Proposal

**You and Me, Forget 23**

An Up Lit Novel of approximately 80, 000 words

By Tara K. Ross

Represented by:

Don Pape

Pape Commons

don@papecommons.com



OVERVIEW

*Tagline:*

A heartfelt Up Lit story about one family losing life, while still gaining hope.

*Hook:*

In the vein of *The Secret Love Letters of Olivia Moretti*, two sisters travel to rural Portugal with an ancestry test and their father’s failing memories to help understand why this trip was their mother’s final request.

*Back Cover Copy:*

Gabriela and Cecilia have nothing in common, except the same three last names and parents who are dying too young.

Their mother is losing her battle with ovarian cancer. Their father’s early-onset Alzheimer’s will leave them as strangers and orphans before either of them has married or had children. The only thing holding the sisters together now is their grief and damaged chromosomes.

When their mother’s life comes to an end, Cecilia clings to their family’s faith and traditions, while Gabriela obsesses over uncovering the skeletons in the closet and decoding their genetic fate. Now both girls must travel to their family’s hilltop village of Amarante, Portugal, to lay their mother to rest.

Mourning turns to remembering as sound recordings from Gabriela’s phone offer vignettes to the dazzling and vibrant lives that existed before the sisters were born. A new set of questions surface when Gabriela receives their ancestry results discovering relatives they never knew existed. Through tragedy, truths, and quiet triumphs, the sisters must reconsider how they will live the lives they have left.

*Teaser Quote:*

*“There is a story that our parents have been trying to tell us these past few months. While Cecilia has listened between tasks of nurture and love, I have been listening with a need to understand. For some reason, they each have held close to these stories for their lifetime, refusing to forget them or leave this world without sharing them, and yet there is something missing. The beginning and the end. Each stop along the way brings us closer to the beginning, and something tells me once I receive those results, we will understand the end.”*

The manuscript is complete at **80,000 words** and is comprised of **45 chapters.**

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Tara has styled mannequins, acted in film and stage, and worked on a psychiatry floor during the SARS outbreak – all to pay for six years of University tuition and too many late-night tea runs. When she is not packing bento boxes for her family, or reading and writing, she uses those years of schooling as a Speech-Language Pathologist.

Tara’s passion is connecting amazing stories with people who might feel alone in their journey. She has volunteered with children who are deaf in Namibia, multiply-disabled people in Kenya, and has spent over ten years working with children and youth with mental health and developmental disabilities. If she can find spare time, you may catch her rock climbing the Ontario Escarpment, planning her next wine-tasting tour to the Douro Valley of Portugal, or narrating audiobooks.

*Passion Behind the Work*

Growing up in a multicultural community provided Tara with an early appreciation for diversity and the many faiths, foods, and fables of the world. She quickly learned that despite cultural and ancestral differences, we all share a love for story and a deep appreciation for family. As an adult, Tara has traveled broadly, including a recent trip to Northern Portugal. On this trip she listened to first hand stories of love and loss, documented flora and fauna, and ate way too many pastries along the way. When she returned, the idea for this story bloomed through debates with her own sister about ancestry testing and whether dipping into the past or predicting our genetic future are fruitful endeavors. Tara continued this discussion with her writing group and book club and found many friends, particularly those with aging parents, wondered these same questions. With resounding support, she began writing *You and Me, Forget 23* in search of her own clarity.

Tara’s first novel, *Fade to White* (IlluminateYA/LPC) won at the 2017 Word Awards and was a number one best-seller on Amazon. She now regularly teaches at conferences in Canada and the US on writing and wellness in the writing life. She is a GoodLit Alumni and sits on the board for The Eden Mills Writer's Festival, which showcases Canada's most esteemed authors.

Tara has a vibrant and engaged readership grown through her monthly newsletters, blog/author website, and participation within the #bookstagram community. She also connects regularly with NYTs best-selling authors and has a listenership of over 20,000 downloads on her author-interview podcast, The Hope Prose Podcast.

MARKETING AND PROMOTION

Through the generous assistance of personal mentors, workshop retreats, such as GoodLit, and over 500 hours of podcasts and marketing research, I have cultivated a growing body of knowledge and interest online and in my community.

Currently I am investing most heavily in developing my broader tribe in the Up Lit market by growing my email list, Instagram community and blog (which also acts as my author website), www.tarakross.com. I have been fortunate to receive guidance from globally recognized authors like Bret Lott and industry professionals like Becky Nesbitt. Their ongoing support has helped me develop a loyal launch team of over thirty members, and an author e-mail subscriber list of over 700 authentic readers. Traffic to my site continues to remain steady at over on hundred visitors per week.

I also receive consistent engagement with readers through my biweekly podcast, co-hosted with fellow author, Rebekah Black. The Hope Prose Podcast is an author-interview style show that celebrates hope-filled authors, the books they create and the readers they inspire. In our first two season, we achieved over 20,000 downloads, and are now receiving regular requests from publishers to highlight their authors on our show. Through these interviews, I have had the opportunity to build relationships with authors such as Lauren K. Denton, Melissa Ferguson, and Holly Goldberg Sloan. I’ve had the opportunity to be a guest on seven podcasts and have another three guest appearances booked for this coming year. I’m also actively seeking guests that will fit with the Women’s Fiction target audience, such as Jennifer Probst, Jenna Evans Welch, and Nita Prose, who could also act as endorsers for *You and Me, Forget 23.*

With respect to social media presence, I am an active member within the #bookstagram community and have over 6000 followers combined on Instagram, Twitter and Facebook, who I actively engage with each week. I also participate in discussion groups within four separate Facebook communities including the Her Novel Collective, and the Fiction Readers Summit. A number of key mentorship relationships and marketing opportunities have developed through these groups.

