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The Glass House

My house feels like a glasshouse waiting to shatter. I'm not sure what is keeping it from shattering, but it doesn't feel like it can last much longer. Since COVID 19 swept the world, leading to a quarantine across the globe, we have all been locked up together, creating tension and exposing us to truths we were ignorant of. From the outside it's not too bad; there are no major fights, no one is being abused, we aren't going hungry. It's not that we as a unit are breaking, but each of us individually are starting to crack. And the end, if there are cracks in the glass, it isn't long before it all shatters.

TIA AME

— NEGLECT

Tia Ame is Abue's oldest sister and for most of her life, was Abue's sole source of comfort. When Abue's husband began to drink and beat her, Tia Ame rushed to her aid and they both moved to the United States together. Thus, Tia Ame became my grandmother's keeper. She never married, which I think is in part due to wanting to keep the family together, as well as wanting to ensure the best for Abue. Along with this, there was simply no time for romance as she spent most of her time helping Abue raise her three children and four grandchildren. This decision now serves as a point of contention, as she often discusses her regret in making such a choice.

SLAP – We all rushed into the kitchen to find Tia Ame incomprehensibly shouting at Tio Abue as he held her arms back. Tia Ame eventually calmed down and explained that she was in

the middle of a telenovela scene and that Tio Abee had ruined it by going out of character. She stood by this account for a few hours, refusing to understand rhyme or reason until, in the flip of a switch, she returned to the real world. This is the moment where we realized that something was wrong. Subsequently, we took her to a doctor who almost immediately told us that she suffered from dementia. We were unsurprised by this diagnosis, considering that her own mother and younger sister experienced the same illness. However, we were still holding out hope for a less dreary diagnosis. The doctor said there was not much we could do other than watch as her condition worsened and wait until we were ready to put her in a care facility. This was never really an option for us as Abue would never allow it. She's her sister—the one that had gotten her out of an abusive situation, helped her smuggle her kids across the American border, and helped her restart her life. By virtue of this, we found ourselves at a clinic in Guadalajara with a psychiatrist who said he could help. With his help, Tia Ame was put on a strict diet of two handfuls of pills a day. From then on, she was never truly herself. She was calmer, less stubborn and opinionated, and went around almost like a ghost drifting through the day with no real purpose. In six years, she never had another episode...that is until quarantine started.

The first days of quarantine were fine, but as the days turned to weeks, the episodes became more frequent. In spite of a mild condition, she was still experiencing episodes that lasted for a few minutes. Her doctor says there is not much that can be done, and that it is just a waiting game now. She has grown restless and wary, and until she can resume her normal routine not much will change. Her doctor recommends taking her out to get some fresh air, but this is not ideal due to her crippled foot and the scars left over from a previous battle with polio. For these reasons, an activity as simple as a walk is uncomfortable and unenjoyable for her. On top of this,

her stubbornness remains. As of now, she spends her time sitting, whether it be in her room, on the porch, in the kitchen, or even the living room. She sits in order to pass time until she is able to take a nap. Some days she sleeps until well past noon. On these days, Abue makes someone check on her to ensure that she is still breathing.

The real tragedy surrounding this quarantine is that I feel less empathetic towards Tia Ame. I do not think is supposed to work that way. I thought living with her would make me understand her struggle, but instead she is more irritable than before — now because of quarantine. She hates not being able to go out and feels tied down by her illness. She has been lashing out and spewing hateful words towards us. I know that this is part of the disease and I know that she is more than her dementia, but her behavior makes it hard to keep this in mind. It is challenging to ignore her rude comments towards us, her family, whilst she is lovely to the friends she talks to over the phone. It is also challenging to observe the impact that the illness has had on Abue, as she continues rejecting her medicine. I grapple to understand how she cannot remember to eat yet somehow remembers to put makeup on every morning. I try to avoid her as much as I can because it takes too much out of me to justify my every move to her. As terrible as it sounds, a part of me is slowly starting to resent her. I know it is not her fault, but it is still her mouth yelling insults and her actions that hurt me. I wonder if this is how I too will end up one day; slowly pushing those who love me away because of some illness I have no control over.

