

knows your past, so you keep it a secret, but you sit outside your dorm room with a friend one night, crying. He doesn't say a word; he just looks at the ground.

"Daddy's dead."

As the nine-year anniversary of his death approaches, your brother messages you. "Did I ever show you my essay about dad?" You tell him no just so he'll send it to you. You've read it before when he was out of the house and left his computer on, but you don't want him to shut down, not now. You'll read his essay over again and think about how he found your dad unresponsive in the kitchen while you and your mom were miles away at a horse show. Would you have had the strength at fifteen to call 911 and try CPR while waiting for help like he had to?

"Daddy's dead."

You'll return home to be with your mom on the ninth anniversary and you'll go to the cemetery with her. You'll eat lunch on a blanket in front of his headstone across from her. She'll look at you and ask, "Do you think dad listens?" Without thinking you'll nod. "I believe he listens, and I believe he answers when you talk to him. I know he helps when we need him to. I really believe he's helped me figure out the important things." You'll finish your lunch in silence before heading back to the car, and she'll ask you a different question this time. "Do you hear dad?"

"Daddy's dead."

You'll read the last essay assignment and instantly know what you want to write about, but you come up with a few different ideas before presenting it to your professor just in case she says no. Instead she'll ask you which one is calling to you. You'll answer and open up to her. She'll tell you to take care of yourself and that's what you'll do. It's what you've done more or less for nine years. You know some days will trap you in darkness, but you know there are people around you who care about you, friends who will sit up with you at two am to talk until you stop crying or hang out until you feel better. You have a mom who supports you. You'll be strong for her, just as she's been strong for you. You have learned over the years it is okay to be scared, but more importantly, it is okay to move forward.

## Your Fifteenth Year

JANETTE CEBALLOS



*WRITER'S COMMENT: When our class was given the assignment for a profile essay, I panicked because there are only about six or so interesting things I personally know of and can write about. Coupled with the fact that I had no clear direction to guide my writing, my concerns only grew. After a week of thinking, I decided to make a straightforward profile of an interesting person, but the struggle continued: since I couldn't contact my subject, I had to go with my backup topic: quinceñeras, specifically focusing on the experiences of my cousin, Ketzal. Luckily, this happened to be the better choice. With this subject, I finally had goals to shape my essay. For one thing, I was genuinely curious about quinceñeras. Like many other people, I understood that they were big Hispanic parties thrown for young girls, but I didn't know much else. After learning more, I wanted to inform readers about the real reasons anyone is willing to put themselves through this kind of stress. Besides these goals, I think I really just wanted to show how families like mine willingly sacrifice time and energy to making one perfect night for someone they love.*

*INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: I had never assigned a profile in UWP 18 (Style in the Essay) before this year. I adapted Pamela Demory's assignment – to "write a profile of an intriguing person, place, or thing." It proved challenging for the students, since we wanted to build on our skills in the class – choosing great topics to explore and exploring them in unexpected, stylish ways. In this class, we think through point of view, tense, word choice, sentence structure, organization, and concision in a focused way. Students come to see each paragraph, each sentence, and each word as a choice; they must ask if their choice best suits their idea and their audience. In writing this extraordinary profile of something many Americans know little about – the quinceañera – Janette made some bold choices inspired by our readings in the class – using second person and present tense to put the reader in the unique position of preparing for and experiencing one of the most important days of our subject's life.*

– Karma Waltonen, University Writing Program

When you are fifteen, you are a queen. The world is watching and admiring everything that is you. The day is yours, so you walk with confidence and pride, facing ahead to hide the nervousness creeping into your bones. Before sunrise and its gleaming light, you rise and ready yourself for the day that in time will become a warm memory. Your body slips into a custom-made dress, filling the fabric with life. A painted face adds years to your age and you transform, no longer a child. You are a woman.

At church, the nerves tighten their grip as you recite a Bible passage, thanking God and the Virgin Mary for your family and life. The priest blesses you, and you are given gifts, symbols of a metamorphosis. With a crown upon your head and heeled shoes covering your feet, you leave the church, heading towards the dance hall. At the dining table, you give a speech, a *brindis*, to give thanks once more. Your anxiety subsides as you move towards the dance floor accompanied by *chambeláns* and *damas* who swirl, twist, and pivot with you and the music. They lift and spin you around in choreographed movements. As you dance, the room is silent, the lights shining only on you, regality wrapped in curls and a gown of roses.

But before the dance, the speeches, the early morning mass and the agonizing preparations, you must first agree to arrange this party.

You claim family heavily influenced the choice. They wanted you to experience the exhilaration and attention. You say it was their decision in the end, one steeped in traditions. They, however, say the whole event was your idea from the start. Still, the party is a celebration of your life and your transformation from child to woman with the help of God and the devotion of your family.

You make the decision, years before your fifteenth birthday and the actual party. This time rushes past, costing sanity, sleep, and at least \$10,000. A hectic calmness overtakes your home long before the ceremony. Most rooms fill with assorted tablecloths, shoes, party favors, and food, which you sift through for hours to find the right choices. Supplies for invitations, decorations, and outfits leave you with only an inch of your bed available for rest. You devote endless hours to perfecting your vision of this single day, but you don't care. Though well aware of the strenuous efforts to be made for this hulking beast of a party, you've agreed to it.