My marketing efforts as an author will continue to grow. I am blessed with a daytime job that allows me twenty hours of dedicated writing and promotion time each week. I am also on the board for the Eden Mills Writer’s Festival which offers me the opportunity to interview and learn from preeminent Canadian authors such as Lisa Moore, Nita Prose and Marissa Stapley. In the fall, I will continue to schedule time for revision and platform building. This coming year, I have already booked three speaking engagements at writer’s conferences and retreats. I am also planning to participate in email list building promotions through Bookfunnel and BookSweeps. My blogging efforts will continue to include book reviews, Well Writer blog posts and a variety of guest blog posts. I will continue to submit articles and guest blog posts for publications such as through Almost an Author.

*Marketing Plan:*

*Traditional Marketing Efforts:*

* Create early hype through selection of 5 beta-readers one year out.
* Establish launch team six months out to share cover and teasers (30-50 members)
* Participate in ARC giveaways on Goodreads or through other ARC review services
* Prepare book club questions prior to publication for website and back matter
* ARC copies will be forwarded to librarians, industry reviewers and endorsers (see below)
* Attend 3-4 in person and virtual writer’s conferences to promote the novel
* Create a book video trailer three months prior to release
* Schedule blog/#bookstagram tour to occur during month of launch
* Book 10+ talk show, IG live, library and podcast interviews during month of launch
* Speak at book clubs within the Greater Toronto Area or virtually during launch year
* Provide easy access to endorsements, reviews and buy links on website

*Creative Marketing Efforts:*

You and Me, Forget 23 starts in the wine and fruit country of Niagara, Canada and then allows readers a taste of the terraced farms and villages of Northern Portugal. I have been fortunate enough to visit both of these areas and plan to feature themes and experiences related to their unique cultures and offerings. To market and launch this story, various artists and horticultural experts have and will be contacted to commission work or support the promotion of this novel:

* Wine and fruit tasting may be a part of a launch party held at a family orchard
* An orchard inspired photography contest will occur leading up to the launch.
* Book giveaways will be planned that may feature a grand prize of ancestry testing.
* Themed book swag will also be created as part of a pre-order campaign. (i.e. family tree bookmark, a family journal prompt card, a thank you post-card)
* A short story or deleted chapter will also be used as a lead-magnet incentive or for a pre-order campaign

*Tara’s social media presence includes:*

* **Podcast –** The Hope Prose Podcast (all major podcast players), 20,000 plus downloads
* **Instagram** -- @tara.k.ross, 3800 followers;
* **Twitter** — @tara\_k\_ross, 1650 followers;
* **Facebook** – Tara Ross 700+ friends; member of ten online writing communities
* **Website** — www.tarakross.com;
* **Blog** — [*www.hopeprose.com*](http://www.hopeprose.com)

COMPARATIVE WORKS

***The Secret Love Letters of Olivia Moretti,*** Jennifer Probst (February 21, 2022, Berkley)

This moving novel from NYT’s Best-selling author, Jennifer Probst, takes three estranged sisters on a trip to the Almafi coast to uncover their mother’s secret romantic past. In a similar vein to *You and Me, Forget 23*, sisters are challenged to discover a side of their mother they never knew while she was alive. Both stories are told with interweaving narratives that pull on letters or voice recordings to offer clues to an unknown past. With the fresh sceneries of Niagara, Canada, and Northern Portugal and the addition of a father’s fleeting memories, *You and Me, Forget 23,* would greatly appeal to a similar target market.

***One Italian Summer,*** Rebecca Serle (March 1, 2022, Atria Books)

This next novel from NYTs Best-selling author, Rebecca Serle is a moving and unforgettable exploration of the powerful bond between mother and daughter while continuing with Serle’s heartbreaking, redemptive and authentic prose. *You and Me, Forget 23*, not only shares many plot points, but similar themes and settings. While *One Italian Summer*, focuses on one daughter and her mother’s love story through a magical realism experience, *You and Me,* offers alternating POVs interwoven with three love stories and the possible magic of a patron saint for matchmaking.

***The Star-Crossed Sisters of Tuscany*,** Lori Nelson Spielman, (November 17, 2020, Berkley Books)

Against the backdrop of Italian coastal villages International Bestseller, Nelson Spielman shares a story of budding romance and unearthing family secrets that could threaten a family far more than a centuries-old curse. Three second-born women travel across the ocean in this story to change their destinies in a similar style to Cecilia and Gabriela’s unearthing of secrets through genetic tests and finding answers through a small villages legendary Saint. A first person present-tense POV and similar witty voice is also shared between second sisters Gabriela and Emilia.

***Rules for Visiting,***Jessica Francis Kane (May 14, 2019, Penguin Press)

Named one of the best books of the year by *O Magazine, The Today Show*, and other prominent media sources, *Rules for Visiting* offers a universal message around the importance of genuine friendships, through careful observation and humorous moments. Both the theme of trees and gardening and the more intimate style of observing relationships are shared between Kane’s stunning novel and *You and Me, Forget 23.* Exploration of old versus new and simpler pleasures along the journey are also touched on in both novels.

***The Bloom Girls***, Amy Pine, (August 3, 2021, Forever/Grand Central)

Touted as *Gilmore Girls* meets *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, *The Bloom Girls* shares with *You and Me, Forget 23,* a multi-generational story about a mother and daughter(s) who discover that life happens when you least expect it. Pine’s novel takes a more humorous light-hearted approach to marriage and unexpected pregnancies while still appealing to a similar audience of 20-40 year old women.

TARGET MARKET

In his craft book, *The Emotional Craft of Fiction* Donald Maass shares that “hope is the current running through fiction that we love.” That we seek characters who are yearning for the good in the world and who strive for hearts more generous than our own. *You and Me, Forget 23* is written to connect with readers who are striving to make peace with the mistakes in their lives, even if it happened twenty-three years ago.

TARGET AUDIENCE: Women aged 17- 40 who have a sister and enjoy heartfelt and hopeful stories about difficult but important topics such as grief, forgiveness and reconciliation.

