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Tradition

You run down the street to the *colmado*, instantly overwhelmed by the savory aroma of *pasteles en hoja* and *arroz con guandules*. Sweet fruits line the shelves – mangos, pineapples, strawberries – a sunset display. You look around as dark, brown eyes meet yours, acknowledging you warmly. A group of elders crowds around a table, smacking their domino pieces down onto a board, chattering in light Spanish with one another as they share a *Presidente*.

The little kids are riding their bikes through the *barrio*. They toss a baseball down the street, using sticks as makeshift bats, their laughter enveloping you like a sweet melody. To foreigners, the sight may seem dirty and unsanitary. To the kids, it seems like home.

You stop by your grandma's house. Ocean blues and fluorescent yellows cascade off its borders. Even with all the years that have passed, you can still recall every moment shared within these four walls. You make your way into the *galleria*. A book rests in your right hand as you take a seat in your favorite rocking chair, though you don't plan on reading for a while. You simply sit there and sway, observing the drops of rain as they hit the tin roof and bounce onto the ground. The slow, rhythmic way of life here pulls you in.

In comes your *abuela*, her gray hair tied into a loose braid, her colorful earrings matching the festive atmosphere. She engulfs you in a massive hug, proceeding to then pull you into the living room. Salsa and bachata tunes hum in the background. Marc Anthony. Juan Luis Guerra. Michel el Buenon.

In come your *primos*. They smile and tease you, *la gringa*. *Callate*, you say, but you smile. You know you couldn't mean it if you tried, and so do they.

The whole family arrives. *Los tios y tias, abuelos, cuñadas y cuñados. El entero grupo* You dance. You laugh. You eat. Pictures are taken and pictures are shown. Stories are made and stories are uncovered. At one point, when you can't so much as even think of accepting one more plate, you lean back and try to take it all in; to store every face, every detail, every person into your memory. The festivities last late into the evening.

It's *manana*. You don't want to leave. You say *adios* and hold back tears in your eyes. You promise you'll be back soon.

You're here. You're 1,465 miles away, but you couldn't feel closer if you tried. Oftentimes, you get tired of the constant tug-of-war. Of feeling stuck in the messy in-between: not quite American enough, not quite Dominican enough. The world beckons for you to line up, pick a side. Which will you choose?

You don't want to choose. You want to be the joyful beat of merengue, the t.v. humming the score of a touchdown on a lazy Sunday afternoon. The passion of Spanish, the dynamic of English. The rowdy - and at times chaotic - bubble of community, the strength and independence of solidarity.

You know who you are. Two in one. You will never let any of it go.

Las fiestas, los dominoes, la comida, las sonrisas. La familia. Todo. Esta en tu sangre.

You will never let it go.