

## Preface ♪ Born To Be Mild

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Once upon a time in a kingdom far, far away, called Orlando, Florida, there lived a girl who was not a princess, for she was born fat. 256

According to the legend, even the hospital staff had appeared a little stunned that this newborn was not so tiny. A nurse had had trouble depositing her in her mother's arms. The mother, worried about the cause, cast a look down at the innocent infant and frowned. 257

"This can't be my daughter," were the first words the baby heard. Of course, she had no recollection of it herself. The only reason she knew was because it was one of her mother's favorite stories. 258

You see, the mother had been a beautiful 22 year old woman in her prime, poised to become the next Selena of the Latino world in America. Until she'd gotten pregnant with her manager, the man who had taken her out of her native Venezuela with promises of fame and richness. And had dumped her to the curb as soon as the news of pregnancy had been delivered to him. 259

So, don't think that the mother was a callous woman. She hadn't been entirely happy about the circumstances. It couldn't have been easy for her to muster love and warmth when feeling abandoned and fooled by the man she'd entrusted her entire future to. 260

The mother, one Victoria Cecilia de la Cruz Vazquez, had grown up in the land of the most beautiful women on earth, being one of them. Since she was a child, her heart had been filled to bursting with compliments from relatives and strangers about how bright her smile was, how wonderful her big, green eyes were, or her glossy, straight hair, and as she grew up, about her hourglass figure. 261

But being praised for her one true love, singing, was ultimately her reason for living. And she'd thought she could make a good living out of it, too. She left her parents and siblings and moved to the land of the American dream to pursue her version of it. She envisioned herself on a stage in front of thousands of people, singing in Spanish or English, it didn't matter, as long as her voice reached far and wide. As long as the applause was all for her. 262

And it all went up in a puff of smoke thanks to a single night of abandon. 263

Fast forward nine months and the baby in her arms was not a bundle of joy. It was a symbol of all she'd lost with one stupid mistake, and on top of that, didn't even look like her. 264

When telling the story to friends and relatives, Victoria laughed as if it was a funny one with a happy ending. "Then she started wailing right there in my arms and I started growing hysterical when it dawned on me that, Dios mío, I was suddenly a mother and I didn't even know how to take care of myself. Her screams were so loud that the doctor and the nurses ran away from the room. But at that moment I realized she was mine, because even though she didn't have my face or my hair or even the color of my eyes, she definitely had my lungs." 265

So this girl, the non princess, grew up using her lungs the same way her mother did. To belt out in song. 266

Vera Maria de la Cruz Vazquez grew up being known in her barrio for two things: one, that she was fat, and two, that she could sing anything, anywhere, any time. 267

In case you were wondering, that was my story.

The only thing I share in common with my ma is that we both love music. Even as a child I was born and she realized that she couldn't keep the same lifestyle of working at weddings, parties and singing at clubs while taking care of me, she never abandoned her talent. She wouldn't read me books when I was a kiddy; she'd sing me songs from her youth. I grew up on Olga Tañón, Selena and old acts like Las Chicas del Can, that nobody seemed to know. And I mimicked her, because what else are you supposed to do when you were six years old, and those were the only moments you saw your ma's eyes fill with genuine delight and pride that you were in her life. 268

As I grew older and it became more apparent that my baby fat was there to stay, this dynamic changed. I'd join her in a song and as a result, her eyes would dim and she'd click her tongue.

"Ay mija, what a shame. If only you were a bit slimmer you could make my dream come true." She'd stand before me, brushing a mass of curls away from my face and looking me up and down in my entire 16 size glory. "Why don't we get you in a diet? With a few pounds less you could become quite pretty." 269

And she meant well, that was the thing. This was her way of saying I had talent but that it wasn't enough. So I'd try to diet to make her happy, to keep the pride for me glowing in her eyes. But every time I tried it felt like fighting a losing battle. I'd get so hungry that I felt like I'd pass out, and I was so miserable that we both had to stop. Rinse and repeat, at least once per year. It became harder for me to sing my heart out to her if it always led to this. 270

Then she got a new reason for being happy when she met a gringo that made her feel like she was special again. I guess we should've counted ourselves lucky, because thanks to them getting married my ma became a legal resident and was able to graduate from cleaning houses and businesses in our poor community to cleaning the houses of the rich in Winter Park. I should have been happy, too, but at 12 I was old enough to think it was kinda weird that my ma was the one working long hours and weekends, while my step father lounged around at home every day, drinking beer, and going to bars with his buds at night. 271

Then my ma got pregnant again. Baby Victor was an average weight and pretty baby, and more importantly, the son of the gringo. My relevance to ma moved down to third position. And then fourth when she decided to start her own housecleaning business, and she only paid me enough attention when she was short of a cleaning girl for a job. Then music became her first priority, because the gringo didn't like songs in Spanish, and she had to juggle a newborn and a business. 272

I, being the pushover that I was, simply stopped singing. 273

There was no point in trying to, when the only audience you cared about was too busy with anything else. When there weren't that many reasons in life to fill it with music. 274

All I could do as a result that was focus on school and hope that a good GPA took me far away, into a land where I could be myself, with no scrutiny on my size, or the texture of my hair, or the look in the gringo's face that wondered what I was even doing in the picture every time he looked at me. The look that made me feel like an outsider and like, just maybe, my ma would have been better off without me from the start.

So I, Vera María de la Cruz Vazquez, daughter of an ex-singer, became known in my barrio for a third thing: excellent grades. And when the Catholic boarding school for rich kids, Holy Trinity High School, announced a full ride scholarship for an underprivileged child, I decided that that was my ticket out of dodge. 275

I applied for the opening one summer night, wishing upon a shooting star that this would change my life — not knowing that this shooting star was not just a burning piece of rock entering the atmosphere and burning up to ashes, but the maker of an absolutely outrageous miracle. 276

SONG OF THE DAY: Steppenwolf - Born To Be Wild