SECONDARY AUDIENCE: Readers who enjoy Jennifer Probst, Rebecca Serle, Kristin Hannah, and similar contemporary works who have experienced grief, miss travelling, or who have an interest in ancestry tests.

TERTIARY AUDIENCE: Readers who enjoy contemporary YA titles, such as *The Truth Project* by Dante Medema*, You have a Match*, my Emma Lord, or *Fade into Bright* by Jessica Koosed, who are looking to age up with strong and witty college and newly-wed protagonists.

***You and Me, Forget 23* was written to fit well within the Uplit or Women’s Fiction market, intentionally worded to be non-threatening and inclusive of all readers, especially targeted for libraries and intergenerational book clubs.**

ENDORSEMENTS

*Tara has personal connections with several authors, and media personalities who have supported her in the past and/or expressed interest already with supporting her with this current project:*

* ***Kristy Cambron*** – Best-selling author of *The Paris Dress Maker and the Lost Castle*, 7500+ followers on Instagram,
* Writing acquaintance and supporter of previous novel, Fade to White
* ***Lauren K. Denton –*** USA Today best-selling author of *The One Your With, Hurricane Season, and The Hideaway*
* Writing acquaintance and podcast guest
* ***Trish Doller –*** Award Winning author of both Young Adult and Women’s Fiction
* Writing acquaintance and literary agent contact
* ***Susie Finkbeiner –*** Award-winning Author of *The Nature of Small Birds and All Manner of Things*
* Previous endorser and friendly writing acquaintance
* ***Carly Fortune*** – NY Times best-selling author of *Every Summer After*
* Writing Acquaintance and future podcast guest
* ***Lisa Moore*** – Acclaimed author of *February, Alligator and This is How We Love*
* Writing Acquaintance through literary festival panel
* ***Jennifer Probst –*** NY Times best-selling author of *The Secret Love Letters of Olivia Moretti*
* Writing Acquaintance and potential podcast guest
* ***Katherine Reay*** – Best-selling author of *The London House and the Lost Castle*
* Friendly Writing Acquaintance and supporter of previous novel, Fade to White

SYNOPSIS

CECILIA and GABRIELA have little in common, except the same three Portuguese last names and bad genetics. Their mother, *Mae*, is losing her battle with cancer and their father, *Papi’s* early-onset Alzheimer’s will likely leave them as strangers to him within the next six months.

When they take Mae off life support, the girls grieve and pledge to fulfill her last requests: to reach her 40th birthday, to have her ashes buried under a pear tree, and for the girls to understand their family roots back in Portugal. As chosen executor of the will, Cecilia leans into her role as the responsible servant-hearted older sister. She focuses on perfecting the details of Mae’s passing, despite already having to take over the family orchard and plan her upcoming wedding. She is entirely unaware that Gabriela feels severed from the family.

Gabriela’s recent efforts to piece together their roots, through listening and recording their parent’s stories and purchasing ancestry tests as a gift for their family, have failed to lift feelings of abandonment. She all but forgets about the ancestry tests until her parent’s favorite nurse provides her with the final samples and warns Gabriela to visit a genetic counsellor given the hereditary nature of her parent’s diseases. She ignores this suggestion and seeks out solace from her equally fitness-obsessed boyfriend but finds his affections have wavered while she’s been spending time at the hospital.

That same night, despite Cecilia having the steadfast, if not sometimes distracted, love of her fiancé, she convinces Gabriela that she needs her support when opening their mother’s will. Gabriela reluctantly drives over, and together they discover their mother’s updated last requests - to be buried within her childhood town of Amarante, Portugal. Except through the scattered stories recorded on Gabriela’s phone, they have little knowledge of why this town or its celebrated festival would be so important to their mother. Gabriela’s adventurous spirit is thrilled with the idea of traveling and piecing together their parent’s mysterious past. Cecilia, who does not fly, has a ton on her plate, and a father who still needs her, flat-out refuses the idea.

Planning her mother’s hometown memorial, Gabriela is reminded of their damaged genetic makeup when she learns the only living female relative has also passed from cancer. This prompts her to revisit the details of their ancestry kit, where she learns they will get a detailed genetic risk factors report along with their ancestry results *and* in only three weeks. Propelled by the need to connect with whatever family they have left Gabriela sends off the genetic tests and enlists the help of Cecilia’s fiancé to book flights for her and Cecilia under the guise of a last-minute bachelorette party weekend.

The following week, Gabriela surprises Cecilia five hours before their flight to Amarante. Both Cecilia and her fiancé loudly dispute the trip. After much convincing and her fiancé’s continued disagreement, Cecilia reluctantly heads for the airport with Gabriela and Mae’s urn in hand. After almost missing their flight due to restrictions on bringing a metal urn, Mae’s recorded voice calms Cecilia during their descent. This recording is the first of a series of recorded stories Gabriela has hand-picked and plans to share during key stops on their trip. Cecilia appreciates the memories and efforts from Gabriela, but each side road-trip diverts them from their intended focus of burying Mae and calls into questions whether Cecilia has the same depth of love for her fiancé as her parents seemed to have with each other. Gabriela takes out her own loneliness through jabs at Cecilia’s fiancé, but also reveals her own failed relationship. The girls begin to understand how each of them sees the world and their place within it.

When they arrive in Amarante, their Airbnb flat’s door will not open. As an apology, the owner’s son, Quim, takes them to his friend’s Uncle’s restaurant and invites his equally attractive friend, Tomas, to join them. Cecilia is made all too aware of her fiancé’s physical and romantic weaknesses, and Gabriela quickly inserts her more available status into the mix. Cecilia remembers an unresolved argument she had with her fiancé before leaving. She races back to their flat for a scheduled call with him and her father but has missed it due to the time change. She decides to call anyway but with an intoxicated misinterpreted apology, their call ends with their relationship even more strained.

