom told me to wear a life jacket and stay close to people because she didn't want me to drown.

On the way to camp, I kept thinking about her warning. I came so close to asking my dad to turn the car around because I had a bad feeling, but I had promised my friends I'd be there. When I arrived, they were surprised I hadn't canceled at the last second. They immediately started joking around, making up scenarios about me drowning. I tried to laugh, but I started wondering: *What if the scenarios come true?* One friend even joked about my life jacket failing. I didn't even know if that was possible, but the idea stuck in my head.

While they were teasing me, a whistle blew. Our coach told us to grab our gear because the buses had arrived. As we boarded, my coach tapped my shoulder; he had overheard my friends and told me not to worry. On the ride over, I finally started to relax because my friends were just messing around and having fun until the coaches announced that we were almost there.

Reality hit, and the nerves came rushing back. I kept telling myself to stay on the shallow side, and I'd be fine. Once inside, the coaches explained the rules, the main one being: *If you don't know how to swim, wear a life jacket.* My friends all looked at me the moment they said it. After they let us go, my friends jumped right in while I went to find my life jacket.

For the first few hours, I was actually having fun. But eventually, I got bored and noticed the waterfall. Behind the falling water, there were little rock seats, and I decided I wanted to try to get back there. I started making my way over, even though the waterfall was located in the deepest part of the pool. When I arrived at the edge, a coach was standing there on watch. He told me to wait a moment because it was crowded. As I waited patiently, I told myself nothing could go wrong.

Then, I made my move toward the waterfall.

Instantly, everything did go wrong! As soon as I entered, the force of the water was too strong; it slammed into me, pushing me under. I tried to swim out, but I was too weak. I was trapped in the middle of the downpour, unable to move or breathe, with the water crashing against my face. Suddenly, my favorite song, "Skyfall" by Adele, started playing in my head. It felt like I was under for hours. Everything began to move in slow motion, and I felt myself losing consciousness.

Finally, the coach reached in and pulled me out. I took a massive gasp of air, feeling completely gassed out. He had to drag me out of the water and repeatedly asked if I was okay. All I could do was cough from all the water I had swallowed. When I finally calmed down, I told him I felt lightheaded. I tried to stand, but my legs felt like lead. He

told me to lie there while he got another coach to help carry me to a place where I could relax.

My friends eventually found me, having heard what happened. They started apologizing for convincing me to come, but I just looked at them and told them that, despite everything, I had a good time. We all laughed it off, and I was glad I was safe.

Here on The Sidewalk
Sebastian Carbonell
Call it fate, Call it Karma - The Strokes

In 2021, I met a group of people at a party. I remember it was a cold Friday in October; the air was windy, and the sky went dark by 7:00 p.m. We became friends that night, though I didn't think much of it at first. To me, they were just interesting people you meet once, only to later pass them in the metro and promise to "hang out someday" without ever doing it. But that Friday, we stayed out until 1:00 a.m., walking through Madrid and discussing the kind of personal things you aren't supposed to share with strangers.

Every Sunday, a neighborhood in the center of Madrid closes down for a massive flea market. My new friends invited me to join them. I hesitated because it took an hour to get there, and we had to meet before 9:00 a.m. to beat the wave of tourists. However, I decided to go, and that day was just as perfect as the night we met. We explored the charming, peculiar shops and joked around until the hours disappeared.

They made me feel alive. I stopped spending my days at home playing video games and started making priceless memories. I loved the whole group, but I became especially close with a girl named Tokyo. We hung out every day that summer; our shared ideas and hobbies made our bond effortless.

That July, a friend who had moved to Italy came back for two weeks. Our group of nine—Max, Jota, Tokyo, Raul, Angela, Adri, David, Vela, and me—spent every moment together. We usually met at Plaza España to escape

the brutal summer sun. But suddenly, things began to fall apart. Tokyo got angry with David over a misunderstanding, and suddenly it was like “Avengers: Civil War”. I felt like Spiderman, caught in the crossfire of a conflict that seemed so easy to solve with words. I tried to be the middleman, but the relationships crumbled like a cookie in a coffee cup. Tokyo was even mad at me for a moment because I wouldn't take a side, but we eventually made peace.

Then, my grandmother came to visit from Spain. She loved spending summers in Europe, and it was great having her with us. One day, she made a life-changing suggestion: we should move to Miami to be with the rest of our family. I was excited at first, especially at the thought of seeing my brother, whom I hadn't seen in a very long time. But when my mom confirmed we were moving in December, I was speechless. My friends, my family, and my life in Spain were now attached to an invisible timer.

We spent those final months making big plans and having deep conversations. We started renting public bikes, riding from the city center back to my neighborhood under the stars. I remember one day, specifically, we started with breakfast in the center and spent the afternoon at a park with a viewpoint overlooking half the city and the mountains.

As we watched the sunset, music played from a speaker. The world seemed to stop, and the lyrics became my thoughts: “Can I waste all your time, here on the sidewalk?” I repeated it in my head, admiring the scene like an old man staring at a fading photo. I looked at my friends and the city I loved, knowing that soon, we wouldn't be able to enjoy moments like this anymore.

My New Life
Enmanuel Sanchez
Save Your Tears -The Weeknd

Holding my backpack on my lap, I kept my eyes on the window. The glass was cold against my forehead as the bus rolled through a neighborhood that looked too perfect to be real: houses in straight lines, clean sidewalks, and shiny cars parked in every driveway. Everything outside looked like it belonged there. I didn't.

The engine hummed low beneath the music playing from the front. The beat was steady, cold, and mechanical. It felt like it was moving me, as if I had no choice but to go wherever it went. "I saw you dancing in a crowded room." The words ran through my head, not like a song, but like my own thoughts—like I was talking to myself without opening my mouth. I imagined people from my old life still moving, still laughing, and still living the same routine, while I sat here, trapped between where I came from and wherever I was going.

The bus shook as we hit a bump. I tightened my grip on the strap of my bag. My chest felt tight, but I didn't let it show. I replayed that last goodbye in my mind—the fake confidence in my voice when I said I'd be back soon. Those words didn't sit right anymore; they felt distant, like they belonged to a different version of me. "You could've asked me why I broke your heart." The line echoed inside me like a confession, not to one person, but to everything I was leaving behind—my old room, my friends, my streets. It was a life that didn't even get a real goodbye, just a closed door and a new address.

I glanced around the bus. Everyone looked relaxed, as if this were just another regular day—talking, laughing, or staring at their phones. Nobody knew that my whole world had flipped upside down while theirs stayed exactly the same. They weren't doing anything special; they were just living, and somehow that made me feel even more alone. "Take your time, I'm in no rush." I heard it in my head while my foot tapped against the floor.

The bus was slowing down now. My heart beat harder, faster than the rhythm of the song. Every second felt stretched out, as if time were playing with me, wanting me to feel every moment instead of letting me escape it. The school came into view—big, loud, and too real. "You just wasted my time." The words hit as the bus doors opened. They didn't belong to the person on the speaker anymore; they were mine now. My time, my past, my old self—all of it sat behind me while I stood up and stepped into the aisle.

I walked down the stairs and onto the pavement. The air outside felt different—heavier. The music faded as the bus pulled away, but the lyrics stayed, replaying in the back of my mind like echoes that wouldn't disappear. For a second, I just stood there, looking up at the building in front of me. I felt small and lost, but I also felt something else, something I couldn't fully name yet: a beginning, even if I wasn't ready for it.

Part of me wanted to turn around, to chase the bus, and to go back to the version of me that still made sense. But my feet stayed planted. Then, slowly, they moved forward. There were no "Save Your Tears" left for the past—only whatever comes next.

The Story of Scythe
Raven Davis-Chu
I Think I Saw a Ghost - One Hope

Let me be real here... I feel like I've always moved to a different beat compared to those around me. You see, I had dealt with undiagnosed ADHD for a good while and was always just the slightest bit more easily reactive than most. Sometimes my thoughts told me I should be soaring 30,000 feet in the air, but I'm only 5 feet off the ground. I was listening to a song that the world wasn't, and it felt... off.

A few years ago, I stumbled upon a concept that gave me a better sense of who I was. Whether it's a connection to the natural world, a non-human spirit, or even a fictional archetype, it provided a vocabulary for the 'otherness' I had felt since childhood. While my initial interest in this concept eventually faded, the core of that discovery—that I didn't have to fit into a standard mold—stayed with me.

When I found out about the Roblox game “*PHIGHTING!*”, I was instantly hooked. It was a few weeks before the release of the “Scythe” character trailer, at the very end of 2023, that I discovered the game. When the trailer for “Scythe” was released, I instantly adored her. I had no real explanation for why I did at the time. I had gone to such an extent that I had bought a Roblox avatar simply to cosplay her.

I later found certain other cosplayers in another Roblox game called “*Regretevator*”. I joined their Discord group chat, which later turned into a full friend group server

called “The Phighting Syndicate”. There, I was exclusively referred to as “Scythe”, and during the first few months there, a realization dawned over me: I had slowly begun to realize that I can't escape the feeling of not being me, and that it's just a subliminal act. I had felt as if the name “Scythe” was truly mine, and not just some online name I used.

