

## **Bitter Truth**

***Emily Diaz and Adrianna Kinard***

I hate sick people.

My back pangs in distress, my hands cramping, and my feet are so swollen, I'm afraid that I might have to buy myself new pairs of shoes after this. I pick up another bag from the truck and I curse Sal for getting a cold from his children and leaving me to bear this enormous load. *Dayquil is created for a reason, Sal. Also, who has kids, man?* My back screams as I lug the coffee beans over my shoulder and move them onto yet, another pallet. I wish I wasn't so desperate for some extra cash, but I can buy a new back when I am buying my casket.

*"Oi! Williams!"*

*I snap my head around and nearly snarl as Jeff "The Jack of All Trades" practices his terrible accent that is neither Australian nor British. Jeff's lack of safety equipment would have been a concern to many, but 'The Jack of All Trades' can find a way not to get hit in the head by the pallet jacks swinging around here. As my manager makes a beeline towards me, I put on my nicest fake face, "What's up?"*

*"Can I ask you for something?" His breath fans across my face and the overwhelming smell of cheap whiskey invades my senses.*

*"Depends, what do I get out of it?" I try not to gag at his body odor as his lack of self-care becomes all too prominent.*

*"You," He sticks a finger in my face, "Get to tone those biceps of yours, Williams." He reaches to grasp my arms and the temptation to duck from his reach and show him how toned my biceps are, is too great.*

*"What do I need to do for you? I step out of his reach to look at the clipboard that tells me no new information from 2 minutes ago*

*"You need to loosen up a bit Williams," He takes a deep sigh, "but I need you to put in the next shift."*

*"What?" I can barely repress the anger as I already put too many hours into this stupid warehouse.*

*"Hey! Don't scream at the not-sick-person here." He falters back and nearly trips over himself, but he catches himself. "Sal's out with the cold. His filthy children got it from somewhere blah, blah, blah...he needs someone to cover for him. You just happen to be the right man - I mean person - for the job." He chuckles at his own "joke". There are twelve other people - I mean men - around me doing my work, but I knew I was special for a reason.*

*Before I can say anything, he continues, "I'll pay over time."*

*His sing-songy voice makes him giggle and me wondering, 'Shouldn't that be a given?' I contemplate my options: I could go home, study for the exam that is two days away, and catch up on some sleep or pay to be able to continue going to school, buy more textbooks, and pay the heating bill.*

*I take the latter, "Okay then. What's Sal doing?"*

*"Yes!" Jeff pumps his hand in the air and motions for me to give him a high five. With a glare, and no motion to join him, he mumbles, "Poor sport." then perks up, "Follow me, darling."*

*We move towards the edge of the warehouse, As we go through the aisles of coffee, my nose tickles with the many aromas that form a multitude of bitter symphonies that many don't begin to comprehend. The earthy notes that come together come from many places: Brazil brings the nutty sweet tones; Vietnam produces vanilla and mocha baritones; Columbia hits the tip of the tongue with the high pitch of caramel; Ethiopia takes the palette off with an herbaceous finish.*

*Jeff and I reach the edge of the warehouse near the docking area - where all of our shipments come through - and like fate, a truck backs into dock four, and a weary man doesn't even acknowledge me, but thrusts a clipboard in Jeff's way and simply says, "Sign."*

*Either I should deepen my voice or grow an unruly beard because, without any stupid gimmicks, Jeff signs the paper like he's sober. The man gets the clipboard back, opens the back of the truck, and throws the keys to Jeff. He heads out to his car without a single noise coming from him - not a grunt, curse, or mumble.*

*Pushing the keys into my hand and pulling a cheap flask out "This is what Sal's supposed to do, so," he pats me on the back, "this is what you're supposed to do." He takes a short pull of the contents within the flask. He points dumbly at his flask, then waves a hand to the truck filled with the brim of burlap bags, "Good luck, Williams."*

I look down at my watch and it's 11:08 pm. Two hours have passed since Jeff's sweaty, drunken, sponge-like body disappeared into the building someplace. Of course, he had failed to mention that the conveyor has been down for repairs for the last 3 days. I take a minute to breathe and I simply have to think. *Most 21-year-olds are not spending a Friday night alone, or in an empty warehouse unloading a shipment of Cafe do Brasil.* I take a deep breath - in and out. I look down in the truck and I nearly start jumping up and down, but my aching body refuses.

