

Significant Figures

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I'm late. Again. I fumble to get the keys in the door, and when I do, I'm immediately hit by the familiar sterile smell of home, and a glare from my grandmother's nursing aid, Melinda. Before I can muster an excuse, she speaks to me in her motherly, disappointed voice. "Yes Mia, math team is on Thursdays, but you are an hour late. I have a family too, you know. Your Nani needs her meds at 7 o'clock sharp, and you should try to get her to eat something. I know how she is when it comes to food she doesn't prepare, but there is some rice and beans in the fridge when you are ready," she declares, grabbing her keys and flying out of the door.

Nani is sitting in her usual spot in the living room, positioned so she can see her favorite show Jeopardy! from her makeshift hospital bed. "Hola Nani, sorry I'm late. Math team had an optional study period after practice was over and I lost track of time." She attempts to reply to me in her hoarse voice, but the whish of the oxygen ventilator beside her bed seems to speak over her. With clear frustration on her face, my grandmother presses her lips together and simply nods. I warm up our dinner, and Nani and I eat. At 7 o'clock sharp I give her the meds she needs. She watches Jeopardy! for the rest of the night as I zoom through my Multivariable Calc homework sheet before it's time for bed.

Today feels no different from any other day. I help Nani with everything she needs before Melinda arrives, eat a small breakfast, throw my Air Maxes on, and venture out into the extremely uninteresting city of Plano, Texas. The bus ride is crummy, but it's better than walking 4 miles to get to school. At 17, I'm technically old enough to own a license and car, but with Nani's medical expenses and no other source of income other than my summer math internships and tutoring, those luxuries just aren't an option right now. I'll stick with the obnoxious kids and my trig podcasts.

See, I've always had a brain for academics in general. But math is my strong suit, my escape. No matter the trouble or worry, numbers are there. When I can't figure out why my father would possibly leave 5-month-old-me at Nani's front doorstep with a note and a few dollars, the numbers always make sense. The day Nani was diagnosed with Pleural Effusion, I scribbled differential equations in my blue Cookie Monster notebook on the ambulance ride to distract myself from the sound of my grandmother gasping for air. The numbers are the safety cushion, the happy shelter I can escape to. When all else fails, I know that the numbers are the most reliable figures in my life.

In 5th grade, my teacher let me do her taxes for \$30. I remember holding up my hard-earned money ever so proud to show my grandmother that day. She “put it away” for me, but I never did see that money again. I knew we weren’t wealthy, our 2 bedroom apartment reminded us of that frequently. I found out the money had been put toward bills, and the shame that filled inside of me for not being able to contribute enough for me and my grandmother was nearly unbearable. I’ve always dreamed of what my brains could do for Nani and me; maybe I could solve a groundbreaking equation, or get a formula named after me (the ‘Mia Santana-Valasquez Formula’ has a nice ring to it). Maybe I could make enough money to get us out of this rundown city. We could move to Chile, where Nani is from. When I was younger she told me tales of her adventurous childhood, filled with sun, frequent knee bruises, and always excitement. Most of all, my grandmother talked about how much she misses it. After everything Nani has sacrificed for me, bringing her home is the least I can do.

I’ve never really been much of an athlete, even when Nani encouraged me to try out for something to get my mind off of numbers. And so I tried out for the all-inclusive softball team when I was 13. Both boys and girls of all skill levels could join. To be honest, the only reason I agreed to join was that my middle school crush Asher Beckett was on the team. I had been watching him from afar for a while. He was just so intriguing. Tan, awkwardly tall, and the greenest eyes ever to be known. Turns out he was a total jerk. A fast-pitch ball chipped my front tooth right in half, and he taunted me for the rest of the season. Chippy was my nickname until the insurance decided to cover my dental bill two years later. I never tried out for another sport after that, and Nani knew better than to obstruct that decision. Better to stick with the numbers.

I walk to the bus stop per usual, and as I pop in my earbuds to listen to my favorite podcast “Breaking Math”, it dawns on me. Today I will find out what college I got into, if any at all. I realize that I’m absentmindedly calculating the probability of me getting into a good school in my head. I applied for every college under the sun, but I’ve always been interested in Ivy League schools specifically. A majority of them are clear across the country, but I haven’t put too much thought into that yet. I walk into advisory, and Mr. Tuffin has placed envelopes on each person’s assigned seat. Some people haven’t even bothered opening their envelopes. A few of my classmates’ faces light up, but most of them attempt to look unbothered. I sit down, noticing that there are four envelopes on my desk. I decide not to open them until I get home. Good or bad, I think I should have the support of my grandmother when my possibilities are let loose.

As the 6th-hour bell rings, I run out to the buses only to see Asher in his electric blue convertible, holding up the bus lines. He’s matured quite a bit, both physically and cognitively, though his current actions don’t show this very well. The bus ride is a blur, and the second I walk into apartment 42, I pull my precious envelopes out of my back pocket with anticipation. I must look like a madman because both Melinda and Nani stare at me in confusion. I hold up college letters, and quickly their expressions are replaced with faces of excitement. My fingers are shaking as I tear open the first envelope. University of Texas: accepted. Stanford: rejected. Dartmouth: rejected. So far, no Ivy Leagues. I’m overcome with disappointment until I realize that I have one left. This envelope is thicker than the last two I’ve opened, and more... competent. Columbia University: accepted! A tear rolls down my cheek as I realize I am holding my very fate in my hands.