At first, I thought I was “fictionhearted”—identifying with a fictional character and feeling a deep emotional bond to it. As time passed, though, I soon found that the label felt off, and eventually, it was wrong. So I tried the term “fictionkin” for a day. It felt right. I realized it then: I am “Scythe”; I am her, she is me. I knew that I was so much more than what people saw on the outside. The story of “Scythe” was one I could relate to.

I had started looking back at the original concept I once favored and found that there are multiple theories one may have about their own lives. I looked toward something called “Past Life Theory”, which suggests that certain identities are carried forward from a prior existence. It felt like a missing piece of the puzzle, explaining why I felt such an inherent, deep-rooted connection to a life that seemed to exist just beyond what I already knew.

Oftentimes, I find myself wishing for a clearer connection to that past—a sense of nostalgia for a life that feels like it's just out of reach. There is a profound restlessness in not having all the answers, and I sometimes look at the world of “*PHIGHTING!*”, hoping for a spark of familiarity that makes everything click. It's a unique kind of longing, a desire to reconnect with a version of myself that feels more complete, even if that life had its own set of challenges.

Sometimes, the weight of the present makes me yearn for a change, simply to be among those who truly know me. It can be difficult to reconcile who I am with the world I live in, creating a sense of distance that is hard to explain to those who haven't felt it. However, this journey has taught me so much about the complexity of the soul... my soul.

Today, that journey continues. While my time with the Phighting Syndicate ended due to differing perspectives, I've found new circles of friends who support me and my path. I've come to embrace a much broader understanding of who I am, discovering connections to other figures and spirits that round out my life. These identities remain a significant, positive part of my journey, and I am thankful for the clarity they provide, even if the road to finding them was a bit winding.

Honestly, it's quite funny that this all started almost two years ago with a simple Roblox game.

4

Upbeat & Anthemic

Joy, Celebration, Culture,
and Living in the Moment

A Thrilling Quince
Zsalee Arnold
Thriller - Michael Jackson

It's close to midnight on an October night, just two weeks before my birthday, and I randomly decided that I wanted a quinceañera party. I hadn't planned one at all, but suddenly the idea hit me, and once it was in my head, I couldn't let it go. And of course, I didn't want a normal quinceañera. I wanted a full-on Halloween-themed quinceañera! I wanted zombies walking out with me, dancing to Michael Jackson's "Thriller", everyone in costumes, and a massive haunted house as the gateway into the party. And it couldn't just be any haunted house; I wanted the kind of entrance that felt like you needed to sign a waiver to survive it. I wanted it dark, dramatic, horrifying, and just spooky enough to make my guests question their life choices the moment they stepped in. It also had to be the only way to enter and exit the party.

When I told my mom all of this, I practically gave her a heart attack. She stared at me as if I had just asked her to let me throw my quince in a graveyard. After a lot of convincing (and maybe a little arguing in between), she finally agreed to let me have the theme I wanted. She spent that entire week searching for inspiration and trying to find "fancy" Halloween decorations, something spooky but still elegant enough for a quinceañera. It turned out to be way harder than either of us expected. But that wasn't even the biggest problem.

When my mom started calling party planners and venues, they kept turning us down. Some of them sounded

uncomfortable, others were almost offended, and a few didn't even let my mom finish explaining before shutting her down. Things got complicated fast. People reacted as if it were the worst idea they had ever heard. I knew some people in our culture viewed Halloween negatively, but I didn't expect the level of pushback I got. A lot of Hispanic families believe Halloween is tied to dark or "satanic" things because of religious beliefs. It felt like everyone was either scared of the theme or completely against it.

Eventually, after so many cancellations, we found a woman who ran her own party-planning business. At first, though, she was completely against the idea, too. She told my mom bluntly that a quinceañera was the most special day of a girl's life and that it "shouldn't be celebrated that way."

But my mom didn't back down. She looked at the woman and said, "Exactly. This is the most special day of her life. That's why it needs to be done the way she wants it. All I want is for my daughter to be happy, because she's going to remember this day forever."

After hearing that, the woman softened. She eventually agreed to help, but she insisted on meeting me first.

When she came over for the first time, I could tell how nervous she was just by looking at her through the window. She was standing outside, hugging her arms, like she was preparing herself to meet some terrifying, demon-worshipping teenage girl. And then there was me... stepping outside in a baby pink long-sleeve shirt, matching pink Hello Kitty slippers, and the biggest smile on my face. The look on her face was priceless, and her whole mood changed instantly. To this day, it still makes me laugh.

From that moment on, everything shifted. She helped plan and decorate the entire party, working nonstop up until the day before my quinceañera. And finally, the whole thing came to life.

There it was, my Halloween-themed quinceañera set up across my huge backyard. A haunted house entrance, guests arriving in elegant outfits with dark, mysterious ballroom masks. I stood behind a giant frame, waiting for my cue with zombies lined up beside me exactly the way I imagined.

And then came the entrance I had been waiting for. The opening beat of “Thriller” started playing, the frame slid aside, and I stepped out with my zombies, ready for the grand entrance I’d dreamed of since day one. I had never felt happier. Thanks to so many determined people, I got my dream party, a thriller night I know I’ll remember forever.

Me, Myself, and I
Abril Castro
On My Own - Brady

I always used to dream about growing up and finishing school surrounded by my friends and family. But life isn't a fairytale, is it? Things rarely go exactly as planned, and you cannot map out your future and expect every detail to become real.

For a while, I thought I had everything under control. I was happy, finally emerging from a dark place I had been stuck in for a couple of years. But life isn't all flowers and bright colors. When things were at their worst, all I wanted was to escape the small town I lived in. I romanticized immigration just like everyone else does, thinking everything would be perfect. Then, in the blink of an eye, that "dream" became a reality. I was excited—how could I not be? My wish was coming true.

But when the day actually arrived, I had to look at the people I grew up with—the friends and family I saw almost daily—and say goodbye. I didn't know when, or even if, I would see them again. In that moment, I feared that the time we spent together would become nothing more than a blur in the back of my mind. I was going to be on my own from then on. I felt as though the memories I had created were being blown away by a summer breeze.

I found myself asking: What am I supposed to do now? The life I had planned no longer existed. Without them, I was alone with nothing but my nostalgia in a strange place I was supposed to call "home." But I couldn't call it that; I was too far from the real thing. I wondered if I was

brave enough for this road. To be honest, I still don't always know. People say, "If you don't try, you'll never know what happens," and that phrase stayed with me. I tried so hard, but I wasn't seeing the results I expected. Still, they say you should never look back at yesterday, don't they?

I had to pack my entire life into a single suitcase. So many years, one little bag. For a long time, I regretted the decision to get on that plane. In just a few hours, that flight erased the life I knew and turned my dreams of leaving home into dreams of going back.

Eventually, I realized I was standing heart-to-heart with a new future, a blank piece of paper that I had to fill, even if I was a million miles from where I started. When your plans are interrupted, you have to remake them. This time, I had to write them by myself, with no one by my side to tell me how. It is hard, but not impossible.

Living in another country is difficult, especially when you realize that some people you called "friends" or even "family" don't even try to reach out. For the first time, I learned how to be truly alone in a place where I knew no one, even here in Miami. But things are only as difficult as you allow yourself to think they are. Once you tell yourself that it shouldn't be this hard, it becomes a little easier to get used to. At the end of the day, I've learned that as long as I have me, myself, and I, I'm doing just fine.



The Road Trip
Sebastian Gomez
We Are the People - Empire of the Sun

In August 2024, my friend invited me on a road trip with his family. At the time, school was just about to start, and we were heading into our junior year. My summer hadn't been very eventful, so getting an invitation to Islands of Adventure absolutely made my month. I could hardly wait; I thought about the massive rides and the fun we'd have every single day. I packed my bags instantly, preparing for what turned out to be the best trip of my life.

The plan was set: my friend's parents rented an Airbnb, the tickets were bought, and everything was ready. The night before we left, I stayed over at my friend's house so we could hit the road as early as possible. My mom dropped me off, I said my goodbyes, and I walked into his house with a huge smile on my face. We started the night playing video games until the sun was down and the moon was bright. We ordered snacks and made air-fried s'mores, eating until we were completely full. We stayed up late talking about the trip and everything we were looking forward to. Time flew by so fast that when we finally checked the clock, we realized our early alarm was set to go off in just a few hours. We threw on a movie and finally crashed.

When the alarm went off, we jumped out of bed. It was so early the sun hadn't even risen yet, but we were still bursting with energy. We hurriedly got dressed, loaded our bags into the rental car, and put the dogs in their crates in the back. There was only one problem: we were starving. We stopped at the closest Wawa, where I got the best breakfast

sandwich I've ever had, a side of crispy tater tots, and an ice-cold water.

