

# Concours de nouvelles 2020

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## *A Question of Life and Death*

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The ground feels cold under my feet, just like my whole body, and I shiver. I follow the beat of the music raging in the room next to the bathroom as I count the seconds. Fifty-five, fifty-six, fifty-seven...

*Please, let it not be it, please.*

Suddenly, I hear five knocks on the door and I jump with surprise. Why can't I never be left in peace, even in the restroom? Why is there always someone following me everywhere in this apartment?

"Dolores?" I hear my little sister Gabriella say from the other side of the door.

I sigh. Gabriella has been completely lost since Mother decided to take on another job lately. She's not even present at home anymore, and we barely see her. But I know she's doing the right thing to support her family of five children with no father to help with the bills continuously coming and piling on the dinner table. One day it's the utility bill, the other it's the rent. It's never-ending. And it's driving us all crazy, starting with me.

"Yes, Gab?" I reply. There is no point in needlessly worrying a five-year-old child. She's still so young, naïve and innocent. She deserves to live her childhood like any child should; with beautiful princesses and princes charming, animals from fairy tales and food in her stomach on her mind at all times. Isn't it what a happy and normal childhood is supposed to be like?

"I need to pee," she says with her little voice, betraying fear.

What could she be afraid of? Then I realize she's thinking she might be bothering me while I'm using the bathroom and I let a sigh out.

How have I come to this point of being feared?

"It's fine, I'm done," I say softly as I'm dressing back up and hiding a pregnancy test in the back pocket of my jeans.

I open the door, and my sweet Gabriella is right there, with her cute little face. I bend toward her and kiss her cheek. I can't help myself in front of such cuteness. Gabriella wipes her cheek where I just kissed her with her sleeve and grumbles.

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Alright, I think. She's not in the mood for receiving affection from her big sister.

I walk down the corridor, bang twice on Santiago's door, and shout "Turn down the music a little, please, I can't even hear myself think!" and I receive some not so fancy words in return. I enter the room I share with Gabriella and Mother, lock the door and stretch myself out on my bed.

What if the results are positive? What am I going to do?

I wait there, staring at the blank ceiling from my bed. White, it has nothing to distract me and I'm soon absorbed by the pictures carelessly pinned on the walls. They are not as numerous as I would like them to be, but at least there are a few of them. They are the proof that we once had a happy life, all of us together: Father still alive, Mother smiling all the time, Adela and Edouardo still at home, Santiago not rebellious yet, and me... not completely ripped-out. Gabriella is the only one left who is normal in this family, and I wish her the best for the future.

After a moment, I take the pregnancy test out of my back pocket and wrap my fist around it. I don't even know what to do if it's positive. In El Salvador, women don't have much liberty in choosing what to do with their own body. I've known women sentenced to jail for three decades for less than an abortion. Even a miscarriage is considered a crime, and women can be sentenced for aggravated murder by negligence, though she isn't responsible for anything. And at barely eighteen years old, I wouldn't know what to do with a baby. It would add even more bills to the ones waiting to be paid already. I couldn't let that happen to my family, or to my mother.

I close my eyes. *Please, let it be negative*, I think.

I flip the pregnancy test in my hand and wait another couple of seconds before opening my eyes. My heart is beating fast as I see the two little red lines. *Pregnant*.

After that, everything is a blur. I stand up, cross the room and leave the apartment. Air, I need air. The hot summer air hits my face the moment I open the front door and my legs seem to walk without any guidance from my brain. I walk for what seems to be an eternity in this weather and I eventually end up at the hospital.

I wait a couple of seconds there, paying attention to every little detail that seems to suddenly appear in front of me. People are coming in and out of the emergency room; most of them are in a really bad shape and I wonder whether it's a good idea I came here in

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the first place. Then I think that I've come here for one reason: find tía Isabella.

Tía Isabella is a nurse in the Women's Hospital in San Salvador and she's the only one who is able to help me, now.