ABUE

— ISOLATION

Abue is the pillar holding our house together, as without her, we'd surely fall apart. Abue has lived with us since before I was born. Or maybe we've lived with her— not sure which way

it is. It is probably the latter as I am positive that we need her more than she needs us. Abue is the single most caring person I have met and there has not been a day in my life where she has not been there to take care of my sister, my mom, and I. She has never complained, never argued, and never said no. If there is a heaven, that alone is enough to gain her entrance. But as if that wasn't enough, when Tia Ame was diagnosed with dementia, Abue refused to let her live anywhere but with us.

Abue is tired. She is not as young as she once was and needs to sit down in between daily tasks. She goes through the day rubbing and stretching to keep her aging joints from aching too much. Tia Ame is her biggest task, headache, and heartache. Abue used to love Tia Ame, but I am not so sure if this is true anymore. Everything changed when she was diagnosed with dementia. The person we all loved sort of disappeared and instead left behind an abusive, stubborn, and angry stranger. Abue became Tia Ame's personal nurse and refused to let a stranger help take care of her, saying Tia Ame would feel uncomfortable. She insists on doing anything and everything for her, from sorting her pills to washing her laundry. But Abue's mind is not what it once was. She forgets things here and there and becomes easily frustrated. She occasionally thinks she sees things that aren't there or recalls events that never happened. I am afraid that she is starting to experience symptoms similar to Tia Ame. This was not something I, nor anyone else in my family, was aware of until we were all forced to spend time together. Ever since I started college, I have not been around much as I spent at most a month at home during the summer. To me, Abue was as healthy as she was when I was seven years old. I remember she would drive me from volleyball practice and Girl Scouts, and still manage to have dinner ready and on the table for when I got back. It is Abue, she's invincible. I think that is how we all see

her, or at least want to see her. She is what holds us all together— if she falls apart, we all fall apart. And so, we neglect the fact that her forgetfulness of small things could very likely be dementia, and instead pretend she's perfectly fine and go on with life. That was easy to do when we all lived our own lives, but right now it feels like we are all living the same life, trapped together as the outside world seems to be coming to an end. Abue says her forgetfulness is due to age, but the more time we all spend time with her, the more we see her acting like Tia Ame did years before she started having episodes. We do not say anything or do anything. In part because ignorance is bliss, but also in part because we know there is nothing that can be done. No number of pills or injections will delay or prevent it, so we let it go and hope something else takes her before dementia does. Typing that feels terrible and cold hearted, but seeing Abue as a fragile individual who can't remember who we are is too much to bare and it's something she would hate.

Abue is lonely. I knew she was alone, but I never thought she was lonely until now. My sister and I are gone most of the year, my mom works from 7 am to 7 pm every weekday and volunteers to go in on weekends, and Tia Ame isn't really there so she seems more like a burden to her now a days. With so little company, it's hard to imagine Abue not being alone. She's always been okay with this. She likes the quiet and is very independent, plus if there is no one there, you can't really miss their company to begin with. Coronavirus has changed that for Abue. She is no longer alone— my sister and I are home all day and my mom works a lot less— but she is lonely. Before, she had no one to keep her company and that was okay. She kept herself busy and would go to the store, tend to her garden, and go to IHOP for breakfast with friends. Now, she can only tend to the garden to distract herself from the troubles that caring for Tia Ame

brings. In spite of our full house, she still does not have any more company than she did before. Everyone is very much in their own world; my sister and I are flooded with schoolwork and my mom still likes to spend most of her free time doing things for her job. There are days where we see each other in passing or sit together just working, but not saying a word. Abue sees all of us around, and she thinks that maybe she will have a bit more company. She will start to talk and then realize that we have headphones in and are either in class or doing work. Though I love to hear stories about her mom, her youth in Guanajuato, and her life, I just do not have the time. The balance between work life and social life has disappeared and so I spend the entire day sitting at the kitchen table doing work, hoping that Abue won't want to talk to me today. I talk to her less than we did when we were hundreds of miles away. I no longer call her just to say hello and ask how she is. I know how she is and she no longer needs to hear what I ate for breakfast, because she is with me and she knows what I have had. Though this is the longest time I've spent with my grandma in the last four years, I feel like I have never been quite as distant from her. I know she feels it too.

