

Dear Luciana,

One of Mommy's friends pulled me aside right after the funeral ended, or was it a cousin? Maybe it was a Tía. I actually don't know anymore. Everything about that day is fuzzy. But I remember her manicured hand gripping my elbow softly while people streamed past us toward their cars. I remember the smell of her hair conditioner because I knew it was something Mommy would have liked. She looked at me with those watery eyes that meant she was about to say something important. I know she wanted to say the right thing, anything to just give a tiny release of the unimaginable awfulness that I just endured. I tried to get away because I knew what was going to be said. "You're going to be such a good father," she whispered, like she was sharing a secret. "I can already see it."

She didn't see anything, really. She wanted it to be true so badly she convinced herself she could see the future. Her certainty felt impossible because the idea of taking care of myself felt overwhelming, let alone taking care of another person competently.

I barely even existed at that point. I hadn't eaten solid food in three days. My suit hung loose because I'd already lost ten pounds of the fifty I would eventually lose. Just the thought of being a good father felt like someone asking me to perform surgery. I wanted to grab her shoulders and plead that I barely knew how to keep myself alive, let alone be good at anything.

The only credit I deserve is not losing my mind at someone sincerely trying to help. But Daddy wanted to. Daddy wanted to direct his anger at anything that could feel.

Everyone tells me how awesome a father I am. But sometimes I don't know if it's for them or me. They need me to be a good father because the reverse is something unthinkable. I understand why they do it. They see me and my grief, etched in my face. They see you, needing the strong parent that I better be.

But they don't see everything. They see the cliff notes version. I fall apart the second I'm alone. The platitudes are endless. "You're doing such a great job." "Luciana adores you, I can see it." "I can't imagine what you're going through. I don't know how you do it."

What if I'm not doing it? What if I'm the worst parent alive? What if telling me I'm a good parent without any proof doesn't help? What if nothing can be said to make things better? What if I'm faking it?

I'm only a good Daddy because your Mommy died.

Before Mommy died, I wasn't a bad Daddy, but I wasn't proactive in anything. I convinced myself that letting her handle everything was being supportive. When your two month checkup was coming up, Mommy would research pediatricians, read reviews, call three different offices to compare availability and insurance coverage, then ask if Tuesday at 10 AM worked for me. I'd check my calendar and say "sure," like I'd contributed something meaningful.

What car seat to buy, what formula to use, which bassinet to buy. I waited for her to research, compare, and decide. I told myself she was better at baby stuff, so why interfere? I chose the easy jobs. Carrying things, building stuff, not calming crying babies. Everything she asked of me I would do. I was the admin and she was the CEO.

Your Mommy was the best Mommy ever because she worked to be. She didn't just coast on natural instinct. She put in the effort to earn that title. When you were sick, she already had tissues and medicine. If you were cranky in public, if there was a possible answer to soothe you, it was in her Mary Poppins purse. I can still see her digging through that thing at 2 AM, pulling out the exact pacifier you wanted, the one with the little pink bow in the middle. She knew what you needed before you needed it.

I had never been alone with you for more than a couple of hours at a time. When she died, everything dumped on me at once while I was also grieving. It's no wonder the memories of last year are seeping out of my brain.

Grief didn't teach me to be a father. It beat me into one. I had to learn everything at once that I should have known all along. You fell off the bed one time while I was changing you because I turned to grab wipes. The sound of your body hitting the hardwood floor. That hollow thunk that made my stomach drop into my shoes. The same panic attack symptoms surface, hands shaking, chest tightening immediately. You cried for maybe a minute. I hyperventilated for twenty. I called your pediatrician convinced I'd given you brain damage. The nurse was very patient with the panicked widower who didn't know babies are pretty squishy and you'll be fine.

The first time you got really sick with vomiting and massive diarrhea, I stood in our kitchen, trying not to faint. The kitchen light was too bright. Everything smelled like bleach and baby formula gone wrong. You screamed from your crib while I googled "how much liquid can come out of a baby before they are dehydrated, can a baby go a day without eating with only drinking water."