That same night, Gabriela receives their results and finds out she has the risk factors for both cancer and Alzheimer’s. Cecelia reiterates that she refuses to play God with the future and that they are here to focus on fulfilling Mae’s burial request. Later that day, Tomas offers to act as their interpreter when visiting the Amarante cemetery. There the girls discover that the place previously reserved for their mother in her family plot, under an ancient pear tree, was given away. Cecilia can no longer fathom leaving her mother in a community that appears to have disowned her, and she threatens to book the next flight back to Canada.

Having rebelled most of her adult life, like her Mae appears to have done also, Gabriela knows what it feels like to be mistakenly severed from a family. She refuses to give up on their mother’s final request and, with Tomas’ help, looks back to the ancestry results for any relatives who can explain what happened. It is then that Gabriela notices that Cecilia and her only share 25% of the same genes—Cecilia has an unknown father. Her parent’s recorded stories begin to make more sense. Cecilia also begins to piece together the stories and what they might mean in her next conversation with Papi and her fiancé.

Gabriela tracks down a second cousin that was friends with their mother, and she shares about the boy who won Mae’s heart first. Cecilia is not ready to hear about this man. The cousin tries to convince Cecilia that their mother is still very much loved by her village and volunteers to organize the internment the next day.

When they arrive back in town, Cecilia starts packing, while Gabriela seeks out Tomas for support and romance blossoms. He has managed to find Cecilia’s father, who strangely turns out to be Tomas’ uncle, the restaurant owner. Quim has known of this familial connection since before the girl’s arrived and had hoped to swoon Cecilia into helping their struggling restaurant and hotel business.

Gabriela races to find her sister and locates her praying within the church of the patron saint St. Goncolas. Cecilia’s biological father joins her and apologizes, sharing that he had no clue how to reach her. She accepts his apology but feels rejected because he never wanted her in the first place. Gabriela finally agrees that they should leave with Mae’s remains on a flight the next afternoon.

The sisters visit Mae’s family flower shop before planning to leave, and a note on the closed shop reminds them of the scheduled service their cousin planned for their mother. They feel obliged to attend, despite zero intentions of leaving their mother behind, but when Tomas and their cousin lead them down to their father’s family cottage surrounded by an ancient pear orchard and a small fenced-in graveyard, they finally realize where their mother had always intended to be buried. Cecilia’s biological father steps forward and shares that he has been maintaining and preparing this plot for both their parents ever since they left Amarante twenty-three years ago, as his way of seeking forgiveness.

After burying Mae, surrounded by two villages worth of guests, the sisters finally realize how family can be defined in different ways, and how we choose to show our love for them can also come in different forms. They return to Ontario, and Cecilia’s biological father joins them for Cecilia’s wedding, along with Tomas, as Gabriela’s plus one. Papi also has a moment of clarity and forgiveness when reunited with his best friend from so long ago.

CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS

CECILIA MARCIA LOUREIRO AVILA PERES (CEE): is a classic Martha, with her dutiful need to show love through acts of service. She is a perfectionist who thrives on order and predictability, is distracted by duty, and who is crippled with indecision, including every detail surrounding marrying her fiancé, Fernando. She is also loyal and empathetic, but has trouble letting others in and admitting weakness. As the more responsible older sister, Cecilia followed in her father’s footsteps to take over the family orchard and with that duty has also come love for the natural world. Described by her Papi as his little pear, she is petite, curvy—from her hips to her shoulder length hair, and has an eclectic style that includes full skirts and silk ribbon hair bands from her mother.

GABRIELA MARIA LOUREIRO AVILA PERES (GABBY): In contrast to her sister, Gabby holds the potential for a Mary-like devotion to those she loves, but her promiscuous past has made her feel the black sheep of her conservative family. She is perceptive, quietly thoughtful, and passionate. After her first year away at university, she has become the life of the party, a self-professed flirt and a fitness fanatic. Her addictive personality has found a healthy outlet through elite training for triathlons and a not-so healthy appetite for bad boys, including her latest mistake, a trainer at her work named Manny. She shows off her fit body in a uniform of athletic wear, a trademark side braid and sun-kissed skin from her outdoor training. Like her sister, she is petite with almond-brown eyes.

FELIX LUIS AVILA PERES: As Cecilia and Gabriela’s dying father, we see both glimpses of his past strengths and his present losses. Consisted across time is his infectious wisdom rooted in his love for trees, and his orchard. He is hard-working, resilient and protective of his family, but also someone who can forgive and move forward. We meet Felix in the late stages of Early-onset Alzheimer’s, where at the age of 43 he struggles to keep the past and present clearly defined. His previously strong build has atrophied to a shell of his former self, but his face still only shows its age from the years working in the sun and fine lines of joy.

INÊS LÚCIA FÉ LOUREIRO: Cecilia and Gabriela’s mother is only met through recorded memories and during her last moments of life, yet, aspects of her effervescent personality and striking features carry forward through her girls. Cecilia highlights her mother’s strong catholic faith, sense of style, and love for fragrant flowers, while Gabriela showcases their mother’s previously boundless energy, flirtatious spirit and wanderlust.

FERNANDO MELO ALVAREZ (FERN): A man of traditions and family, Fernando carries many of Felix’s qualities. He is strong, but gentle-hearted and a dedicated partner, both within the orchard and at home. Dishonesty is his pet peeves and can bring out his protectiveness over the ones he loves most dearly. When at rest, he fully embraces his passions for football, good food, and family, and none of Cecilia organizational efforts. As new immigrants to Canada, Fernando’s family assisted Felix and Ines with establishing their farm, leaving Fernando and Cecilia to not only grow up together but to feel connected through the roots of their orchards.