My heart is still beating fast when I enter the emergency room and I look for my aunt. But all I can see is wounds and blood, and the cries of the patients break my soul entirely.

*I shouldn't be here, I think. Nothing is wrong with me, I am healthy and...*

No, this is not true. There is something in my belly that I don't want, and tía Isabella is the only person I know who can help me in my situation.

A nurse eventually comes to me and asks me what I am here for. I fail to answer in the first place but succeed in coming to my senses again.

"Nurse Isabella García Rodríguez. I'm looking for Isabella García Rodríguez, please."

The nurse takes me to the waiting room and finds me a place to sit in. I don't know how much time I wait here, in a room full of people who look at me as if I have some viral disease and they are avoiding me at all cost. God, can people actually see when a woman is pregnant? Are sadness and confusion visible on my face? Or do I look like I am guilty, somehow, because of the anxiety I'm in?

I take a magazine from the coffee table and browse through it. Thirty seconds later, the nurse is back. The expression on her face says it all, and I grab my purse, ready to leave as the woman explains me that Nurse Isabella García Rodríguez isn't available at the moment.

I mumble a shy "Thank you," and start walking. I don't know who to go to next, and I don't even know if someone would be willing to help me. In El Salvador, a child is a miracle sent by God, no matter how the conception happened and it would be a sin to abort. It would be a total disaster if the child is dead-born. Yet, it's always the woman's fault.

My best option is probably to go to the police. But in this country led by men, in which the villains, the guilty ones are never punished for their crimes and in which the women are always the ones to blame, I doubt the police will listen to me and help me in my situation.

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I think about what happened to me, and what led me to what I am today: an eight-teen-year-old young woman, pregnant after being at the wrong place at the wrong moment. How could it be?

When I arrive at home, everything is the same yet so different. It's like I see things differently now that I know how my life will end. Santiago's music is still raging from his bedroom, and I can hear Gabriella play with her dolls in our room.

I walk towards the bathroom, ready to finish what has to be done. But as I close the door, Gabriella's voice raises behind me.

"What are you doing, Lili?" Gabriella says, using the same nickname as Mother does.

I turn around and squat down to face her and strike her hair.

"Lili is going to rest for some time, alright? I've had a difficult day."

Her face becomes serious, the seriousness children sometimes have and that makes them so mature at such of a young age, her eyebrows frown and she reminds me of Mother all of a sudden. "But it's the weekend."

"You can have difficult days on weekend days, Gab, you know."

"Alright," she says, accepting my answer as it is.

"Alright," I repeat. "Go play a little, now."

"Okay," she replies, before running down the hall.

"Gab?" I say, and she stops abruptly in the corridor.

She looks at me, waiting for me to talk to her. "Never let anyone decide what to do with your body, okay?"

She nods.

"And don't let anyone touch you if you don't want to."

"What are you talking about, Lili?"

"Just remember what I told you, understand?"

She nods once again and I watch her run to our bedroom, excited to play with her dolls again. Santiago's rock music is still playing hard in his room but for a moment, I appreciate it, I enjoy it, and I try to forget about our difficult relationship we've had these past years. Despite our recurrent disagreements, he stays my brother.

I close the door and lock myself in the bathroom. I get the water rain in the bathtub and undress myself. It feels nice to get my clothes off in this hot and humid weather. A nice fresh bath is the perfect thing everyone asks for in summer.

I get in the bathtub and I shiver when I feel the cold water on my feet. I lie down in the tub and my heart skips a beat with the

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contact of the icy water.

I look at the razor blade in my right hand I stole from  
Santiago's drawer then at the pregnancy test I had kept in my purse in  
my other hand. Is this a good idea? Is this the right thing to do?

No one is going to help me, so I better help myself.

I'll do myself a favor.

My heart is speeding in my chest, pounding hard.

Am I right to do it?

After all, we're talking about life.

And it's a question of life and death.