CARMEN

— REMORSE

Quarantine has been hard. I hate to say it out loud, but it has. It feels selfish to say it— I haven't lost anyone I love, I have not been sick, I have all the essentials, I have ways to keep myself entertained. Saying it, or even thinking it, feels like a very privileged thing when so many people are suffering while I'm simply tired of being inside. I hate staying indoors. My family all say I'm "pata de perro," which in English translates to dog leg. It doesn't make much sense in English, but truthfully, I don't know how it makes sense in Spanish either. They're basically saying that I

go out too much and do not like to be still. Being home too much makes me feel trapped and gives me too much time for self reflecting. That never ends well, typically leading to one existential crisis or another. I try to distract myself as much as possible and just end up spending an ungodly amount of time on twitter. This is as true during the pandemic as it ever has been. I already have terrible eyesight so staring at a tiny screen for hours on end is not helping my eyesight at all. On top of that, it adds to the uncertainty that comes with coronavirus. It amplifies my thoughts and fears and though some are funny, others are terrifying. The way some people have no regards for social distancing rules and are allowed to congregate and forcefully protest is disturbing. Some people don't seem to understand the gravity and weight of this pandemic.

People seem to be saying that nothing will be the same, honestly I am not too optimistic — I don't think things will be better. Damian Barr tweeted, “We are not all in the same boat. We are all in the same storm. Some are on super-yachts. Some have just the one oar.” We are all being impacted by COVID 19 differently; some will sail through, health and profession intact, some will lose one or both. The reality of it is that there are class lines distinguishing the coronavirus; people are protected or vulnerable based on where they live, how much money they make, if they can afford to miss work, if they rely on public transportation to move about, and so on. Implementing social distancing guidelines is more difficult in high density areas, and so extreme inequality and poverty are pre-existing conditions in this public health emergency. When looking at the pandemic through a socio-economic lens, we can begin to fully recognize the ways in which the poverty line is growing. The homeless population has increased. Millions have lost their jobs, while at the same time losing their health insurance. Though some measures taken by the government certainly help people struggling, it's all a temporary fix. The stimulus checks will

stop going out when the pandemic ends, but the jobs won't be returned to people as a lot of businesses shut down already. At the end of the pandemic, the poor will be poorer, and while the rich might be less rich, they'll still have the advantage. Things are certain to change, but maybe not for the better. There is much talk of progress after the pandemic is over, and though legislation like universal health care sounds nice and dandy, it's not a reality for our nation. At the end of the day, our government is made up by a small minority (of which most are white men) and though everyone claims to want to help, their own interest gets in the way. We are not yet able to see past political parties and biases. Though this pandemic has served to bring some of our social issues to light, I don't think that as a country we are able to move forward. Coronavirus will just serve to polarize us further.

Quarantine has felt like a choice, and has helped me distinguish why "home" has always been a difficult choice for me. I was adopted, when I was seven years old and by that point, I knew my birth parents and had a relationship with them. My mom always stressed how important it was to maintain this relationship. She's always said that being adopted just gave me the advantage of having two families— which in the end were the same family due to my mom and my birth mother being cousins. I spend every other holiday with my birth parents, and I call their home my home. In many ways, they are still my parents. Yet, when quarantine happened, I chose to be with my mom and Abue. I did not tell my birth parents anything until I was home and I think I could feel my dad's heartbreak over the phone. By choosing to call this place my "home," I felt like I'd betrayed them, and I think they believe this too. Every time I call, they insist I go quarantine with them for a while. Every time they ask me to make a choice, but my choice is never them. It is not that I don't want to be with them, though I am sure that's what they

think. Truthfully, I myself don't know what it is. It is just not where I want to be. And so I find myself riddled with guilt once more for not feeling the need to be with them and not being able to give my birth parents what they want from me.

Quarantine has not been easy. Spending so much time with my family has exposed cracks and truths I was unaware of before. My family is flawed and in certain ways broken; we are neglected, isolated, and remorseful. But we are here – together. And while some people feel like they are rowing alone in this storm, I know I have a substantial crew to help me get through these times. In the end, some ceilings are made to be shattered.