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Dolores' Last Will and Testament

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

DOLORES' LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

CREATIVE WRITING

by

Victoria Calderin

2022

To: Dean Michael R. Heithaus
College of Arts, Sciences and Education

This thesis, written by Victoria Calderin, and entitled Dolores' Last Will and Testament, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

Lynne Barrett

Maneck Daruwala

Lester Standiford, Major Professor

Date of Defense: March 16, 2022

The thesis of Victoria Calderin is approved.

Dean Michael R. Heithaus
College of Arts, Sciences and Education

Andrés G. Gil
Vice President for Research and Economic Development
and Dean of the University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2022

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To my family, thank you for affording me the opportunity to so much as dream of a higher education. Most of all, to my favorite person, my best friend, and my husband, Michael, thank you for the endless love, patience, and support; I wouldn't have done it without you.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS
DOLORES' LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT

by

Victoria Calderin

Florida International University, 2022

Miami, Florida

Professor Lester Standiford, Major Professor

This thesis aims to analyze the intersectionality of points of view among generations of Cuban immigrants in Miami through the lens of fiction. In it, Carmen Velez, a Cuban American construction manager, faces a divorce and financial ruin which force her to return to the life she fled from in Miami. After her mother, Dolores, dies, Carmen must execute her estate. Following a dangerous whirlwind trip to Cuba, meeting her estranged father, and encountering the shadows of her mother's former life as a revolutionary, Carmen comes to more deeply understand her family, and by extension, herself. Despite her loss, she gains a new life and the return of her father.

The novel is influenced by Jenine Capo Crucet's *How to Leave Hialeah* and Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*. Like its models, the story focuses on its main character's struggle with loyalty to family versus loyalty to oneself.

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Chapter 1

It was my official opinion that anyone who thought turning twenty-five was traumatic should try doing it while divorced, unemployed, and moving back in with their overbearing Cuban mother. Only then could they come talk to me about some quarter-life crisis. I came to this conclusion while leaning on the doorframe of my now mostly hollow home in Sarasota, Florida as a moving truck backed into my driveway.

“It is Carmen Velez, yes?” one of the movers asked as his partner maneuvered the back of the truck past my overgrown red bougainvillea.

“Yes, that’s right,” I said. “Come on in whenever you’re ready.” I pushed off the doorframe and made my way back into what was left of my house. There was an eerie hollow sensation that came with being in a space emptied of every trace of me. The perfume of the jasmine and gardenia scented oil, one of the few things I enjoyed from my mother’s house, had faded. In its place, the acrid smell of the fresh white paint that now covered the walls permeated the house. I made my way past the bags that sat packed and ready in the foyer and right to the small room that used to be my office.

Last month, I sat in this very room waiting for my husband, Richard, to come back home from the holiday party we had both attended. His contracting company invited all the wives and usual clients, both current and potential, to enjoy a nice dinner. Despite having several job sites active and in crisis, the bane of any construction manager’s existence, I took an uncharacteristic night off and joined Richard. After all, I reasoned, of the two of us, the one that most deserved a break was the one who spent her days drowning in safety checks.

My husband spent most of his time in air-conditioned trailers passing work off to his secretary. I know what you're thinking, and no, I was not bitter. A bit pissed off maybe, but not bitter. That feeling ended up being rightly justified when I discovered work was not the only thing he was passing off to his secretary.

Just past midnight, my husband explained a new client wanted a private meeting, and suggested I go home.

"No sense in both of us being exhausted," he had said.

So, I left.

I will fully admit I am not a calm or patient person. A tightly wound and paranoid parent was bound to produce a tightly wound and paranoid child. And my mother was both of those in spades. However, it had rarely served me poorly to be intense particularly given the nature of my job. Who had ever heard of a serene construction manager who had to wrangle thirty to fifty grown men on a regular basis? That said, the people on Florida's west coast were different than the ones I grew up with down in Miami. Most of the people here were at or nearing retirement. They had spent their lives building business or taking over industries. When many of them were fifteen, the most dangerous thing they could do was get drunk at a house party.