One last bag sits in the corner

*Come on, Aria. We got this!* In comparison to the enthusiasm I had only five minutes ago, I practically strut into the musty truck and let my boots stomp to the back of the truck. I squat down to pick up this bag, and I notice a large gash across the top and I carefully get my body in position. My arms are

getting their last give, and my thighs burn with this last push. I come up to make the last trek to the pallet. Only a couple of beans fall out, *not too bad*. I take one pace, two paces, three paces, four paces, and a fifth -

“Ugghhhhhh!!!!” I trip over the lip of the dock and my knees make a large smack against the concrete. The pain shoots through my body like lightning. drop the bag and the beans spill and trickle all over the floor. I flip my body over onto my back and bite back any chances of letting one tear fall. As if my luck drains out of my body, not one tear falls, but many, many tears. I try to control the tide by hiding in my hands as if it was a caress from somebody. I haven’t cried in a long while, but I know it isn’t just the throbbing pain in my body. I cry for the person I am: a lonely person, a child with no parents, a woman with no love, and a worker with no respect. My tears continue to fall and I admit my defeat by releasing my arms from their “caress” and letting them fall on the floor. My left arm falls and meets the concrete, but my right arm makes contact with an unfamiliar surface. Immediately, I flinch. I peer and make my watering eyes to look where my arm made contact with a... brown thing. I wipe the tears from my eyes and sniffle. I look down to see a creased leather binder of sorts. The string that binds it had come undone and amongst the spilled beans, papers of many weights, varieties of color, and varying sizes rose above the mess. I crawl and grasp the leather binder, only as big as my hand, and scatter beans that sit on these papers, spreading the mess more, but I collect the papers one by one.

I hear shuffling steps approaching and I shove these papers filled with the unknown and cradle them to my chest.

“What happened down here?” The words are spoken too long and are strung too attached to each other.

“I tripped and a bag ripped open” My fingers clench the papers as if I am afraid Jeff will try to steal them.

“Williams! Come on!” He belts out and he takes a couple of drunken steps and I curl my body into itself. “That’s a big mess you got there.”

“Jeff.” My voice stern and commanding, “I’ll clean it up. I got it.”

The shuffling steps come to a halt. Jeff’s shadow looms over me. My breaths quicken and I could feel the atmosphere around me change. Morphing into my fears running amok in my head. An echoing smack breaks the atmosphere and silence around us. I look to my right to see a wooden broom beside me.

“Thanks.” My voice above a whisper.

“Yeah, man.” He lets a loud burp out. “No problem.”

He leaves hiccups in his wake as he departs to God knows where, but that’s not my concern. I try to compact the papers back into their leather binding, making sure not to rip any, and tuck the papers into the pocket of my oversized jacket. The papers start to burn over my heart and I know that I have to get out

of here as quickly as I can. I yank the broom off the floor and sweep all of the beans into a heaping pile. Throwing the beans into the trash as they are no longer good. I slam the back of the truck down and refuse to let the loud bang of metal deter me from my task. I lock the truck, toss the keys onto the desk, and make an almost sprint to my car. Yanking the papers out of my jacket and slamming them onto the passenger's seat, I breathe a sigh of relief. Like a bat out of hell, I get my beat-down car out of that parking lot and speed off into the night.

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By the time I get home, I feel like I am racing against the sun. It's 2:16 am and I have class at 8. *We'll make it work... We'll have to make it work.* I desperately peel off my work clothes and try to slip into something more comfortable. There's a pair of dirty sweatpants on the floor and I yank those on, I look onward and there's a dirty sweatshirt with too many stains on it, I yank that on too. With the papers trying to free themselves of their bindings, I plop down on my bed and carefully unbind the leather to let the animals free. The papers fly, swim, and crawl across the comforter in a chaotic manner, and once they still, I begin to examine. The first paper I look at has some good handwriting, especially for being shoved into a coffee bag. A beloved coffee ring: Even if they come from another place, we share our stains together. The only problem, the story written in Spanish - no, Portuguese I think. I whip out my phone and quickly type in the words on the page as best as I can. I try my best to decipher, write all of the accents and forgive the complicated language. As soon as I finish, I read:

*"I remember pulling my first cherry, I was neither happy nor thrilled that I had done it, but a foreign feeling formed beneath my breast, coating my heart in thick molasses. That first day was tiring: splinters coated my fingers, calluses started to form on my fingers, and my feet were so tired, I felt as if they would fall off my body."*

"Who is this person?" I say to the shadows around me. This paper is only one of the many, and I don't think I can do this. Wait! I didn't go through this, this isn't about my pain, this person has gone through more pain than I have. *How old is this person? Could it be -? No! There's no way!* The paper was ripped and now I look for its missing piece. I toss more papers aside until I find the rest of the coffee ring. Rooting amongst the mess I collect the second part:

*"I was found in the fields of Sao Paulo, only a small child now that I see. I was barely the age of thirteen and I thought I was normal. I had friends in the field like me, age never mattered to us as we were all foresting the same bushes; we all had grown with each season like the*

*berries we pick. My parents had tried to get me in school, but nothing could've kept me from those fields I believe. My fate had wound itself so tight, I think that's why I have survived this long. When you see your own parents give each other glances every time you tell them about your dreams, it brings fear into your life. I knew parents loved me, but I knew our lives aren't built on love, but on wages."*

"What?" My cheeks grow warm and I can feel the steam rising from within. This is just a child. They don't need to - they shouldn't have to fear dreams. Survival is built on hope and this - this child is getting their hope stripped away from him! When I wanted to be a writer, my mother had taught me how to write, and my father had edited my works. *How can this be okay?* My hands start to shake, but I notice a stain spilling down the papers, and one paper on the edge of the bed has continued the story through the stain.

*"With my bucket hanging from my neck, I found my parents in front of the processing area, like the rest of the crowd, counting the bags from today's work. I pushed myself through the crowd until I could grasp onto Papa's worn pants and tug. When he looked down, he didn't have the eyes of relief of his son's appearance, but disappointment, on the verge of anger as he looked into my bucket. I had a variety of colors in my bucket - bright red, bright green and splatterings of a black, brown cherries - but Papa didn't see color, Papa saw a mistake one right after the other. He called for my mother to help, "Ani!" When my mother turned to her husband's voice, like Papa, Mama didn't see me, but the bucket of mistakes. Mama speeds to me and rips the bucket off my head and my parents push through the back of the crowd, to the outskirts by a coffee plant. 'Oh, Paulo,' Mama starts muttering over and over. They start digging through my bucket, peeling the variants of color out and tossing them underneath the plant. My parents were fuming as the bucket slowly turned one shade of a cherry red. The before full bucket of pain, but pride of completion, was gone and turned to just another bucket in the bunch."*

"No love is stronger than a mother's." Isn't that how it's supposed to be? *Paulo*. This name - this child with no childhood. This person with no dreams, and this soul with no hope - has worked more and longer than I ever had. How has this story not come to light? But this isn't a story, after all. This isn't a fairy tale, this is someone's life. Instead of dreams, this child got a nightmare. I type frantically needing to pour alcohol to ease the infection.

*"At the end of my first day, my parents and I took home \$10.00. By the time we got home, it dwindled down to \$4.56. Papa needed a new pair of boots and Mama had to pay for water. The*

*boots came from a worker's son whose father had just passed that day and my mother fished dead bats out of the water. I got Papa's old boots, the soles were worn down terribly, the material so of course I could feel my father's pain with these boots with every step I took. I had those boots for four more years - Mama and Papa saved up some money to purchase me a new pair of boots for my tenth birthday: we didn't eat that night."*

My heart weeps and breaks with each word streaked across the page. The words end with the dead-end of the stain. A dead-end, no more Paulo. I peel my eyes from the phone and look out, to absolutely nowhere. When I look for something, all I see is a blank wall. A blank wall with a crappy paint shade slapped onto it. I start muttering to myself, "Blank wall... blank wall... blank wall..." then it hits me, "Blank wall!" I grab the pieces of paper and steal the stapler on my floor (the world is my desk) and I smack the first page in the middle of the wall, then thump! Click! I staple Paulo's work onto the wall and I run back to the bed and find my next piece. No more handwriting matches Paulo's, but there is handwriting similar, yet less handsome. It's scratchy handwriting and there is limited consistency in the writing, but I push through. I need to listen to this person.