Melinda congratulates me with a warm hug, and Nani weakly claps from her bed. We celebrate with thousand layer cake, my favorite. I know I should be happy, but opening that letter felt like a punch to the gut. After Melinda leaves, I quietly enter my room and count my triumphs from over the years. 28 student of the month certificates, 16 honor roll certificates, 9 presidential education awards, 7 mathlete trophies, 3 math fair medals...it seems like school is the only thing I know how to do. Is this an indication I belong at Columbia?

Since my acceptance, life has been a blur. The days seem to melt into one another. I'm no longer the star participant in math team, and even at home with Nani, it feels different. As excited as I should be, there's a very big problem at hand. Columbia University is in New York. 1,553 miles away from everything I've ever known. My grandmother has always been the one to teach me right from wrong, guiding my decisions based on mistakes she has made. "Education is first," she constantly reminds me. Hypocrisy in its truest form, given that my grandmother never had an education of her own. I know she is counting on me to be everything she couldn't, and my shoulders are heavy from the thought of that. But I also know today isn't the time to worry about myself, my education, or even my grandmother. Today is the day my mother passed away 16 years ago. A day of mourning the memories I didn't get to make with her, and a day of tribute. Nani usually comes to visit the cemetery with me, but her current health situation has her bedridden.

I head out to pick up some flowers at the corner store by my apartment. A few years back Nani told me that my mother's favorite are poppies, and luckily they're in season year-round here in Texas. Before I get a chance to turn on my podcast, I hear a group of people behind me. "Hey, Chippy." Instantly, a lump forms in my throat. I know that voice, and the person who comes along with it. I turn around, only to be met by a posse of illiterate teenage boys, one of whom is Asher. Since I'm not in the mood to entertain such an inferior species, I turn around and keep on walking. They turn the other direction to taunt someone else, I suppose. One more block to the corner store. "Sup Ernie, I'll have your finest poppies and a pack of bubblegum," I say. Ernie is the closest thing I have to family other than Nani. I started coming here about seven years ago when I was old enough to get groceries on my own. Supposedly he was good friends with my mom throughout high school. I find it funny that I know him better than I know my own mother. "It's on the house, kid. Say hello to your Nani for me," he says as he slides a pack of gum and a bouquet into my arms.

After we exchange goodbyes, I head towards the cemetery with my bag of gifts for my mother. Very few people are visiting loved ones at Old Plano Cemetery when I arrive. I finally reach the headstone that reads 'Emilia Katrin Valesquez, Loving Mother, Daughter, and Friend.' I kneel down and clean it off, gently placing the flowers and gum onto it. Nani told me stories of how my mother would always have a pack of gum with her no matter where she went. I never really know what to say when I visit my mother, but today the words seem to be pouring out of me. "Hi. Um, I got accepted to an Ivy League. Columbia, actually, in New York. I just don't know what to do. I don't. It's always been me and Nani and it wouldn't be right to leave her, but it would be wrong to pass this up. What do I do? Please mom, just this once. Give me a sign."

That night as I lie in bed, I'm overcome with emotion. Everything feels like an ongoing migraine. For the first time, I skip school. I lie in bed and try to disguise my sobs with coughs. When Melinda comes in with brunch I pretend to be asleep. I realize how tired I am. Tired of it all. Eventually, I decide to rest my eyes... I hear a knock on my bedroom door. It's my mom. Long legs, beautiful black hair, olive skin. Exactly how she looks in the pictures. She walks beside my bed, close enough to me to where our noses are almost touching. "I am so proud of you," she whispers in my ear. My mother grabs my hand and kisses me on the forehead. The most comforting feeling. In my palm, I see a plane ticket. It reads 'New York City, NY'. And then I wake up to my mom-less bedroom. There is no plane ticket. Nothing tangible. Only my tears and will to keep going.

Day by day, it seems Nani's condition is worsening. I decide not to tell her about my dream. She's a very superstitious woman, but no palo santo or feathers could possibly tell her what I know. My mother came through for me, for the first time ever. She said she was proud of me! Oh, how I needed that encouragement, that love. But I'm still uncertain of what is truly right. The last thing I would want is my grandmother to resent me for leaving her. To feel the abandonment I felt from my father.

It's April 29th, three days until I have to choose. When I walk into advisory there's a small folded piece of paper on my desk. I immediately figure it's from Mr. Tuffin, probably about missing school a few days ago. I open it to see sloppy handwriting that I don't recognize. "See you at Columbia, Chippy- A.B." I rack my brain until I realize who has the initials 'A.B.' Asher is going to Columbia? No, that isn't right. He can't be. Asher, who held up the bus lines the other day? Asher, who still makes it a point to call me 'Chippy'? I want to be upset until I realize I'm grinning like an idiot as I read his little note.

I come home to yet another note on the table, though I know this one isn't from Asher. It's a brochure for the 'Lifecare Center of Plano'. A nursing home brochure. I open it up and see smiling faces, and a note from Melinda. It reads, "Please consider this. Your Nani and I want the best for you, and I think she will be happy there. They have a great program. Leave YOUR legacy, Mia. We all know you have it in you."

It's May 1st. Today I must decide. No formula, equation, or group of numbers can help me on this one. I'm being pulled in 100 different directions. I now understand what is right, and what is easiest, and I know they're not necessarily the same. With a pang of guilt, I kiss my Nani on the cheek as she sleeps on her makeshift hospital bed. I have sullenly chosen, and if my grandmother could speak, I know she would approve