With breakfast handled, we settled in for the long road ahead. We had an adventure; it felt like we were following the sun, reminiscing about life, and cracking jokes until we had tears in our eyes and our stomachs hurt from laughing. Eventually, the adrenaline wore off, and the lack of sleep caught up to us. We fell asleep for a good portion of the drive.

We eventually stopped at Yeehaw Junction to stretch our legs and take a bathroom break. After hours of being cramped in the car, it felt amazing to move. We walked the dogs, fueled up on some more food, and got back on the road. My friends are pretty impatient, so to make the time go by faster, we ended up falling asleep one more time.

Finally, we arrived. We saw the rides towering over us and heard the distant screams of people on the roller coasters. We found a parking spot and then practically ran into the park, feeling well-rested and excited. My friend took a bunch of pictures, and we truly had the time of our lives. It was a day full of nothing but good memories. After the park closed, we headed back to the Airbnb to rest up before the long drive back home to my family.

That trip felt exactly like the song "We are the People" by Empire of the Sun. It was a summer of love, chasing the sun, and making memories that will stay with me forever.

Burly Brawl at Summer Camp
Gabriel Ligonde
Under - Breaking Point

So, boom—it’s a day in the summer of 2017, and I’m at the local daycare for elementary schoolers on break: summer camp. At my camp, we had this tradition where on Fridays, we’d spend the day playing inside and splashing around a mini water playpen next to the building. I wouldn’t say this place was infamous; on the contrary, it was revered in the community and usually pretty chill (mainly because it was the only one around).

The day started off normal enough. I showed up, ate some breakfast, and watched a movie while kids gossiped with their friends. Eventually, we got dressed and ready for the water. I even brought my water gun at the suggestion of another kid so we could pretend we were playing Call of Duty. Once we got outside, we were running around like a bunch of hyperactive squirrels.

After an hour or two, I took a breather. Some kid came up to me and started talking crazy for no apparent reason. He thought he could reach up and take the sky, but in hindsight, he was definitely joking. But when you’re ten years old, you take everything at face value. I was not rocking with what he was saying because he started bad-mouthing my mom, and I was a massive mama’s boy. I stood up and told him to hush his mouth.

He smirked and said, “Or what? You *gonna* hit me?”

Before he could get another insult out, I reached up, touched the sky, and socked him right in the face. He

retaliated in kind, and we devolved into a total brawl. I have no clue if we accidentally collided into other kids, but suddenly, everyone else started fighting whoever was closest—almost like they had just been looking for an excuse to throw hands.

Imagine seeing an absolute melee between twenty kids on a random summer day. It was crazy. Eventually, I wasn't even fighting the original kid anymore. It was everyone against everyone, no allies, just enemies on every side. At one point, I got hit with a savage haymaker out of nowhere and was knocked onto my back. I remember looking up, feeling like I could reach out and touch the sky.

The kids who weren't fighting fled into the water area to avoid the crossfire. When I scrambled up, I saw some kid get flung past me by a behemoth of a 12-year-old. He was here today, gone tomorrow! I kept spinning around to make sure I didn't get knocked out again. Kids were diving over and under each other to land punches. I saw someone using my water gun to blind kids before swinging it at them. Another kid straight-up threw dirt into someone's face. I even witnessed a "ball shot" delivered by a particularly short kid.

I am still surprised by how long it took for any staff to come out. I'd say this warzone lasted roughly seven to ten minutes. You'd think someone would have run for help or noticed the noise. But when the staff finally stepped outside, everybody—and I mean everybody—went dead silent and still.

Most of the kids needed to be patched up, but everyone was scared "shirtless" when the parents started getting called. We were all more afraid of *our* parents than we were of the fight itself. My parents were incredibly angry,

but the most amazing part of the story is what happened after. Some kids were kicked out of the program, *“here today... gone tomorrow”*, but the ones who stayed became incredibly chill with each other. We never brought up the fight again. I even ended up trading 3DS games with some of the kids I had been brawling with.

The Flow State
Isaias Rizo
Spine - WesGhost

I didn't expect the room to feel like a stadium that night, but that's how it always gets when I'm locked into a racing game. The lights were low, my headset was on, and my fingers were already twitching over the controller before the countdown even started. Then the opening beat of "Spine" slid into my ears—sharp, fast, and alive. Suddenly, the moment felt bigger than just a game; it felt like my pulse had synced with the music.

The race started with that familiar jolt, like being yanked into another world. Cars shot forward, engines roaring, and the track curved ahead of me like a challenge. "Spine" hit its first heavy drop, and that's when it really kicked in. There's something about that song—how the rhythm climbs up your back and sits right between your shoulders, as if it's telling you: *Don't mess this up.*

Go!

It made the whole moment feel electric, like every tiny movement mattered.

I leaned forward in my chair, the screen inches from my face. Every time the beat pulsed, I felt myself reacting—steering tighter and sliding around corners with more confidence than I probably had any right to. My breathing matched the tempo without me even realizing it. When the synth rose, my speed rose with it. When the bass slammed, I braked or drifted, letting instinct take over. The song wasn't just background noise; it was a co-pilot in my ear.

Halfway through the race, I messed up. A sharp turn with too much speed. My tires screeched, and I slammed the joystick, trying not to spin out. For a second, I thought it was over—that the race was cooked. But then "Spine" hit one of those intensity spikes—fast, cold, and full of pressure, like a warning siren. Instead of panicking, the sound snapped everything back into focus. My heart stopped jumping around, and I locked in harder than before.

I pulled back into third, then second. The player in first was so far ahead that it looked impossible on the mini-map. But the song kept pushing, like it was dragging me by the collar. Every little detail felt louder: the vibration in the controller, the blur of the track lights, the hiss of each drift. I could almost feel the adrenaline buzzing in my hands. It didn't feel like sitting in my room anymore; it felt like the world had shrunk down to this one final stretch.

The last part of the track appeared: a long straightaway with one brutal curve before the finish line. My chance. The beat in "Spine" started building again, the way it does right before it explodes. My screen shook as my car hit maximum speed. I could see the first-place player only a few feet ahead. We hit the curve at the exact same time—him on the inside, me taking the wider, riskier path. The drift was either going to save the race or send me straight into the wall.

The beat dropped.

And I took the shot.

My tires caught just right, the boost kicked in at the perfect moment, and I shot past him so fast the screen almost felt delayed. The finish line flashed across the screen in a burst of neon. First place. Victory. For a second, I didn't even celebrate—I just sat there staring, letting the song finish out as if it were sealing the moment into my memory.

It wasn't the most important achievement of my life, but there was something real about the way the music matched the moment. "Spine" made the whole thing feel heavier, sharper, and more intense. It turned a simple game into a scene, like something straight out of a racing anime where the main character finally gets their win.

My Only Diamond Girl
Anthony Perez
Diamond Girl - Nice & Wild

It started with a text on a random day. After that, we began texting and calling every single day. I really started to feel a connection; we had so much in common and hit it off effortlessly. She was easy to talk to, perfectly matched my energy, and was so sweet and genuine. We eventually planned to meet at Miami Roller Rink to hang out and get to know each other better. When I arrived, I realized her family had come with her. When I tell you I was nervous... I was really nervous. But I had to man up and introduce myself to her parents. Luckily, they ended up really liking my energy.

After talking to her parents for a bit, we went out to skate. They were playing old-school music, but one song stood out from the rest: “Diamond Girl.” As it played, we both started singing the lyrics loudly to each other. When I looked at her, I was captivated by her smile. She really was *my* Diamond Girl; I couldn't get over how she looked at me every time that song played. She was so beautiful that I could hardly focus on anything else.

When it was time to go, I walked her and her family to their car. I hugged her goodbye, and as I walked back into the rink, I could still smell her perfume on my clothes. She smelled amazing—like vanilla was running through my veins. Later that night, she texted me, saying how much she enjoyed the day. She told me her family really liked me and appreciated how respectful I was toward them and their daughter.

Many more dates, texts, and calls followed. Finally, the day came when I decided to ask her to be my girlfriend. She said yes, and we shared our first kiss. Literally right after, “Diamond Girl” started to play. We couldn’t believe the timing. We started singing it together again:

“Diamond girl, you make me feel like I’m on fire when you are near.”

That line perfectly describes how she makes me feel.

As the days go by, I get to see her more often, though I have yet to set foot in her house. I know I’ll be nervous when that day comes, but I know how to handle myself, especially knowing she will be right there with me. My girlfriend goes to a private school owned by her grandma, and since my school day ends before hers, I go there to hang out with her. I’ve had the chance to get close to her grandma, uncle, aunt, and nephew. They’ve all started to love me, but the best part is just being there. Seeing her after school clears all my problems away.

“Diamond Girl” by Nice & Wild was the first song we sang to each other, and it showed how quickly we connected without any shyness. She became my diamond girl, and I can never let her go. The beautiful girl of my dreams finally came to me; she is perfect, and I can’t see myself without her.