When my mother was fifteen, the most dangerous thing she could do as a member of Castro's Mariana Grajales Women's Squad, was to aim her M1-Carbine at the wrong person. None of her business after that was above board. Her version of a retirement plan was picking out a headstone. This was the woman who raised me.

I, however, was determined not to be my mother. So, despite all my instincts that night, I waited. I waited without calling. I waited without messaging. I continued to wait. And then it was the next morning, and I was still waiting. Later that day, the statement from our credit card company with a very long, very out of character receipt from an Italian restaurant was the first red flag. The unmistakable smell of Chanel No.5 on his suit when he finally got home the following afternoon was the second. Of course, it was Chanel. Why not be basic in your choices? I still was not convinced though.

One thing you learned growing up Cuban in Miami surrounded by a million and one colorful stories of revolution is that without solid proof, a story is just a story. Lord knows exaggerating stories is the national pastime of every man on a job site. You leave them to their own devices and in one day a welder can gain the equivalent of five years of work experience. You better believe he will have a story for every one of those years. All this to say, my bar for what convinced me that something was true could be fairly high. However, when I got a call from a restaurant confirming a reservation I definitely didn't make, I decided that was proof enough.

Armed with the aid of my trusted partner, a very large bottle of wine, I interrupted Richard's lovely romantic dinner with his frightened and later food-covered secretary. Then, it all came pouring out, a torrent of infidelity

So now, I sat on the floor of my empty home office, my back to the only wall not covered in wet paint and logged into our bank account to make the final transfer of money to my new personal account. I stared at the screen for a long time after I logged in. My brain was trying to make sense of the numbers I was seeing. It was failing.

The account was empty.

The current balance was displayed in bright red numbers: 0.00. I kept telling myself that this had to be a mistake. A very big mistake.

I refreshed the page. Nothing changed.

“Ok, it’s fine,” I said to the vacant walls. “You’re fine. You just have to call the bank.”

There was only one problem with calling the bank. That problem was named Greg. Greg used all of his tan six-odd foot self to coax every little old lady in town into sharing whatever story they had. When Richard and I first got engaged, every trip to the bank was an interview on the wedding. I had no doubt that Greg passed all of my answers on to his stylist, his mother, and his Shitzu. If it was breathing, Greg gossiped with it. Since my breakup with Richard had been unfortunately public given that I dumped his dinner, wine decanter and all, on his lap, Greg was bound to ask questions. In that moment, I would have preferred to go for a nice long swim in an acid lake then answer any of those questions. But that nagging voice in the back of my head that my mother installed when I was a kid wouldn’t shut up. “Trust but verify,” she would say, something undoubtedly useful to her given the projects she ran off the books.

So, I took several long deep breaths, and dialed the bank and tried to reason myself into believing that it was highly unlikely Greg would be the one to answer the phone. It was not as though he was the only one who worked there.

After the trill of the phone’s auto-dial, a few seconds of a static-filled jingle played. Then a robotic female voice let me know that someone would be with me shortly. A man’s voice came on the line.

“Thank you for banking with Meddler’s Financial. This is Greg. How may I help you?”

“Shit,” I said, and closed my eyes. “I mean hi, Greg! It’s Carmen Dickerson. I am just calling to verify my balance. I think there might be something wrong with what the app is displaying.”

“Oh, hey Carmen! How are you?”

“Everything is great Greg. Just wonderful. Just need to check my balance.”

“Sure thing! Let me get to my computer. So, how’s life? Anything new?” Greg said.

Dear God, kill me now. “Oh, you know, life’s going along.”

“Oh, honey I’m sure it is. I don’t know if I told you, but my sister’s ex-girlfriend’s cousin is a waitress at Mimi’s Italian. Now, I don’t know what Richard did but I assume—”

“Greg, honestly, if you really want to know, you can ask Richard to fill you in,” I said, angrier at myself for the sharp knot forming in my throat than at Greg for unknowingly eliciting it.

“Well damn, okay then. I guess I should have asked this morning,” he said, and I heard the rustle of his office chair, and the clattering of keyboard keys.

Shit. “So, he was there today?” I asked, trying to think back to exactly what time I checked the balance on my phone.

“Yes ma’am. Bright and early,” he said, over the sound of a clicking mouse.

“How early exactly?” I asked.