*Mainha had charged at me when I was playing with the other boys and girls. I had thought she had found I had dirtied her only ring when I slipped it on just the other day. I had seen this white skirt with a huge diamond on her finger and I had wanted to be pretty and rich. Mainha scooped me into her arms and I was starting to squirm like a worm in the rain and Mainha had squeezed her arms tighter around me and said, "Pare". When my Mainha told you that, you could've felt your body obey her before your brain could obey. The squirming freezes in place. She had taken me into the house shared with other families and brought me into the room I shared with my three other sisters. "Ani," she told me, "How old are you?" I knew this answer and I smiled proudly as I was a grown-up now, "Thirteen, Mainha."*

The first time I laughed today was now, a low chuckle greets the room, changing the atmosphere slightly. Bringing the shadows some lightness. I go to the wall and staple this piece and find another with very similar handwriting. As I read, the little flicker in the wet cave dies.

*"...her aged smile matched my own, "Good." Her smile dropped, "You know what that means?" I nodded and she continues, "You get to become a part of the family now." I was so excited, "How can I do that?" "Well, you get to come to the fields with Papai and me." Now, I was confused, "Why? I don't want to do that." Mainha's voice had risen, "Ani, you don't want to*

*grow up?" Distance had grown, "No!" I quickly interjected, "I just don't want to go into the fields. I want to do something different for the family." "No." Mainha had made her way to the door. "No. No. No. No need for difference." My mother left the room and I started to run after her, but she pushed me away, and I landed on my butt. "Mainha!" I start to cry, tears flowing down my cheeks, "Mainha!" I start to scream, and she ignores me as I can hear the door locks work and keep me in here. "You aren't coming out until tomorrow morning, Ani. Understood?" I scream in frustration but no amount of screaming or tears could have stopped the door unbolting at sunrise and my mother dropping a pair of gloves in front of me. Those gloves have too many holes, but then again, so does my heart."*

I understand the concept of how mothers are always right, but poor little Ani. Tough love can only salve people's wounds before they start to infect them. Is this a right of passage? Do young boys and girls understand what they live through isn't okay? How do they survive? People bring their children in the fields knowing exactly what could happen to them! My hands clench in anger, but the crinkle of paper stops me. I look down to see Ani's story facing more wear and tear than help and growth in my hands. I drop the story and it sinks to the floor instead of a gentle drift. I breathe in and out as best as I can. *Inhale... exhale... do it again Aria... inhale... exhale.* When I come through and anger no longer shakes my voice, I drop down. Besides the sores (that I used to think was the worst) flaring up, I push through and pick up the story and I move to my wall. When I staple the story to the wall underneath Paulo's, I take a step back, I look at these stories with new eyes. I just have to wonder out loud, "Is Ani a relative?" I audibly gasp, "Is Ani Paulo's mother?"

I mean, she has to be. I compare the handwriting. The resemblance of the more refined y's shows that Paulo had seen that type of "y" before. The evolution of language shows, it's obviously not just from what Ani told me, but Paulo eventually got an education, but Ani never had a chance. Ani's language is too specific. *Skirt...* I heard that before. That's right! My grandfather would always say "Get your little skirts over here, Adrianna! I need to see my granddaughters!" Grandpa's language never grew from his time as a kid himself. So if grandpa was born in 1943, he would've been at least 13 by 1956. *Aria, you are becoming a little Nancy Drew.* So, Ani would have to be at least in her 70s now. Paulo would have to be in his 50s most likely. I look back at the scattering of untold mysteries behind me and it all starts to click. *Oh, Paulo...you took not only a leap, but you did what I thought you couldn't. You dreamed.* Paulo has to be in the fields still, but how? He literally wrote he had gotten out of there! What does this even mean? I pick up more papers and read more stories, more heart-wrenching, breaking stories. As more and more travel and stick to my wall, the plants grow as the soil of my mind is fertile. I make sure to shade the

fragile seeds; I wait to let them grow on their own, but I pick the seeds that have developed into a cherry; I bring them to other sides of the field; I process what Paulo has given me, and I let them sit and dry.