No Use to Sit and Wonder Why
Brooklynn Riffa
Don't Think Twice, it's All Right - Bob Dylan

Poorly contained laughter, late-night calls that bleed into the morning, conversations so long that you talk about nothing and everything, and tears of sheer joy falling from tired eyes. That's how it always was with her; that's how I thought it always would be. She's not an ex, but losing her felt like a messy divorce where I had to figure out who was getting the house. In this scenario, let's just say the court was not in my favor. In a way that can only be described as Pavlovian, the mere mention of her name makes my palms clammy and my eyes wet.

I met her through a shared interest in the 2024 film "Challengers", directed by perhaps my favorite director of all time, Luca Guadagnino. I find it ironic that we met this way, since a focal point of the film is the abrupt end of a friendship that leads to over a decade of silence. Unlike the two main characters, Art and Patrick, I don't see either of us jumping over a net to embrace one another at the end of our respective arcs.

The details both do and don't matter. All you really need to know—and all I ever say—is that she hurt me. She hurt me unblinkingly, unintentionally, and thoughtlessly. But does the intent matter? You can hit someone with your car with no intention of doing so, but at the end of the day, you still hit them.

I didn't do what I normally do when someone upsets me. I didn't fawn, and I didn't perform the usual dance of: "It's okay! No, it doesn't hurt at all that you

metaphorically ran me over! It's fine!" Instead, I confronted her and ended our friendship then and there. This led me to reflect on myself—how I handle situations that scare me and how I want to react to them in the future.

There weren't many things that comforted me during this time. Movies lost their spark, I couldn't lose myself in a book, and no amount of writing was able to release the noise collecting in my mind. Nothing helped except the warm, honest sound of Bob Dylan's "Don't Think Twice, It's All Right."

It felt as if he were speaking directly to me, as if he knew my exact situation. During this period, I couldn't listen to the song without sobbing; it evoked emotions I never expected. It wasn't my first time hearing the song, or Bob Dylan for that matter, so it was a shock when those opening words hit me in such a visceral way. The song is truthful in a way that makes you want to be truthful. Those ten opening words rang in my head: "It ain't no use to sit and wonder why, babe." As melodramatic as the song is—and as I am—music has always understood me in ways nothing else has managed to. I had that track on a loop for weeks. It was like honey to a sore throat; it didn't fully heal the wound, but it soothed the sting.

This didn't just feel like losing a friend; it felt like I lost the parts of myself that only she could bring out. I would be lying if I said I ever fully got over it or that I can listen to Dylan without thinking of her. Her existence will probably always be etched in my mind, but I think it's beautiful that the love we have for people never fully leaves us.

The Warmth of a Middle School Year
Daniel Rivera
The Fragrance of Darkness - The Consouls

Eighth grade is often called the "best" year—the closing of a chapter where we all supposedly mature. For me? It wasn't exactly the best, but it definitely wasn't the worst either.

Everything started when I moved from my country to the United States. My first and most annoying problem was knowing zero English. I could count from one to twenty and barely squeeze out a "yes" or "no," by mostly just nodding my head as if I understood. Life decided to throw fuel on the fire, and I was the firewood burning down to ashes. Two months after arriving, I had to start at West Miami Middle School. My mental state was a wreck; being in a place where "Spanglish" was everywhere made it even harder to learn. I was, as they say, "cooked". To make matters worse, I had to skip seventh grade entirely.

Only three classes brightened my day: PE, ESOL, and a psychology class that was so boring I forgot its name. I just remember my teacher showing us "Morning Music for Kids" by Learning Station Music. Seriously—what was he thinking, playing that for eighth graders? The rest of the time, we just stared at PowerPoints, trying to answer existential questions I didn't understand.

Despite all that, something happened in that class that changed everything. Or rather, someone happened.

On my first day, I got lost because of a room number error on my schedule. Once I finally found the right door, the teacher sat me right behind a partner who could help me translate. My first thought when I saw her? She was

beautiful. Her skin was white as snow, and her long blonde hair seemed to glow whenever the light hit it. Her eyes were sweet and always slightly closed, giving her a look that was incredibly kind.

At first, we only spoke when she translated for me. But suddenly, school didn't feel so terrible.

On a recent Thursday afternoon, I was drinking coffee on a park bench when a specific song started playing. It hit me like a memory I didn't ask for but desperately needed. It brought back her voice, her smile, and the way being near her made everything feel warm, even when my life wasn't. I let out a small, bitter laugh because I haven't felt that kind of warmth since graduation.

When we fall in love, we become shy. We convince ourselves that the other person is too perfect or unreachable, so we stay silent. We let the feelings fade and eventually ask ourselves: *Why didn't I at least try?* The music I was listening to captures her voice—soft like a saxophone, with a piano that creates a comforting silence. The bass sounds like the ticking hands of a clock; I didn't feel the time passing, but I felt its presence. It feels like drinking coffee in a park while a breeze moves through the trees during a sunset.

Since then, I haven't fallen in love again... I think. I don't know. But lately, I have a friend—the only real friend I've made in high school. And she has started making me feel something different. Something I haven't felt in a long time.

Wait... What if...? No, actually... Yes. You know what? I think I'm going to do it. I'm going to do it.

TO BE CONTINUED.

Foolishly in Love
Bruno Soto
Love Me - Elvis Presley

It was a random November night. I was scrolling through TikTok when I got a notification: a girl from my fifth period named Kailyn had followed me on Instagram. I ignored it and went to sleep. The next day, I followed her back. Later that afternoon, I shared the song “Foolish” by Ashanti to my Instagram notes, and she instantly messaged me, saying I had good taste in music.

We started talking every single day for two weeks—over the phone and in person. But just as I started catching feelings and daydreaming about her, she went silent. I didn't get a response for about a month. When I asked her best friend what happened, she told me that Kailyn was dating a guy in Homestead who mistreated her. On Christmas Day, I reached out to wish her a Merry Christmas, and we started catching up. She told me things about her relationship that weren't good, and I gave her my honest opinion, but she was clearly blinded.

We stopped talking for a few months.

I was pretty down during that time. To get over it, I tried talking to my ex, which didn't work out, and then to another girl named Kelly. While I was talking to Kelly, my friend Steven told me that Kailyn actually liked me and had broken up with her guy. I did some digging and found out the boy had gone to jail, though no one would say why. I debated talking to her again—I thought about every outcome, including what might happen if the guy got out—but honestly, I didn't care about him.

I cared about her.

We started talking again, and during spring break, we went on our first date: a picnic with her sister and her sister's boyfriend. In typical Miami fashion, it started to rain, so we headed back to her house to hang out. On that very first date, I ended up meeting her mom, stepdad, neighbor, and baby brother.

When it was time to go, she drove me home. Yes... *she* drove me, and I will gladly take the title of "passenger princess." Halfway through our night drive, she put on "Love Me" by Elvis Presley. Once I heard Elvis say, "Treat me like a fool," I fell in love with the song. I felt like a fool for waiting for her to end things with that guy, even while I was messing around with other girls just to pass the time. Then, Elvis sang, "I would beg and steal just to feel your heart beating close to mine." It reminded me of how we imitate a heartbeat while holding hands—I know it's corny, but it's something only we understand. I'd be on my knees begging if she ever tried to leave.

That song still plays in my head whenever I see her driving toward me. It takes me back to the end of that night. After she dropped me off, I walked around to her door and opened it. She got out of the car, I hugged her, and she kissed me. That was my first kiss.

Friends on My Block
Mia Forte
Friends - Laundry Day

Being alone has never been something that bothered me, yet I have almost always had friends around. Having a sister means I always have a companion, and together, we tend to build large, vibrant friend groups. This takes me back five years—before the pandemic—when my sister and I formed a friend group that I will never forget. Every minute I spent with them made me think of the song “Friends”, and that is how everything started.

The song had a massive impact on my life at the time. I remember the new season of the show “On My Block” had just come out, and there was a pivotal scene featuring the track. It showed a group of friends who had just split up, each starting to live their lives differently. Ever since I saw that scene, the song has stuck with me. I realized it wasn’t just music; it was a reflection of my reality.

My friends and I eventually went through exactly what the song describes: we split up, we became friends with different people, and we began passing each other in the school hallways with no words to say. I remember the song replaying in my head during those silent encounters. Hearing the lyrics “we got so caught up” made me realize just how deeply the track related to my situation.

I first started watching “On My Block” in sixth grade, but “Friends” didn’t appear on my screen until I was in eighth grade. Throughout the show, I felt a deep connection to the core group of four people who went through everything together. Every note, every word, and

every instrument used in that song felt like it was scoring my life. It helped me through tough times—through broken friendships and family fights—the lyrics always echoing in the back of my mind.

I've gone through countless friend groups in my life. Some were all girls; most were all boys. In every group, I felt something different... different boundaries, different rules. They all meant something special to me. I still can't quite figure out why, every time I pass an old friend, those lyrics rush back into my head. Even though I haven't purposefully listened to the song in three years, its impact remains. I now realize how much I missed it, and I've started listening to it again.