I scrolled through WebMD horror stories. When I called the nurse hotline, the woman's voice was so calm it made me feel insane. "Sir, this is very normal," she said. My body physically rejected the idea that any of this was normal. I was dripping wet within seconds, telling me that this is wrong and feels wrong. But I did what she told me, and I did okay. I was more freaked out than you were. But I stayed calm, took your temperature every couple of hours, and kept you hydrated. I handled it like I'd done it a hundred times.

Every skill I learned came with the taste of panic. I could make and feed you dinner, change a diaper without tears, but the voice in my head doesn't just sound like me. It sounds like me cross examining myself in court, presenting evidence of every diaper I didn't change, every cry I let Mommy handle first.

"You let her carry you for nine months. Then carry the mental load for nine more. You played with blocks on the floor. You checked your phone while she researched car seats. You were dead weight with a paycheck. Now she's actually dead, and you want credit for doing what you

should have done from day one? You're not a good daddy. You're just a daddy with no other choice. Don't you dare feel proud of meeting the bare minimum when Mommy is in the ground."

Regular anxiety feels suffocating and chaotic, out of control. This voice feels different. Malicious. Intentional. Like it knows exactly where to cut deepest.

People showered me with compliments while internally I was drowning. But somehow, the building blocks of a competent Daddy began to take place. The first time I handled one of your meltdowns in public, I felt this strange mix of pride and devastation. You had a complete breakdown in Walmart because I wouldn't let you lick the shopping cart. Your face turned that specific shade of red that means business. "DADA DADA! DADA!!" you screamed, throwing your whole body backward in the cart.

I could feel my face getting warmer, the nonexistent eyes peering at me when in reality I was in an empty aisle. Nobody was staring. Nobody cared. But I cared. However, instead of panicking, I scooped you up, found the quiet corner by the pharmacy, and did the breathing thing. In 2, 3, 4, out 2, 3, 4. Your hot tears soaked through my shirt. You calmed down in my arms, and when you giggled at my terrible humming, for exactly three seconds I forgot to feel guilty about being competent.

But then the guilt crashed back. Competence felt like betraying Mommy's memory. She should be seeing this. She should be the one calming you down in the pharmacy corner, not me figuring it out too late.

I could tell you about the night you had a fever of 102 and I knew exactly what to do, or the morning I braided your hair perfectly on the first try. But I don't want to celebrate those moments. I want to stick my head underwater and hold it there until my lungs burn. I want to feel the full weight of how much I sucked before. I deserve to drown in that guilt, even if drowning doesn't help you.

Now, over a year later, am I a good father? Yes. I'm on point with your bedtime routine. Bath, brush, book, bed. I can read your moods, anticipate your needs, make you laugh when you're cranky. When you're having a rough day, we breathe together. It helps both of us. Anxiety is always trying to suck me into a void. When you need to take a break, I get to take one with you.

When someone tells me I'm a good father, everything in me goes cold. I freeze, stuck between trying not to be mean and going against every fiber of my body telling them they're wrong. Dead wrong. Mommy had to die for me to step up. That's not heroic. That's just late.

People say Mommy would be proud. But she isn't here to be wrong. She isn't here to tell me not to be so hard on myself. She isn't here to comfort me. She isn't here to push back when I try to fight. And since she isn't here, then that means she doesn't get to be proud of me.

But I'm making this about me, and it is selfish for me to do that because what guts me the most is what you lost. You lost the one person who knew what it felt like to grow up as a woman. When girls are cruel to you in ways only girls understand, when your body changes and you

have questions I can't answer from experience, when you need someone who lived through being a daughter, a teenager, a woman in this world, I'll be guessing. Mommy would have known exactly what to say, exactly how to help. I'll be googling "how to talk to your daughter about periods" like I googled everything else.

But there's something else that breaks my heart. Mommy died thinking the Daddy she got was a good Daddy. She never met the Daddy born out of necessity. The one who actually figured it out, who became the father you needed. She only knew the guy who said "sure" when Tuesday worked.

She used to brag about me to her friends. "He's such a good daddy," she'd say when I'd play with you for an hour while she made dinner. She set the bar so low that basic participation looked like excellence.

Mommy died believing I was good enough. She was wrong. But maybe that's what love does. Maybe it sees potential where there isn't any yet. Maybe she knew I would become this person someday, and dying just made someday happen faster.

I became everything she hoped I was. I just wish she was still here to be wrong about me.

Besitos,

Daddy