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Usurped
Alicia Tosca

“When is he going back to the hospital?” I ask, glaring at my mother as she burps the newborn baby. The black leather couch shrunk after Alex was born last week. She tells me he can’t go back because he is part of the family now. I continue to glare. No three-and-a-half-year-old girl jumps for joy at having her throne taken away by a square-faced, incessantly screaming baby boy who chokes on his own tears more than he suckles on her mom’s breast.

Mami lays Alex on his back on the couch cushion and asks me to “watch the baby” while she uses the bathroom. Her bedroom door closes. For five seconds Alex stares at the twirling ceiling fan before he is scooped up in my tiny arms and carefully placed at the bottom of the trashcan in the kitchen pantry. Shutting the lid means closure, good riddance, sayonara.

It unfortunately also means: “Oh no, where’s the baby?!”

I am still in the pantry, browsing for a snack. Mami’s voice shrills with panic. For me it sounds like trouble, the kind that leads to spankings and time-outs. I fling back the lid of the trashcan and reach for the baby, tugging up from his fleshy armpits. His squishy face begins to melt as his lips curl into his gums. He is heavy. Alex cries and screeches as soon as Mami yanks back the pantry door. His body droops in my hands mere inches in front of the trashcan. Mami grabs the baby, and, after I explain that I am hungry, she grabs me a pack of crackers. She plops back on the couch with relief; I return to glaring.

She told me being a big sister would be exciting—she even smiled as she said it. But now that Alex is born, “sister” does not excite me. It is a loathsome title and a label I am
confined by four years later as Alex yells at me to stay away from his mom.

His face boils with anger in the Florida heat as he informs me, “Papi is your mom and dad, and Mami is my mom and dad!”

“What? Mami is our mom and Papi is our dad.”

Although Alex is wrong, his observation is true. Every child gravitates to one parent more than the other. And the limelight of my childhood memories falls mainly on my dad and rarely flickers on to my mom. Papi would play with me and tickle me and talk to me about Jesus. Mami would cook and clean. Sometimes she would even ask me to clean for her. Papi is my favorite animal. When he plays he is a bear; when he laughs a hyena; when angry he is a man. He is a father, the kind the Navy Reserves recruits and spits out after twenty-four years of service.

When he comes home early from work once a week to take me to the YMCA’s Indian Princesses Program, or when he takes thirty minutes each Saturday to watch “The Amanda Show” with me, or when he spends hours on the weekends to teach me how to play basketball—he is my family. I know Mami by name only, usually when I want to go outside or need to know what’s for dinner.

Because of her stubborn refusal to leave Alex at the hospital after he was born, my now eight-year-old self is stuck with a belligerent four-year-old bellowing at me in the front yard. Alex is right. But he can’t be—he’s not supposed to be right. So I yell back, “She’s my mom too! I came out of her stomach!” I had seen the surgical scar below my mom’s navel before; I bit her there once to get her attention.

“Yeah, well, I came out of her butt!”

I shouldn’t laugh. I don’t even know yet where babies actually come from, but Alex’s proclamation lifts me back onto
my throne and makes him look like...well, not as good as me.

Alex runs back into the house and calls out for Mami. Still laughing, I race after him to make it clear that I haven’t hit him or called him any names. I want Mami to laugh with me, to prove Alex wrong. Instead, she tells him that yes, he was born from her bottom and no, she is my mom as well.