As the years pass, you work with your family to gather the necessi-

ties of the celebration. Your mother reserves a church and rents a dance hall, ensuring both locations are large enough to fit your extended family. The hall is an easy arrangement, but gaining a priest's approval is akin to being judged by God himself. The priest may reject you and the event, demolishing all plans, so you are cautious as these trials of the church begin. The priest looks you over, assessing your religious life. He asks if you have completed your Baptism, your First Communion, and your Confession. Have you been regularly attending church? Fill out this form each Saturday after mass. Show me you are faithful. Prove to God that you believe.

Once the locations are set, you hurry to buy the outfits. *Chambeláns* wear standard suits with colored ties that match the theme, yet *dama* clothes will need strategic planning. Keep these dresses plain and simple; too flashy or too ugly a design will distract from you. These girls are meant to enhance your appearance, so a monochromatic pallet will suffice. Remember, the greatest attention to detail is given to your gown. Bought from a specialty store or custom-made in Mexico, the layered marvel of fuchsia-colored satin embedded with black roses exemplifies sophistication and the beauty of womanhood.

For you, stress is in the form of decisions. You have the final say on everything from the dance choreography to the color scheme and even utensils used. This, however, does not compare to the responsibilities of your parents. They gather the options you choose from: table sets, catering services, flowers, decorations, centerpieces, lights, invitations, and other ceremonial favors. Your father rents a limo, and hires both a DJ and a *Norteño* band, while your mother organizes the party schedule down to the moments when guests arrive and eat, and when you dance or speak.

For all your parents accomplish during this time, an event this large cannot be executed without help. Family members, willing to spend what they can, help build your perfect day. These *madrinas* and *padrinos* cover costs of food, music, and the hall itself. They ask for nothing in return, except to be thanked and remembered. At the party, you do not forget.

On the day before the celebration, your house is more frenzied than usual as you scramble to tie up loose ends. Your mother double-checks the arrangements, calling the DJ and caterers to make sure they arrive on time at the right location. You count the *recuerdos*, mementos of the upcoming day with your name and picture on them and are pleased to find enough for the guests. A pair of flat dress shoes hides underneath

your wrinkle-free dress in the closet, awaiting the festivities. It is too late for any major changes now, but you do not fear. Months, even years, of hard work promise tomorrow's perfection. Once organized, you finally rest in your now-cleared bed. You pray for everything to run smoothly.

Anxiety that has been rising in your stomach dwindles as the priest gives the mass service in church. He speaks of the importance of family union, blessing you and praising your parents for their love and care. He thanks God for your existence and asks you to remain faithful. You will. It's now your turn to talk, so you turn the pages of the Bible to your assigned passage. In the language of your family and country, you speak of the Virgin Mary, a symbol of purity and grace. When finished, you turn, holding a bouquet of fresh red roses. You walk up to the shrine of the Virgin and kneel at the statue's feet, offering the flowers and thanking her for your life. Turning back to face the pews and your family, you walk towards the main aisle to a cushioned chair and sit. Your mother stands behind you, removing the barrettes from your styled hair to set a silvery crown on your head. You cannot see her, but in the silence of the church, you know she's crying softly. Your father stands in front of you, kneeling to remove the flat-heeled shoes you've been wearing all morning. He replaces these with gorgeous sparkling heels and whispers that he loves you. In succession, cousins and aunts give you rings, necklaces, a Bible, and a rosary. Together, your parents present one final gift: a porcelain doll made in your likeness with a matching dress. You are escorted out of the church and towards the dance hall, stifling tears.

Hours later, you sit at the center of a long table in the hall and prepare for another speech in which you thank your guests for their support throughout the years. The speech given, you dance with *chambeláns* and *damas*, beginning with a traditional waltz. Next is the *baile de sorpresa*, a free-for-all in any style you choose. It is one last chance to act ridiculously child-like at a formal gathering without repercussions, so you make the most of it. The music stops and your guests applaud, loving the spins, dips, and synchronization of these dances. You will remember the rush of fear and concentration, the intricate steps, but not the music. It will have melted away as you were lifted towards the heavens. After a brief rest, only one dance remains. The live band's music slows as you approach your father, who holds his hands out to you. Together you dance, but it's different this time. The music playing is not what you rehearsed. Did I do something wrong? Was I not supposed to dance yet? Do I keep dancing?

Your head fills with fears and worry, but these fade when your father stops moving altogether to hold a microphone to his lips. He sings of you, his pride and joy. Your eyes tear up as you dance with him some more.

Weeks pass, and you slowly realize the horrid truth: it's over. A day of extravagant celebration dedicated to you has slipped away, far from the tangible present. Keepsakes become physical evidence of the party's reality; a paperweight encasing your image rests on the desk. In this clear, glass box, your dark hair is curled and frames your beaming face, a pleasant contrast against the colorful dress you are wearing. Your body is slightly turned and your hands fold over your lap. Inside the paperweight, you and that night are eternal.

This is the necessary, the excessive, and the traditional involved in such a celebration. This rite of passage from childhood to womanhood is equal parts religious and cultural. Without the Catholic mass, this is only a glorified party; yet, without the Hispanic party, it's just an extravagant mass.

This is a *Quinceañera*.