"Friends" by Laundry Day hits a certain spot in my brain. It's not just about walking past old friends; it's about rethinking the arguments my parents used to have, or the conflicts I've had with my best friend, my sister, and my mother. It seems like I turn to this song primarily when I am sad, and sometimes I wonder if the song has a darker meaning than I originally thought. But regardless, it has always helped me navigate the hard parts of life, just like the show did.

Sometimes I wonder: what if I had never watched that show? What if I had never liked that song? Would I have dealt with these changes the same way, or would things be different? At the end of the day, I'm glad the song found me. Even though a song isn't a person, it has been there for me through so much. I feel grateful every time I hear it from the beginning.

Maybe you will get the chance to listen to the song and watch the show; it really is great.

Not Even Trying
Angelina Gonzalez
Perfect - Ed Sheeran

It all started on a rainy afternoon after school. I was tired and bored. The sky was gray, the hallways were loud, and all I wanted to do was go home, change into comfy clothes, and curl up in bed. I was halfway to falling asleep when my phone buzzed. My friends were texting me, begging me to go to a baseball game with them because they wanted to see the players warming up on the field. I rolled my eyes a little—that wasn't really my thing—but sitting home alone sounded even worse. After thinking about it for a second, I finally texted back: “OKAY, FINE.”

A few minutes later, they showed up at my house, loud and excited as usual. We sat in my room doing our makeup while the rain slid down my window. It felt cozy, like the whole world was quiet except for us. We kept laughing and talking about who we might see at the game. My friend kept talking about the pitcher she had a crush on, while another tried to convince me to keep an open mind. For some reason, it felt like something special was going to happen, even though I didn't know what.

When the rain finally stopped, we grabbed our stuff and headed to the stadium. As soon as we sat down, my stomach growled, so I told my friends I was going to get food. As I walked toward the cafe, the speakers started playing “Perfect” by Ed Sheeran. The whole stadium suddenly felt soft and warm, despite the wind. The music made everything feel magical, like the scene in “Rapunzel” where the lanterns go up. Right as I stepped under the lights near the cafe, I

heard the line, “I found a love for me...” and I felt butterflies in my stomach for no reason at all.

I was so caught up in the music that I didn't notice where I was going. I turned a corner and bumped right into someone. My snacks almost flew out of my hands. When I looked up, everything froze. I had run into one of the baseball players—an actual player, in uniform. His jersey was sweaty from warming up, and tiny raindrops dripped from his hair. He looked surprised for a second, then he gave me one of those easy smiles that makes you forget how to breathe.

It was a moment when time slows down, like in a movie where the music keeps playing, and everything else fades away. Another line of the song floated through the air: “When you said you looked a mess, I whispered underneath my breath...” It felt too perfect, like the song knew what was happening. He apologized, even though it was totally my fault, and asked, “Are you okay?” His voice was gentle, and I felt my face get warm. Instead of freaking out, I managed to smile back. He just laughed softly and told me not to worry.

That tiny moment changed everything. We ended up talking a little more, then texting, and eventually hanging out. I never expected anything to come from a random collision at a baseball game, but we started dating. We have been together for four whole years now. It's crazy to think that one rainy day, one random decision, and one song playing at the perfect moment changed my life so much. Sometimes the best things happen when you aren't even trying.

From Years Ago, to Now
Crein Lopez
Voyager - Daft Punk

Looking back to the time when I was a "tiny" lad (well, not that tiny), I think about the moment I moved to this country. It was as if a switch was flipped; in just a few years, I became someone else—different from my old self, but in a positive way. Goodbye, Spain; welcome, USA. As I grew up and adapted to the language, I discovered many songs for my ever-growing music taste, but none impacted me quite like "Voyager" by Daft Punk. This isn't a song associated with one specific memory, but rather a collection of them that remind me of how I got here today. It is a journey of life. As I near graduation, this song serves as a powerful reminder of my transition from years ago to now.

As the track starts and the synth begins its first notes, I feel nostalgic immediately. The music pulls up major memories—both positive and negative—that shaped me. That nostalgic vibe takes me back to arriving in the USA for the first time; my uncle's friend picked us up, and we went to eat at a late-night pizzeria under moody streetlights.

Then the beat drops. The bass—one of my favorite instruments—starts playing. I become attached to its funky nature; the way the notes play gives me an indescribable feeling. While the synth accompanies the bass in the background, I am transported to another major moment: moving schools during my first year in the USA. I remember forming my first real social connections and meeting my ESOL teacher, who helped me so much through my English voyage. Then, the song reaches a pause. The funky guitar

becomes the focus while the drums play steadily in the background. This pause makes room for the memories that truly define me, holding them in a room full of other moments until the synth and bass are welcomed back into the beat.

Now, I am halfway through my journey. At this halfway point, the bass, drums, and guitar fade away, leaving the synth alone. It represents the realization that I still had so much to learn and experience, even after becoming accustomed to the language. One by one, the instruments make their grand return, bringing the song to its full potential and completing this long chapter of my life as I move toward a new one.

As every instrument finally fades into silence, I wonder about the people I've met and those I have yet to meet. I think about the lessons I've learned and the ones still waiting for me. Finally, I think of the defining memory for this chapter—not a past one, but a future one: my graduation. While graduation is a reminder of academic success, for me, it represents how far I've come in life.

This song is the soundtrack for my childhood up to this moment, and perhaps it will be the soundtrack for the rest of my life. It provides a nostalgic anchor while reminding me of my accomplishments. It serves as a reminder that no matter where I am in time or place, I must not stop. I must keep going further in this “voyager” of life.

More Than a Moment
Angel Marquez
More Than a Woman - Bee Gees

June 15, 2025: Father's Day. After our annual family lunch, my dad suggested we all watch a movie together that night. We all agreed, and I jokingly said, "Only if the movie is good." Let's just say the movie was more than good; I still think about it to this day. After a quick trip to the 7-Eleven for snacks, we piled onto the couch. The film was "Saturday Night Fever", starring John Travolta. He plays Tony Manero, a young man who spends his weekends dancing to escape the social tensions of his working-class neighborhood.

There is a song in the movie that immediately caught my attention: "More Than a Woman" by the Bee Gees. I had heard it before, but for some reason, this time it captivated me. I added it to my playlist, and now, every time it plays, I don't just think of the movie—I think of the time I spent with my family that day. It is a memory I hope never to forget.

The reason that moment is so significant is that we don't get to do things like that very often. I've learned to take full advantage of every second I have left at home. On June 9th, 2026, I ship off to Marine Corps boot camp at Parris Island, South Carolina. That is three months of being away from my family, and I know I am going to miss them immensely. While I am there, I know I'll be reflecting on these moments and realizing how precious our time together truly is.

You never know how much time you have left with the people you love. I know what it feels like to regret wasting

time; there are many family moments I've missed in the past that I wish I could get back. These days, I spend almost all my time training for boot camp. My family understands and supports my goals, but sometimes I wish they would just tell me to take a day off to be with them. Honestly, I would take it. I have a goal to reach, but I've learned that the choice should always be simple: family first.

I have a feeling I might even use that song at my future wedding. It holds so much emotional value for me now. I know that when that song plays, it represents the fact that my family has been there through everything I've been through. I'll have to miss next Father's Day because of boot camp, but I know that while I'm there, I'll be thinking of that movie night. I hope that in the future, we can make it a family tradition.

There is no one better to hang out with than your family. Almost everyone eventually regrets not spending enough time with someone they've lost. If you ever have a doubt about whether to go out with friends or stay in with your family...

...Choose your family.

The Juliette to My Romeo
Sebastian Polanco
Until I Found You - Stephen Sanchez

Three months ago, I decided to take a chance on an amazing girl. I had liked her before and tried to start something, but the circumstances back then just weren't right, and it didn't work out as expected. After some time had passed, I realized I wanted to try again. I gathered my courage to "shoot my shot." I was too nervous to go up to her in person, so I waited for the right moment. After exchanging some looks in the halls, I finally texted her. To my surprise, she replied almost instantly. After catching up, we talked about what we were both looking for and realized we both wanted to build a relationship together.

That was the beginning. We started spending time together at school every day, talking about our childhoods, our lives, and our goals for the future. After many long, deep conversations, I realized she was the right one for me. I told myself I wasn't going to give up until I could call her mine. Two months later, I decided to ask her to be my girlfriend. I was incredibly nervous. After brainstorming some ideas, I decided to make a poster and buy a bouquet of flowers. Fortunately, she said yes.

Once we were official, I told my parents I wanted them to meet the gorgeous girl I was talking about. I invited her over for dinner, and as I expected, my parents loved her. They had a great time talking with her over the meal. After dinner with my parents and little siblings, we decided to use the rest of our time to lie down on the couch and watch a movie.

After setting everything up with popcorn and snacks, we finally found a movie we both liked and hit play. We started to get comfortable, but keep in mind, we had never actually cuddled or lain down together before. In the back of my mind, I really wanted to, so I suggested we lie down to be more comfortable. To my surprise, she wanted to, too. After a little while, I held her face and pulled her closer to me. As I was caressing her cheek, she turned to look at me, and we made eye contact.