JOAQUIM JOSÉ AMARAL CARDOSA (QUIM): Described as God’s gift to Portuguese women, Quim exudes confidence, charisma and hospitality, as the girl’s AirBnB host and the hopeful future owner of the restaurant where he works. He is willing to take risks, bend the rules and sacrifice others to reach his goals, but also has a fierce love and loyalty for his family, friends and community. He has a soccer-player build, dark features and a smile to kill.

TOMAS MARTIM ALMEIDA D’SOUZA: Introduced as the respectful, intelligent and more level-headed friend of Quim, Tomas also draws the attention of the sisters, but more through his quiet-confidence, tentative smile and servant-hearted personality. He pays for his university studies in history through giving tours of Amarante, and tries to keep up with Quim’s physique through training for marathons. His mother and father live in the neighboring town and his Uncle Tiago is the current owner of the restaurant where Quim works.

WRITING SAMPLE

ONE

Cecilia

*“No tree, it is said, can grow to heaven unless its roots reach down to hell.” - Carl Jung*

Trees are the perfect metaphor for all life situations. *Papi* taught me this. He’s passed down this wisdom of the earth to explain every aspect of my life. From scraped knees to choosing my life partner. His proverbs would have been irritating if not for the infectious way he imparted them with one hand grasping for soil and the other reaching for the sky.

He and Mom, *Mae* as we call her, want this last proverb to hold fast in our hearts before they pass. And because I love my parents with the force of roots through clay soil, I stand within the orchard they planted twenty-three years ago when they arrived from Portugal to this rural Ontario town, ready to make that happen.

My parents are dying. Not in a philosophical, “someday we all shall perish” sort of way. No, they will die soon. Half of their life left unlived. *Mae* will be gone first. Today. Tonight. Perhaps a little later, but not much.

As with her life, she chose to create an organized, but beautifully poetic, departure from this world. She had three requests: to reach her 40th birthday, which is today, to have her ashes buried under a pear tree, and for me and Gabriela to understand our roots before we reach for heaven ourselves.

*Papi* is not always aware he is dying. Yet he repeats *Mae*’s last request as though it were scripture itself.

His words seem to arrive through the rush of wind coming up from the lake. *“Start with the pear trees. The right ones will learn to sing, despite their severed roots.”* He can’t remember my name some days, but I don’t think he will ever forget about our effervescent *Mae*, Inês Lucia Loureiro. Or his tree-lore, as he likes to call it.

Moving to the rows of three-year old saplings, I brush my fingertips against the tips of each. I toss a whisper of my voice to the wind, “Help me find the right ones. Ones with a melody left to sing.” Closing my eyes, I wait for a ballad to pulse from their restricted root-balls, through their pencil-thin trunks, and into my expectant touch.

My father has a particular fondness for the wisdom of roots. With that in mind, he even designed this orchard with its own experimental tree nursery. Growing up, roots were his first line of defense against any tear-stained arguments between my sister Gabriela and myself. While *Mae* would offer a steady trunk for floral-scented embraces, *Papi* would use these opportunities to impart five generations of vine and tree metaphors with flailing passion.

On more than a few occasions, he would remind me I was a root cap, a strong thimble at the apex of each root, built to protect and ease the way for my sister. His voice rings again within my ears. *With her thin-walled exterior and spirited energy, she’ll never grow strong without your support…* “And without a strong grounding,” I continue *Papi*’s words aloud to the pitiable sapling before me. “A tree will never produce fruit.”

I’ve done this throughout my life. I have been that cap, protecting my family, pushing my sister forward, even now, with the spring sludge slowing my efforts to find the right saplings from within these rows. If Gabriela doesn’t appreciate the need for this task, I alone will find the perfect symbol of our family’s growth—a symbol that will mark our growth in this country. And their deaths.

I sidestep through a gap in the row of spindly branches. None of these saplings will work. The trees in the next row are no better. They are too heavily pruned, and their trunk bases are far too exposed. I should have been here to supervise. It’s appropriate to cut off the downward angled branches, to remove any weak shoots, but these gangly trunks with ladder like branches will not stand a chance in an Ontario winter. And it needs to survive. They all need to, but the two I choose? They *must* survive.

For all of my life, I have adored two people on this earth more intensely than anyone else. My foundation and my encourager. Mr. and Mrs. Louriero Avila Peres. They are the two branches I need to be fruitful, but by this time next spring, they will be in their eternal Eden, and I don’t know how I will thrive without them.

Of course Fernando, my soon-to-be grafted in love, will support me in all the ways he can. And Gabriela? I want us to be like we were, but she has all but pruned herself off our family tree.

Near the end of the row, there is one pear tree with a thicker base, with more budding than the others. I pluck off one of three bunched buds and roll it between my fingers. A delicate scent so reminiscent of *Mae* travels to my nose. This one might do, but I don’t want *might do*. I want the perfection *Mae* and *Papi* deserve.

From across the rows the rhythmic slushing of boots in gravel disrupts a collection of sparrows from the budding twigs. I’ll ask the new girl. She should know if we have additional stock somewhere else. I brush off the dry soil from my skirt and make a mental note to school the new crop of seasonal staff on proper watering. But for now, I press my lips into a smile because I need her help.

I used to know where everything in this orchard was at all times, but it’s been over a year since I could claim that talent. I could blame wedding planning, but that wouldn’t be true. My mind and heart have taken up permanent residence on the third floor of West Lincoln’s Memorial Hospital.

The crunches approach more quickly now, and I weave toward their schlumps. It doesn’t take much to see the girl’s black rubber boots through the frail branches, but then just beyond her a second set of shoes appear—spotless neon pink runners.

So, my sister finally decides to show up. I glance down at my watch. Half an hour late. Sounds about right for her. In all the wisdom *Papi* has imparted, he failed to mention that the root cap wears down. And at this point, I don’t know if I can renew myself fast enough to handle whatever chaotic spurt of effort Gabriela plans to throw my way.

