

Of the many beautiful things about my mother, one of most beautiful is her voice. That lovely singing voice with which she once sang a full love song into my cellphone's inbox one chilly winter night in my sophomore year of college.

I remember I was running late to a mariachi rehearsal, checking messages on my cellphone with one hand, violin case in the other, leaning slightly to the left to counter the weight of my swinging book bag while hurrying through the yard to get to the group on time.

Then I heard her voice, and that melody, and my heart swelled and I stopped to sit on one of the fountain rocks to listen to her singing... and I remember the quiet around me, making itself quieter, you know, as if to listen in on my mother's message.

***"Hoy me vino la gana que no las musas, hoy no tengo pretextos ni disculpas, para cantarte a ti..."***

It roughly translates to: *Today I just felt like it. Without muses. Today I have no excuses, nor apologies, to sing to you...*

The song goes on for three messages – the whole song didn't fit in one message.

It's tender and touching, and mostly, it's familiar.

Mama and I had sung it together many times before. It always happened at the dinner table. I guess it was just another form of nourishment.

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I needed that nourishment.

My transition to college was a difficult one. Coming to Harvard was the first time I had ever been away from family for longer than a *week*. It was also the first time I walked more than a mile on my own without a brother to walk with me. It was the first time I went on public transportation on my own. Don't get me wrong – I just never needed to. There was always a parent or an older brother wanting to go with me. Even when they didn't. My parents made sure of that.

At college, for the first time in my life, I was away from *my source*, from what, for better or for worse, defined who, what, where and *why* I was...

At college, I was doing everything on my own. And at times it was lonely. The strong need to fit in combined with homesickness, and a jarring culture shock, gave me feelings of uncertainty and self-doubt.

It took a long time before I felt better... and I never quite shook the idea that I did not belong here.

For one thing, I believed that I did not deserve to be here. So many of the reasons I was able to come here were completely out of my hands. How could I deserve to be here, to live in these halls, to have these kinds of opportunities, when there were smarter, more socially aware, more hardworking people my age back home who did not even get to finish college? Surely it couldn't have been those things that led me here.

My right to be here was only one of the things I doubted. Over time, I doubted not only my role at Harvard and in the US, I also doubted my abilities, my strength, my friendships, my faith, my identity... I was facing the black hole of my own uncertainty. On my own.

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Inevitably, especially in the loneliest of times, the song would emerge again. My mind always brought me back to it. Sometimes before I realized it I was humming the tune. Many times I would just actually sing it out loud, in the shower... walking to class... showing it to roommates. It was always good song because it is so well written. It was always a great song because it was mine and my mother's. It was an invisible thread tying me back to my nourishment. My mother and my family.

But it was not the only one.

I also carry something else – something that I can hold and open and touch.

It is flat and crisp and folded over four times. And it has a funky shape when I unfold it because this love, when it's opened, you can't flatten its lines. It's creased, torn and worn at the edges, from the number of times I've opened it just to remind myself that it's there. Then, folding it over four times again I put it carefully back in its hidden place.

This love was handmade. It was signed and delivered 3000 miles across the country, and it was unlike any letter anyone had ever written.

That's because on this one, at the very bottom of the page was another peculiar postscript: a small drawing, and in this drawing my mother showed me that same thing she had shown me in the voice message. And in every letter she ever wrote to me. It is what has kept me *together* ever since before I even *knew* that one could possibly fall apart.

It's made up of six little stick people. Six figures with nothing more than heads, torso, legs and arms. They are all the same size and have no hair and no eyes. They are not even smiling.

What's special about these figures, however, is that they are all holding hands, and that the first five are close together, and that the fifth one has an incredibly long left arm, holding on to the sixth one's incredibly long right arm.

When I saw the six figures, connected the way they were, knowing that the sixth one was me, knowing that the other five were my family, I understood only partially. But I felt. Entirely.

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There's something incredibly strong, continuous and perpetual represented by those long arms. Something that held me in place, so that when I lost sight of things... of myself... I could always count on it being there.

Now, I am standing here spinning my own invisible thread, all the way back to my mother. To thank her for so carefully, diligently maintaining that thread... even in the smallest of ways.

I want to give this speech to you because as I understand it, we are constantly weaving new threads, connecting with more people... only to then create physical distance between each other. Soon, I will no longer be here, and I can only imagine the corners and lengths of the world that shall be traveled by you when you leave as well. I only hope that the threads that connect me to you, friends and classmates, will endure.

But most of all I want to give this speech to my mother. Because she's the one that showed me how to weave them.

Like my favorite line in our song says, Mama, "It's your hands that created the stage on which I can continue my own creations." ***Tomo tus manos, como escenario, para existir.***