In that moment, everything else just stopped. I realized I had finally found what I had been looking for. I used to have the mindset that I would never fall in love again because of past failed relationships; I thought "real love" was just something people made up in their heads. But as I looked into her eyes, I realized how wrong I had been. I used to say I'd never fall in love until I found her.

Right then, the song "Until I Found You" started playing in my head. It was a beautiful, defining moment for me. Having her so close and staring into her beautiful eyes made me realize that, just like the song says, she was perfect. She was the "Juliette to my Romeo," and I knew right then that I would rather die than let her go.

Having my “Jordan” Moment

Shiloh Salazar

Sky Walker - Miguel

Freshman year of high school was a LOT of things. In my opinion, it's the most awkward year of all, and mine was a pinnacle example—though, funny enough, I can barely remember most of it. Crazy times, right?

I was at a party with three friends, Myra and Malori, and our friend Santi, who picked us all up after we got ready at my place. The four of us were the type of group to celebrate every day like it was a birthday, as corny as we knew that was. This mindset was crucial because, at the time, we were all riding mental health rollercoasters, dealing with depression and self-sabotage. Gotta love being a teenager.

After what felt like nauseous teleportation—fueled by a Spotify playlist and a car full of future Mariah Careys in training—we arrived at the party. We learned from some people outside that the only way in was to hop the fence. I was the first to scramble up Santi's shoulders. I felt "higher up than Canada", and I definitely made sure everyone knew it. The people who had already hopped over helped us down onto the other side. Santi, of course, was the last to climb up and the first to tragically fall down on the other side—easily one of the funniest parts of the night.

After we finished laughing at Santi, it was time to take a shot, make a friend, and just enjoy the moment. We walked towards the energized mob of people. Santi and Malori split off to talk to people who caught their eye, so Myra and I decided to do the same. With things like this, you can't wait too long to jump in.

As I moved between different groups—dancing, meeting new people, and having a blast—I felt like I was outside of my own body. I felt nonchalant, yet like the most confident version of myself, having a "Jordan moment" and completely wilding on my haters. It was a reference to the saying that good things come to those who wait.

That moment was pivotal. The music felt slowed down, and the gears in my mind shifted. I thought, "Things will definitely get better, slowly but surely. I am sure of it." Before I even realized it, I was making a move on someone I found alluring. "I play for keeps, and I don't lose, so pick a poison cause' I got what you need," I said, successfully bagging his attention.

Shortly after we began some playful, egotistical banter—I told him, "I'm outstanding, so I stand out"—the police arrived to dim the lights. Honestly, that just added to the fun. Running away to our group's emergency meetup spot felt like I was finally living out the "correct" teenage experience. This night shaped me because it allowed me to let loose at a time when that felt impossible. Every now and then, you have to step back and look around; sometimes things are worth the mess we call life.

To make a long story short: living life to the fullest isn't all that difficult after all.

Maybe you're just a freshman!

Seventeen
Su Hongtao
17 - MK

It was a sweltering summer in China. Every year, people our age have to take an exam that feels like a turning point. "This exam will determine which high school you go to, and to a certain extent, it will determine the course of your life," our teacher told us. I felt only confusion and helplessness. I didn't know what my future would hold, and I even had thoughts of running away.

The exam covered biology and geography—my two favorite subjects. I listened carefully to every word the teacher said, took excellent notes, and treated every assignment with the utmost seriousness. I was proud of what I had learned, and my grades reflected that. I even became the class representative.

However, during a mock exam, I suffered a crushing defeat. I was devastated. All my previous efforts seemed worthless. I asked myself: Why did I fail despite trying so hard? In an instant, my enthusiasm was extinguished by a torrential downpour of disappointment. My soul felt as if it had been ripped out, leaving behind an empty shell. Teachers criticized my decline and classmates mocked me, but I retreated into a shell of indifference.

While scrolling through videos online, I came across a clip of students living a vibrant, confident school life. They were radiant, like the sun. Honestly, I envied them. Compared to them, I felt like a pathetic mouse lying in the dust. I turned off my phone, feeling that kind of life was unattainable. But then a spark returned. Was I really going

to give up? That alluring life was only possible if I moved forward. I made a crucial decision: I would pass the exam with excellent grades.

I began my preparation from scratch—reviewing the first page of every textbook and practicing the first question of every handout. Because I had done these things before, the repetition was tedious, even maddening. It felt like a piece of porcelain being shattered and reshaped again and again, just to become more perfect. I knew this was necessary to reach the future I longed for.

When exam day finally arrived, the tension was thick. The teacher noted that the exam was extremely difficult; only 8% of students in the city would receive an "A." The competition felt like thousands of soldiers scrambling to cross a single plank bridge. I felt as if I were facing a powerful, oppressive dragon. When the bell rang, I forced myself to calm down. My palms were sweating, but as I read the first question, the fear dissipated. The knowledge I had reviewed through countless nights surfaced clearly in my mind.

As I found my rhythm, I felt like the person I was when I first loved these subjects. The passion that had been shattered by disappointment was being pieced back together. I told myself: I'm not here to prove anything to others, but to give myself an explanation.

When I wrote the final word, the air suddenly felt lighter. I walked out of the hall and watched my classmates wave goodbye, knowing we might never see each other again. At that moment, the song "Seventeen" popped into my head. *Ah, this is youth! Standing in the sunlight*, I realized I was no longer the self-doubting person I once was. A renewed version of me was stepping toward a brand-new future.

ACHO Just Feels Right!
Oscar Tejada
ACHO PR - Bad Bunny

There I was, playing Rocket League late at night after work, still in my uniform, just trying to chill and win a few games. My playlist was on shuffle when "ACHO PR" came on. I usually skip the beginning because I'm not a fan of that part, but I was in the middle of a match and couldn't change it. I just let it play. When Bad Bunny finally came in and said he achieved everything because he kept God close, it hit me, because I've always felt that way, too. Every bar in that song makes sense to me; it felt like he was describing things I've lived, even if our lives are worlds apart.

I've had a dream since I was eleven years old: a Mustang GT. Not just any car—that specific one. I used to watch videos and look at pictures of them all the time. I talked about it so much that my friends probably got tired of hearing it, but they still supported me and told me to keep working. I didn't know how I was going to get it, but the dream stayed with me every year.

By the time I was twelve, I was already trying to make money. I even did DoorDash without a license. I'd wait for my parents to leave, grab the keys, and take the car out. I was nervous because I knew I wasn't supposed to be driving, but the dream of the Mustang was louder than the fear. I'd finish the deliveries, bring the car back, and park it exactly how I found it. I acted normally when I walked inside, but I felt proud. I always thanked God, too, because I knew anything could have happened, but He kept me safe.

When I turned sixteen, I got my first real job. The hours were long and the days were tiring, but I learned how to save and stay focused. I still wanted more, so I started doing starlight headliner installs for cars—friends of friends, random customers, anyone. I worked on cars late into the night until my back ached and my hands were tired, but when those lights turned on, it felt good. It felt like I was moving closer to the Mustang. I never let my ego get the best of me; I stayed humble, trusting God and staying grateful for the people who pushed me.

Hearing "ACHO PR" during that Rocket League match made everything connect. The beat felt like the grind I've been living—sometimes slowly, sometimes stressful, sometimes calm. When Bad Bunny said he stayed the same person even after everything he achieved, it resonated with me. Despite everything I've learned and done, I still feel like that eleven-year-old kid watching Mustang videos and dreaming big.

The song reminds me of waking up early for work, those underage DoorDash "missions," and the first starlight job I ever got paid for. It's the soundtrack to my friends hyping me up every single day. At the end of the song, there's a feeling of gratitude toward God and the path it took to get somewhere. I relate to that deeply. Every risk, every long night, and every prayer helped me get here. I'm seventeen now, and looking back, nothing feels random.

When the song ended, I finished my game and just sat there. "ACHO PR" explains my grind better than I can explain it myself. Now that I've actually bought my own Mustang GT, the lyrics hit even harder. Every time I turn that car on, the dream I had as a kid is sitting right there under my hands. The song makes the struggle feel real—the

long hours, the saving, the praying, and the friends who listened to me talk about this car every single day.

When I drive and play "ACHO PR," it just feels right. It isn't about showing off; it's about the soundtrack of everything I went through. It reminds me to stay humble, keep God close, and keep working. If I reached this goal at seventeen, I know I can reach even more.

Something About Coral Park
David Castell
Something About You - Eyedress, Dent May

During my junior year, I failed biology. As a result, I had to attend summer school at what felt like one of the worst high schools in Southwest Miami. The building was ugly from the outside and even worse on the inside. Classes ran from 8:00 a.m. to 12:45 p.m., Monday through Thursday, for an entire month. You couldn't miss more than two days, or you'd fail. My classroom had a tall, middle-aged Dominican teacher and a strong smell of medical alcohol. There was even a dead cockroach on the floor next to my desk that stayed there the entire month—insides out and everything. I was too shy to say anything, so it just became my silent classmate.