Her pink shoes race ahead of the rubber boots and sprint in my direction. She often runs, but only when she intentionally schedules it into her Fitbit. Somehow this run is different. Her running is jilted, as though she is in search of something. Or someone.

I walk, because that is what I do in all circumstances. Quickly and with purpose until I see more of her than the branches. I press down my skirt and prepare my smile, but then stop. Her face says more than any words could. Not tear-stained, but numb.

My breath clogs in my throat. My knees weaken beneath me. I grasped for a branch to keep me from falling, but they are too thin, too frail.

I’m not ready.

TWO

Gabriela

The only thing redeemable about this place is the view. Like really, it’s pretty and all, but at a time like this closer to civilization would have helped. We crest the largest of the hills on our property and the dark blue edge of Lake Ontario slices a line across the morning horizon. Okay, I can see why National Traveler chose our land for their orchard feature, but I don’t have time to go gaga over our endless rows of terraced fruit trees. If not for these hills, I could have found my lost-in-a-cloud sister by now.

My parents must have chosen this place because they knew they’d birth me—a child who ran before she walked. And I’d be running now if not for this chick who is honestly slower than maple syrup straight out of the freezer.

“I left her with the five-year old trees about half an hour ago.” The girl’s voice comes out winded from our traverse through *Papi*’s more established pear families.

“Plenty of time for the average person,” I mutter under my breath. Cecilia has never made a quick decision in her life, but right now is not the time to be tree shopping in the distant fields of *Papi*’s Oz. “Where are the mini pears in pots?” Given the uber-cute, but completely impractical ensemble she’s sporting while working with manure, my bet is she’s a high school summer hire. *Was I this fashionable before University?*

“You mean the ornamental saplings?” She says with the cutest false confidence. She stretches her arm out in the direction of a lattice work collection of sticks in pots. Oh no. Cecelia is going to spaz on whoever pruned these Charlie Brown specimens. I catch sight of her yellow blouse in the rows ahead, say thanks to the summer-hire, and take off yelling Cee’s name.

Gravel flicks against my shins, while Cecilia sashays her way toward me in return. Typical. I open my mouth to yell more than her name, but our eyes meet through the budding branches.

*She looks so much like Mae.*

For a moment, we both freeze, lost in who knows how many thoughts. But the second she bites her lower lip, I know the one most pressing on her, and it travels the space between us and overtakes every muscle of my face.

It’s the same question that has weighed on us for the past two seasons of our lives.

When?

The hemline of her trademark full-length skirt spins in one direction and then back. Her steps join in the uncertainty of the material, until she is left grasping for twigs— none of which do any good. She collapses within a pool of denim material, shakes her head more to herself than to me, before rising with surprising speed.

Like a game of cat and mouse, she disappears back down the row. Why does she do this every time?

“Cee, come on.” I round the corner of another row of baby trees and find her kneeling next to a pot, fingers smoothing a barely visible leaf as though it were our mom’s hand. But real *Mae* needs us right now. Not some stupid tree *Papi* insists she would want. For all we know, she might have wanted this tree twenty years ago. Not today. Not the day she is letting go of this world.

I crouch down and squeeze between the trees until the heat of my breath pushes through the cool May air and connects with Cecilia’s. Until she has no other choice but to attend to the present rather than get lost in requests. “There’s still time.”

Her eyebrows raise. “But I thought—”

“Dr. Yates got called for emergency surgery in an hour. If we want her and Nurse Debbie to be the ones that…” I can’t finish, but Cecilia knows.

As though painting, she slides her fingertip from leaf to twig and down the connected branch leading to the base. “I can make this one bloom.” She lifts the pot a foot off the ground with a strength that doesn’t match her small build.

“You can.” I grab the opposite side of the base and we shuffle down the row together to an awaiting wagon.

She pulls the cart as though a baby nestles within it, avoiding each rock, slowing for each dip in the path. This pace is ridiculous. I give her some steam in the rear of the wagon, only to get the exact look I’ve missed so much from *Mae*. The *Gabriela-Maria-could-you-please-stop* look. It stings.

I try a different tactic. “Can you *please* move a little faster?”

She tilts her head now, *Mae*’s look still in place.

I shove my hands into the kangaroo pouch of my hoody. “Fine. I’ll meet you there.” I jog past her to my own car and thank the garden fashionista employee for her help before switching into gear.

While I, for once, stick to the gravel paths as *Papi* always instructed us to do, Cee careens through the fields ahead of me. What gives? First she’s unreachable in the land of trees, then she meanders through the fields with her newborn sapling, and now she’s racing like someone lit a fire under her truck’s bumper.

She could be in a heated argument with herself, the way she’s now yelling into the air as she whizzes past my window, avoiding all eye contact. A posh couple on a tandem bike almost gets pancaked as she skids out of the orchard driveway.

It takes me two country roads to catch up with her and then, out of nowhere, she veers onto the gravel shoulder and puts on her right turning signal.

“Really?” I yell in the direction of her truck, hopefully loud enough to travel through the closed glass.

Her window rolls down in unison with mine. She points toward the edge of our property. “Fernando. I’ll meet you there.”

My lips press together into what I hope comes across as a pissed off smile. She’s been aware for the past two weeks that our mother will be taken off life-support today and she decides now to take a detour to pick up the fiancé? I have no words for her. This was not discussed. He’s not even family yet.

It’s not like I have time to drive across town to the gym to pick up Manny. He likely wouldn’t drop his clients with zero notice anyways. But still. If I’d had notice of her last minute plus one addition, I’d add a shoulder to sob to my guest list as well. I take-off through the stop-sign nearly clipping the end of a wine-tasting bike-tour.

For once, I wish she could recognize the orchard for the damn fruit tree. But this is my sister—perpetually spinning from the details of life, never settling long enough to enjoy or even grieve in the moment. Public service announcement sis: The priority is *Mae*. Our mom doesn’t care about the details, or our current significant others. All she wants is *Papi*, and her *pera* and *videira,* her perfect pear and her gangly grape-vine to be there.