As I step down from the arduous plant, there's one space that's untouched. The blank space feels larger as it seems to swell the more I look at it. I turn from it in fear and what do you know? One piece of flimsy paper, withered and old sits upon my bed telling me to come closer. My feet drag, not only out of tiredness but in fright as to what I would find. As I got closer, I hesitantly reached my hand out to the paper, almost sure it was gonna bite me if I startled it. I let the paper waltz into my hand. I begin to slowly unravel the paper, the creases old, but very sharp and crisp like a morning frost. This handwriting differs from the rest: most of the papers have had more time taken for them like it was therapy for them. This handwriting shows touches of the refinery, but harsh lines of back against the wall. My phone begins to dim as the battery runs out, but I have begun to get a hold of this, so I type as this might be my last effort.

*Dear Josie,*

*The days grow longer and longer I get further from you. Though we have made it thus far, my hope begins to wither like the last flicker of the oil lamp swinging above me. The moon is bright and full tonight and I wish you could see it. These train tracks aren't in the nicest conditions, but I pray you can read this: I write to you, meu amor, in hopes you can hold onto a piece of who we are. We travel through beating nights and work through the whipping sun. I don't know how long I can take this. Josie, they refuse to quit. Coffee is our joy but this war needs to be won. They have promised us full pay when we have finished our travels, but the men grow sickly and weary as we unload more and more beans. Most of these beans do not stand a chance, most of these bags I lay on will be burned this time tomorrow. With the States facing their depression, the government has us burning their orders. You don't deserve this, our future doesn't deserve this. I am trying to get to you, I promise I am, but they want to keep growing and it all goes in flames. I have lost count as to how many bags we've burned - the sweet smell of our bitter treasure is gone. I don't remember the fresh smell of the best brew you used to make me. The sugar boiled with the grinds, and you would pour the coffee through the filter, and every time, you would spill the coffee over the side. Josie, those spills are what made me want to come back to you. My suffering and those around me are worth it, don't get the rest of broods worked up, you hear? How's our little one? Fiery like their mother? I hope they are. Sing to them tonight for me? I want to hear your voice carry through the winds.*

*Coffee might not be ours anymore, but Josie, I am yours,*

*~ Diogo*

Unlike the rest of Paulo's family, Diogo shares hope.

Josie and Diogo have to be Ani/Anila's parents, which makes them Paulo's grandparents. I doubt this has been opened or seen by anybody other than Josie. The creases show that Pedro may have known what could've lied within, but never had confirmation. I know what's in it, but it isn't a story, but a promise. This has no rhythm, but it has a coursing amount of love that flows in each word. Diogo had shared the bad, the horrors, yet that man had the audacity to face the war with hope. Ani shared her story with deep and dark sorrow, that would leave acid in the back of the throat. Like his mother, Paulo had shared his experience in avid detail and could make you feel those splinters were digging into your raw hands. The rest of the Silva family had made you feel the physical pain - the bruises, calluses, whips, and the exhaustion ripping your body at the seams. The emotional pain - terror, animosity, misery, sickness, and consistent torture. Diogo shared some of that, but I've read at least 50 other stories, but this one, gave away light that's barely flickering but provides more than enough to cope.

Without getting too emotional, I think more logically now. *How could they destroy and waste labor? I know in general that competition is competition, but still, how could Brazil do this? They hurt men, women, and children for what? Children could be dying.* My anxiety starts to rise more and more as I think about the pesticides, bone damage, and the animals that thrive in these fields. I shiver as I think of snakes wrapping their bodies around children's arms, slithering and capturing their prey around the neck. Delivering a deathly bite. *Do women get any relief?* There have to be laws to protect women now, but then again, Paulo's tale takes place less than thirty years ago.

There are too many questions swimming possessed to toy with my focus. I try to divert my attention to the field growing on the wall. I couldn't feel the surge of euphoria as I picked the stapler off the floor, and planted one more seed.

Thump!

Click!

Diogo's story lies peacefully amongst the rest of them; His daughter's lies adjacent to his, binding their connection, her son's cause connections to cousins, aunts, uncles, mothers, fathers, sons, and daughters. Paulo didn't just gather his family but gathered up stories from those who learned to dream, to hope that their family can be freed as Paulo's. The strings, the scrambled notes, and the stories I have yet to comprehend, hang in front of me as the sun breaks into the room.

I ask the audience that is my room:

*What. Happens. Now?*