Every morning, I walked toward that prison-looking entrance with one song stuck in my head: "Something About You." Now, that song is forever tied to the memory of those nasty stairs and the old classroom. Before class, we had to wait in the cafeteria until a loud security guard shouted our teacher's name, making sure everyone was wearing their uniform and summer school ID.

On the first day, the cafeteria was packed with kids who were all there for the same reason. Everywhere I looked, I saw familiar faces from Southwest Senior High. Even Mr. Cancio, our history teacher, was there teaching the same subject for summer school. My teacher, Mr. Blanco, was thankfully very chill. He gave us a full schedule for the week, allowed us to keep our phones, and held competitive exams on Thursdays. If I wanted to return to Southwest for my senior year, I had to pass. I spent hours writing out

vocabulary from the book while the song blasted through my earbuds on repeat.

I sat alone at lunch for the first half of the month until my friend, Victor, joined me for the second half to finish a history credit with Mr. Cancio. He had the same opinion of the school: awful. Wake up, same song, same walk, same stairs, same classroom, same cockroach, same worksheets. It wasn't fun, but it was consistent.

When the last day finally arrived, I walked out of Coral Park with "Something About You" playing in my ears one last time. Except this time, the song didn't feel like a nuisance. It felt like it had been carrying me through the experience without me even realizing it.

Now, whenever that song comes on, it immediately brings back the smell, the heat, and the boredom of those Miami mornings. But it also brings back the stress of knowing I had to pass and the realization that I didn't want to mess up again. That memory stays with me—not just because Coral Park was a rough place to be, but because it's where I finally decided I wanted to do better. Somehow, that song became tied to that feeling of growth. Every time the chorus hits, it reminds me that even in the ugliest places and on the most annoying days, you can still push yourself forward.

Sundays of Happiness
Ernesto Jay-Fuentes
He Llorado (Como un Niño) - Juan Magán

I was eight years old, living in Cuba with my mother and my grandparents. I remember how every Sunday the family would get together to spend quality time. Those days were my absolute favorites because, in addition to playing with my cousins, there was always delicious food, an incredible atmosphere, and a cool breeze that made everything feel calmer. It truly felt like those simple moments were what people called “happiness.”

Every Sunday morning, the house already smelled like something was cooking: sometimes chicken, sometimes a pot of beans, or that typical Cuban rice that my grandmother made better than anyone else. By noon, the harmony of my uncles' voices, the laughter of the children, and the clinking of plates filled me with a nostalgia that I still feel today. Back then, I was just a kid who wanted to play, but now I realize that stage of life—where I had no responsibilities, and my mother gave me everything—was the period of greatest peace I have ever experienced.

My grandfather really loved a Cuban music duo dedicated to urban pop and reggaeton. Around that time, they released a song called “He Llorado (Como un Niño)” ft. Juan Magán. It was a massive hit. Every time my grandfather played it, everyone in the house would gather in the living room to dance. The speakers weren't modern, but to us, the music sounded perfect. The line, “Today I realized that I wasted time...” seemed to soak into the very walls of our house. My cousins and I loved the song, and even

though I didn't fully understand the lyrics at that age, we would scream the chorus at full volume as if we were performing on a stage.

The music video was also beautiful. It told the story of a young woman about to marry a man she didn't love, only to remember the young man who truly owned her heart. I identified with the video because it showed scenes of boys playing soccer while girls watched, kids eating mangoes under a tree, and everyone simply running around having fun. It reminded me of my own afternoons with my cousins on the dusty street in front of my house.

I'll never forget the feeling of dancing to that rhythm at eight o'clock at night, the living room lights dimmed, the fan turning slowly, and the floor cool beneath my bare feet. That mix of music, warmth, and innocence felt like magic.

One day stands out even more vividly than the rest: November 14, 2015—my grandfather's birthday. Those celebrations were very important to him. He made sure everything was ready early: the chairs arranged, the table cleaned, and the drinks cooling in the fridge. The house felt fuller and louder than ever as friends joined the family. After singing “Happy Birthday” and eating the classic combination of cake and salad, my grandfather took his place as the DJ.

When “He Llorado (Como un Niño)” finally started playing, the energy was powerful. So many voices were mixing—kids, adults, and grandparents—all feet tapping and hands clapping in unison. It was a moment of pure connection. It made me realize that happiness wasn't something complicated; it was simply being there with the people I loved, with music filling the air and my heart completely at peace

When Can We Do This Again?
Alexander Licea
When Can I See You Again - Owl City

It was a chilly Friday night in November 2012. I was around four or five years old, and my cousins were about the same age. Our parents took all of us to the AMC theater to watch “Wreck-It Ralph”. At that age, something as simple as going to the movies felt monumental. Everything inside the theater looked enormous to us—the posters, the screens, even the snack counter. I just remember feeling pure happiness being there with my family.

We walked in holding small slushies and snacks. I probably didn’t fully understand the plot, but I was excited anyway. When the lights dimmed and the movie started, the colors and sounds grabbed my attention instantly. I didn’t know then that it would become a memory I’d revisit years later; I was just a little kid caught up in a funny story.

Throughout the entire hour and forty-one minutes, my cousins and I were completely focused. Every time something funny or surprising happened, we reacted together. I remember looking over at them and seeing them laugh or point at the screen. We didn’t have any real worries back then. The only thing that mattered was the movie and being together.

When the film ended, and the house lights came back on, we stood up slowly, still processing the magic. We walked out into the cold air, talking loudly and over each other about our favorite parts. Our conversations probably didn’t make much sense, but we didn’t care. We argued over our favorite characters—personally, mine was “Fix-It Felix”.

I remember feeling a pang of disappointment when it was time to get in the car because the night had been so fun and simple.

Now, whenever I hear the song “When Can I See You Again?” by Owl City—especially the lyric, “When can we do this again?”—it brings me right back to that night. Back then, it was just the upbeat song that played during the credits. But now that I’m older, the lyrics mean something different. They make me think about how fast time moves and how we can’t truly go back to being those little kids again.

The song sticks with me because it carries the feeling of having zero responsibilities. It brings me back to sitting in that theater, enjoying the simplest version of life. It makes me realize how small, ordinary moments can become your most important memories without you even noticing. At the time, it was just a normal Friday. Now, it’s a moment I deeply miss.

The memory isn’t important because of something dramatic. It’s important because it represents how easy life felt. No stress, no deadlines, just family and fun. When the chorus plays, I honestly wish we could do it again, just for a day. But even though we can’t go back, the memory is still perfectly clear. Whenever I hear that song, I think of 2012, the theater, the cold air, and my cousins laughing next to me. It reminds me of a time when life was special without us even realizing it.

The Long Haul to Cherokee
Jarek Marenco
Walking on a Dream - Empire of The Sun

It was 2019 when my family decided to go on a trip. Like any teenager at the time, I wasn't sure if I would actually like it. My mom and stepmom had decided on Georgia for our vacation, and we rented a big minivan for the long haul to Cherokee, Georgia. The ride was grueling. My brother and I had to put the seats down and use cushions to try to sleep, but it was still incredibly uncomfortable. Despite the fatigue, it was amazing to see the rolling mountains and the kind of nature you just don't get in Florida.

We finally arrived in Cherokee at night. My parents had rented a cabin high up in the mountains, but we didn't realize that reaching it in the dark would be such a mission. The roads were pitch black and barely drivable. My mom still talks about it because, for her, it was the scariest drive she'd ever experienced. But when we finally reached the cabin, it was stunning. Coming from small apartments, it looked like a mansion to me. It was spacious, with a massive living room and the biggest TV I had ever seen. It made me want to own a place exactly like it one day.

The backyard was just a vast, open expanse leading further into the mountain. If you walked a bit further up, there was a river so clear and cold that my family and I couldn't resist swimming in it. My brother and I explored every inch of the property; the nature was an experience I hadn't expected at all.

I'll never forget the next morning: the sunrise, the biting cold wind, and the thick, heavy fog. My mom woke us

up early to go down to the little town at the base of the mountain for breakfast. On the drive up the night before, everything had been hidden in darkness, but now I could see the beauty of the big grass valleys and the animal farms lining the roads. I was glued to the window, lost in the view. At that moment, I finally noticed the music in the background.

“We are always running for the thrill of it, thrill of it... always pushing up the hill, searching for the thrill of it.”

The song was “Walking on a Dream” by Empire of the Sun. It was perfect. It felt synchronized with the mood without any of us even realizing it. We arrived at the town, and it felt worlds away from Florida. Everyone was kind, and it seemed like a place where everybody knew their neighbor. After breakfast, we went on an old, classic train that fit the town’s aesthetic perfectly. Throughout the trip, I was just in awe of what was in front of me. Every experience felt like it was scored by that one song. It made me feel free and completely stress-free.

When the trip finally ended, and we began the long drive back to Florida, my family played the song one last time as a farewell to the mountains and the memories we had made. Now, anytime I hear that track, I think of Georgia and every little detail of that cabin. It left a lasting impact on my heart because it was a time when my family was truly, simply happy together.