She didn’t request some clunky sap-filled fiancé that’s been sucking up to them our whole lives, while not-so subtly stabbing thorns into my inadequacies and recent chain of less than perfect partners. She wants *family* treasuring her presence, listening to her passed-along words, holding her hand as she travels from this life’s adventure to the next.

Today of all days, I don’t need Fernando pointing out how lack-lustre I am compared to my legacy-fulfilling wonder of a sister. *Please not today.*

Now I get to stand in the room alone, attempting to comfort our confused father, while my sister presents her perfect tree, her farm-ready fiancé, and a promise of matrimonial created offspring.

And they wonder why I’ve stayed away for so long.

THREE

Gabriela

“Yes! A partridge. No… A pear tree. Oh, my brain! How I keep forgetting the words.” *Papi* flops forward with zero grace to reach his slippers, almost smacking his head on the rolling meal tray. “She said if I grow it. The pear tree. If I make it grow, she’ll travel. Anywhere … with me. I have one. The perfect one. I get it.” With slippers on the wrong feet and his glasses now crooked, he pushes his hands down on the armrests of his mint green hospital chair.

“No, it’s okay *Papi*. We don’t need to go anywhere.” I center myself in front of him and place both of my hands on his shoulders. “Cecilia is bringing the pear tree to us.”

His head begins to shake, slow at first but then faster. “But, I need to go. My fields.” His voice grows. “I need to go back.”

I trip away just as he shoves the rolling cart into the radiator under his window. His coffee splashes over the rim and onto his jam-coated toast.

I search for the nurse call button to get Debbie, but then notice the stack of photos I brought on the window ledge. “Wait *Papi*. Look! Your field is here.” I lunge for the pile and arrive back in front of him before he has coordinated himself to rise fully from his chair. I shuffle through the photos until I find the one I know will ease his mind. “See? Here are your pear trees, and look at this beautiful woman.”

He takes hold of the faded photo and taps the image of *Mae.* In the picture, she is about my age, leaning against the trunk of a pear tree, blossoms scattered around her bare feet. She holds a wicker basket of flowers under her one arm and presses down the same denim skirt that Cecilia wears today. *Papi’s* thick eyebrows knot together. Then, as if his mind offers an exhale, he sinks back in his chair and I sigh with him, perching myself on the window ledge next to him. It’sa picture he has seen countless times before, but because of the tangles and plaques ransacking his brain, he looks at it as if a fresh and wondrous discovery each time.

I smile along with him now. This photo of *Mae* is also one of my favorite discoveries. I hadn’t intended to find it, but about a year ago, after a bender of a weekend and the disappearance of my dorm keys at the university pub, I ransacked *Papi*’s roll top desk in search of Cecelia’s old house keys. And when I found this photo of *Mae,* buried deep within a drawer of receipts and paper clips,it spoke to me. Almost like *Mae* had come alive from within the photo.

*Gabriela, we’ve all messed up. Don’t stay away.*

It made me homesick for *Mae Mae*, and *Papi,* with all his proverbial rants. And even Cee. It feels like a decade since I found it in that forgotten mess. But this past year deserves a decade to process everything that has happened. I blink over and over pressing my lips together hard. This day has come way too fast.

*Papi* leans sideways to look into the hospital hallway, and then signals for me to come closer. “You know I snuck in seeds? Grew my own babies. From that pear tree,” he whispers, pointing to the tree behind *Mae*. “My beauty. She said if I grew her one, she’d leave this place behind. She’d travel anywhere with me. With *me*. She did, you know.”

He could be a sailor, with the tanned and weathered quality of his skin. The lines are so familiar to me. Sparrows’ feet edging his dark eyes, and quotation marks accenting his wide smile. He has few other wrinkles. Only those used to savor the joys of this world. In my opinion, those lines are the best part of my dad.

“Yes, *Papi*.” I force a smile, but no sparrows’ feet touch down on my eyes. “And, Cecilia will bring one of your baby trees. Today. I promise.”

“Really?” His face lights up for a moment, but then just as quickly blots away. His gaze swings to the edge of Lake Ontario outside his window and then back to his hospital room. He throws his arm out toward the open space, his voice growing with his movements. “Nah. Not in this jail. It needs family. I need to get back. I need to take it back.”

“We can maybe go to the fields next week. I can ask Nurse Debbie, but *Papi*…” He doesn’t remember what we need to do today. “…when Cecilia gets here—” My eyes blur and I crane my neck toward the door as a click clack of shoes sounds from down the hallway. *Please be Cee. Please be Cee.*

An elderly woman passes by *Papi*’s room, holding a pie plate covered with tin foil. She offers a smile, which *Papi* returns with the raising of his own arm. He seems to freeze in this greeting even after she leaves. His eyes soften, and then his hand drops to clasp hold of the other side of the photo in his lap. He lowers his head into what appears like a prayer, but I’ve seen this happen so many times now, and *Papi*’s prayers are rarely silent.

He’s travelled with this woman. Not down the hallway, but back in time, across an ocean. And when he travels, he fights through the tangled gray matter to make sense of something—a puzzle that seems to come together a little more each time he sees this photo.

I reach for my phone from my backpack and swipe over to the voice recorder.

*Mae* refused to talk about anything or anyone from back home. And now it’s too late. But I still have questions, like why they left their country as teens? And how they could leave all their family behind when they must have known Cecilia was on her way?

But *Papi?* If Alzheimer’s has any positive, it’s finally allowing him to let down his protective and loyal guard. His familiar intimate tone warms the institutional space, his words flowing now, as though pulling from pre-recorded cue cards. “You know how I love your *peras bêbedas*? You could take the finest *rocha* pears and poach them to perfection. Oh, and my *Papi*’s port.” He frowns but then closes his eyes for a moment and swirls his tongue around the inside of his mouth. “If the roots had been better for travel. I should’ve taken time to search for the strongest grape vine before we left. Maybe the *albariño* would have been better? Ah, but the soil. It never would’ve been the same. These limestone rocks, they are nothing like back home.”

He pauses to stare out his window with an intensity deserving of the ocean rather than a Great Lake. “You were right, *minha querida*. Stick with trees, you said. And how much sickness those vines caused me back home. Yes, Inês, better to keep that poison far from us.” He reaches for my hand now and through still crooked glasses, tilts his head and raises one of his eyebrows. A man teasing his beloved. “My sweet Inês, you always knew best.”

I should correct him. But when I’m *Mae*, he is no longer sick and all of his best parts return. He looks at me now with the same pride he used to give *Mae* after finishing one of her many perfect meals. Content and complete.

His vision must be leaving him as quickly as his memories though. I catch my reflection in the lens of his glasses. I guess I can see *Mae*’s eyes. All three of the Loureiro Avila Peres women share a petite frame and thick dark hair, but I have *Mae*’s almond eyes and nose. Otherwise Cecelia took all of *Mae*’s beauty, from their peach-shaped faces, to their cherry-shaded lips.

I laugh to myself. This is what happens when you grow up on an orchard. Everything about you becomes edible. No wonder I left as soon as I finished high school. Since living on campus, not a single person has commented on my perfectly grape-like skull, or my gangly, vine-like build.

*Papi* mumbles on, repeating the same three lines of this story—pears, port, and travel. I let him continue within his peaceful reverie until I notice my battery warning message light up the screen. It’s almost noon. *Where are they?*

I’ll ask one question, then call Cee. We need to get *Papi* down the hall, whether she’s here or not. “Felix?” I try using *Mae’s* melodic lower timbre, almost as though I’m singing him a *bosa nova* through my words. “Why did we have to leave so quickly? Without finding your *Papi*’s strongest vine?”

He clears his throat in a way that could be laughter. “You know why … you know we had to leave so quickly. Don’t try to trick me. Right under that pear tree.” He taps at the trees in the background. “Don’t…” he shakes his head. “From the first day you told me, I knew …I knew what to do. I just needed you to trust me. To be your new life.”

The door to his room creaks. Cee stands in the frame with Fern’s hand massaging her shoulder.

I put my pointer finger up to my closed lips. *Please don’t ruin this.* “Go on *amore*, how was I your new life?”

“It was like yesterday Inês. You were already grr….” He taps his fingers on the arm of his chair over and over. Ah…g---lowing. You were always glowing. In the evenings when we met. You glowed just like valley at sunset.”

“*Papi*, Inês is down the hallway.” Cecelia’s voice comes out like a kindergarten teacher. “You are talking to your daughter, Gabriela.”

He shakes his head for a moment and then glances up into my eyes. Any fairytale moments are replaced by circular taps, as if sifting through soil for the disappearing memories from his present. “Ah of course, my little grape vine. Your *Mae* could take the finest *pêra bêbedas* and poach them to perfection.”

Cecilia approaches his arm chair. “I have one of your rocha trees *Papi*. I have it in *Mae’s* bedroom. Do you want to come over to see her?” She puts one hand under his elbow and the other interlaced with his hands. His fingers are so much more weathered than his forty-three years.

Forty-three years. He doesn’t need this kind of help to get up. Not yet, at least. He would still be out there pruning and picking alongside his countrymen if he could find his way home each day. If he could coordinate his muscles on command. But Cecilia’s movements are not for his physical weakness. It is for her to cross off another daughterly duty that I was too selfish to predict. He is going to see her prized pear tree, whether it’s the last thing *Mae* experiences.

*Papi* accepts her guidance and pats Fernando on his shoulder as he passes. “Are you still following me around?”

“You’re a good man to follow, Felix,” Fernando responds with a similar bro-pat. I don’t get why he still feels the need to suck up to *Papi*. He’s slid the engagement ring on Cee. He’s put in his time in the fields.

“Tiago, you can stop that now.” *Papi* says with a surprisingly gruff tone. He shrugs off Ferm’s hand from his back and glares with unexpected intensity.

*You tell him Papi.* I have no clue who Tiago is. Mind you, *Papi* often gets names wrong these days. What’s stranger is him dishing out the heinous emotional vibes inside my head. *Papi* was never one to take beef with others, whether they were the likely bearer of his first grandchild or the personal care worker coming to change his diaper. He was always zen-like, never letting anyone get under his skin. But now? I want to both smirk and cringe.

Cecelia must notice my conflicted expression. Her teacher voice returns, along with a warning glance to me. “*Papi*, he was just saying that he respects you. You love—”

“I don’t need his repay…his respect.” He is yelling now. “He is never … getting back there. You can never have my girl!”

Debbie races from behind the nursing station. She positions herself in front of *Papi*, one foot slightly behind the other, ready for anything he may try to throw her way. This isn’t the first time *Papi* has become agitated, as Debbie so politely calls it. She reaches slowly for his free hand, the one not digging into Cecilia’s much smaller one. “Mr. Loureiro. It’s me Nurse Deb. We’re here with your family, your two beautiful daughters and your soon-to-be son-in-law. How did you like that pear jelly I brought you from home?”

He takes hold of her hand, and the uncharacteristic anger melts away into a boyish confusion. “Deborah?” He searches each of us, a little more of the *Papi* we know resurfacing.

But just like his memories from the past, those parts are resurfacing for briefer and briefer moments. As much as Cecilia may fight me on prodding with the past, I know there is so much buried inside that we rarely see, just like this jab to Fernando. I need to know what it all means and why he is only letting it out now. I will race to find as much of him as I can before he disappears like *Mae*.

“Gabby, are you coming?” Cecelia’s voice jolts me back to our present reality. She has already guided him into the hallway. And I still stand here without answers, within his so-called jail, now recording silence.