A Voice from Heaven
Ivan Martinez
Locked Out of Heaven - Bruno Mars

It was February 17, 2017, three days before my ninth birthday. My family lived in Naples, so they had come down to visit me for my party. My uncle was my best friend at the time; he took me everywhere, from fishing and bowling to building Legos and playing with his dog. He was always there for me. Two days before my birthday, the family was having a barbecue. Everyone was outside, the music was playing, and we were all having a great time. My uncle was at the grill, and out of nowhere, he fell backward.

He had suffered a stroke while cooking. I was the only one outside at the moment, and everything seemed to move in slow motion. I was in the pool playing by myself when I suddenly had an urge to look at him. I saw it happen, and all the noise seemed to block out except for the song on the speakers. It was his favorite song, and right before he collapsed, he had been singing along to “Locked Out of Heaven” by Bruno Mars.

I instantly jumped out of the pool to help him, but as a young kid, I had no idea what to do. I ran into the living room screaming, “¡Papi, papi, tío se cayó!” My dad knew what had happened before he even reached him; my uncle was battling cancer and had suffered strokes before. My dad called 911, and the paramedics rushed him to the nearest hospital.

My uncle was eventually stabilized and regained consciousness, but the news was difficult. The doctors explained that his cancer was spreading and he needed

emergency surgery. I remember sitting in the hospital next to my mom, crying and asking if he would be okay. She told me to try to think of other things, but the scene at the grill—and that Bruno Mars song—kept replaying in my head like a loop.

Thankfully, my uncle made it through the surgery. Even though he still had to fight the cancer, I was so happy he survived. On the night of my birthday, I woke up from a nightmare and begged my mom to take me to the hospital. When we got there, he was awake, and I finally got to talk to him.

Years passed, and my uncle eventually finished chemotherapy and beat cancer. During those years, he took care of me as if I were his own son. My dad was often busy with work, so my uncle would pick me up from school early and take me out to eat. He knew exactly what I needed.

My uncle passed away in 2022 from another form of cancer. It was incredibly hard for me, but I will always remember the man he was and how much he cared for everyone. Still, at least once a day, I think of him when I hear “Locked Out of Heaven.” It brings back a mix of painful and beautiful memories. I’ll never get to tell him how much I thank him for being there for me, but he remains my greatest mentor. When I’m older, I hope to be just like him—caring for everyone else, even when he was the one who needed it most.

Relax Without Pretending
Brandon Perez
We Are Young - Fun

We met back in middle school, and though we must have passed each other in the halls a hundred times without realizing it, it wasn't some dramatic moment or instant spark. It was just a normal day when a friend introduced us. For whatever reason, something just clicked. We talked like we had known each other for years, and before long, she became the person I trusted most. It wasn't complicated; our friendship just made sense. Even then, I didn't understand how important that connection would eventually become.

All through middle school and into freshman year, we stayed best friends. She was the person I joked with between classes and the one I could rant to about life or school. Time with her always felt lighter, like I could relax without pretending to be someone else. We didn't call it anything at the time, but looking back, the foundation for everything we have now was already being laid.

By sophomore year, everything shifted. It didn't happen in a big, dramatic way; it was more like finally admitting something we both knew but never said. Being with her felt natural. She made me genuinely happy, and even when life got stressful, being around her felt like stepping out of the noise for a while. I didn't realize how rare that feeling was until later.

The problem was that around that time, I wasn't in a good place emotionally. I was dealing with things I didn't talk about, things that made me feel heavy and unsure of myself. Instead of opening up, I kept everything bottled up.

I convinced myself that she deserved someone who wasn't carrying so much baggage, someone who wasn't constantly overthinking. I told myself stepping away would protect her, when really, I was just afraid of not being "enough."

Eventually, we broke up. I remember that night clearer than I wanted to. I sat in my room with Fun's "We Are Young" playing on my phone. "Tonight, we are young..." echoed through my speakers, and it hit differently than ever before. The song felt like it was calling me out for the way I kept running from things that were good for me. It wasn't just a catchy anthem anymore; it was a reminder of what I had thrown away because I didn't think I deserved it.

In the months that followed, we slowly started talking again. It wasn't a big reunion at first; it was quiet and careful. We talked about normal things, pretending everything was fine. But eventually, the real conversations started happening. One afternoon on the phone, I finally told her everything. I told her I didn't leave because I didn't care—I left because I didn't think I was good enough for her. Saying it out loud was terrifying; it was like admitting a secret I had been hiding even from myself.

She wasn't angry. She listened. She told me she wanted to be with me even when things were messy and imperfect. That moment changed everything. It made me realize that love isn't about being flawless; it's about showing up honestly and choosing each other when things aren't easy.

Working things out took time, but it was real. We didn't pretend the breakup never happened; instead, we talked through it and came to understand each other better. Slowly, we found our way back—not to where we were before, but to something stronger. Something we chose on purpose.

Now, when "We Are Young" plays, it doesn't take me back to the night I felt lost. It reminds me of the moment I realized how much this girl mattered to me and how much I had been running from my own happiness. The song has become the soundtrack of that turning point—the moment I learned to stop pushing away the good things out of fear.

Breathe... You're Still Young

Denisse Rivero

We Are Young - Fun

It was a normal night—well, normal for my friends and me, which basically meant sitting inside my car, parked in some random spot, talking as if we were solving the world's problems when in reality, we were just venting about the same villain as always: a man. Each of us had our own tragedy, but mine came with an extra-large combo: heartbreak, nostalgia, and the urge to cry over anything, from a message that never came to a sad cat video on TikTok.

My friends were in full therapist mode, screaming at the universe and asking why men are the way they are. I laughed, but deep down, I had a knot in my stomach. It wasn't just the failed relationship that still hurt; it was also the homesickness for my family, who live far away. You know when you miss someone so much that even the air feels heavy? That was me—silent, depressed, and in full "Turkish soap opera" mode.

In that awkward moment where we were wrapping up our daily session, the speaker suddenly started playing: "Give me a second, I need to get my story straight..."

It felt like the song was talking directly to me. I thought, *yes, I do need a second... or seven... or a whole week to get my life together.* My friends looked at each other and smiled. Instantly, everything shifted. Their faces reflected the same mix of comedic drama I felt inside: romantic frustration, nostalgia, and the overwhelming urge to cry. The music kept going, and when I heard, "My friends are in the bathroom getting higher than the Empire State..."

I laughed to myself. None of us were in a bathroom, but we were just as lost, trying to lift our fallen spirits.

Without thinking twice, I yelled, “THIS IS MY SONG, PUT YOUR PHONES DOWN!”

My friends burst out laughing while I sang at the top of my lungs, challenging whatever sadness was still holding on inside me. Meanwhile, my mind betrayed me. I remembered a day with my ex, back when I still believed things could be fixed. Then another emotional punch hit me, remembering my grandmother making me soup and diagnosing me the way only she could. “You’re sick; tienes cara de huevo frito. I’m going to make you soup.” She was probably right. But anyway, there I was, choking on my emotions and screaming the lyrics inside a Honda Accord. When the chorus hit, we were so deep in character that one of us almost ran out of breath: “TONIGHT – WE ARE YOUNG. So, let’s set the world on fire...”

I thought: *Yeah, set the world on fire.* The only fire I really needed was the one that burns inside me when I finally get a plane ticket to Havana so my soul can realign. But I kept singing. You can be emotionally destroyed, but you should never be vocally defeated (even if you’re completely off-key).

The moment got even more dramatic during the hopeful part: “Carry me home tonight...” I felt like the song itself was hugging me, telling me that even if I was emotionally exhausted, I would still make it somewhere safe. Suddenly, we all started laughing at everything—at our heartbreaks, at the men who weren’t worth the pain, and at how dramatic we were, like we were filming a series called *Friends on the Brink of Collapse*.

In the middle of the music, the laughter, and the ache that never fully goes away, I understood something: even when life squeezes me, even when loving hurts, and even when nostalgia pulls at my chest, I still have nights like that. Nights where my friends save me without even noticing, where music forces my mood to rise, and where I can be sad—but not alone.

At the end, with the chorus playing for the fifth time and all of us screaming like we were on a world tour, I thought: *We're broken, but today... Today we are young.* Every time I hear "We Are Young" now, my heart goes back to that car filled with laughter, tears, and chocolate. That song is a permanent reminder that even in my most shattered moments, I am capable of getting back up. It's my emotional alarm telling me: "Breathe... you're still young, and there's so much left to live."

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Listen Now

Soaring and Unmuted

Southwest Miami Senior High – Class of 2026

- | | | | |
|---|---|---|------|
| 1 |  | Dust in the Wind
Kansas | 3:49 |
| 2 |  | Time Adventure
Mathematicpony | 1:29 |
| 3 |  | No One Noticed
The Marias | 5:10 |
| 4 |  | Thriller
Michael Jackson | 3:09 |

