

LEAVING PARADISE

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Cast of Characters:

CYNTHIA: Woman, any race, 60s to 70s

XIMENA: Woman, Latina, 40s to early 50s

Setting:

A bedroom in a modest house in West Palm Beach, Florida.

Time:

Modern day.

SYNOPSIS: A death doula joins her client for an appointment filled with chatter, manicures, and stories about more than one kind of trip.

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[CYNTHIA lies in bed with some medical equipment nearby, but it's her bedroom at home, not a hospital room. Not serene, exactly, but not agitated either.]

XIMENA enters with a tote bag of items; she's welcome and expected. Before settling in, she goes to a nearby speaker (or uses a Bluetooth one from her bag if needed) and starts playing something like smooth jazz. She looks over to Cynthia to check the volume level and gets approval.]

XIMENA:
I didn't see your daughter today.

CYNTHIA:
She went to Iceland.

XIMENA:
Wow! So far!

CYNTHIA:
Don't worry, I told her to go.

XIMENA:
Oh no, I didn't mean—

CYNTHIA:
I said to her, "Kaitlyn! It's not happening today and it's not happening tomorrow and lord knows it's probably not happening next week, so go take your dang trip!" and she started fussing again, hand-wringing, literally, in that way I just— [she gestures like she's overwhelmed with how she can't stand it.] So I said. "Kaitlyn. I may not be getting much older, but you're certainly not getting any younger. You want to go. You've wanted to go for months. So go."

[There's a brief silence. Ximena is listening as she takes out and sets up a tape recorder, some flowers in a vase, and some lotion.]

CYNTHIA:
She's worried, of course, about all those stories where dying people... you know... depart as soon as the loved one leaves the room. But I said, look, six days overseas will not induce sudden... heart arrythmias or something.

[*She seemed to want to say the words "sudden death" but stumbled over it.*]

CYNTHIA:

I'm sorry, Ximena, you were?

XIMENA:

I'm listening.

CYNTHIA:

No, I interrupted you before. You were saying? You maybe didn't mean to...?

XIMENA:

Boy, your memory is sharp. I don't even remember what I was saying.

CYNTHIA:

You said something about distance... and then that you didn't mean something.

XIMENA:

I just meant I agree. Kaitlyn deserves a break.

CYNTHIA:

Do you get breaks from your clients?

XIMENA:

No, not while already working with someone. I make myself completely available to them.

CYNTHIA:

Just one client at a time?

XIMENA:

There's been overlap before, but not lately. I try to avoid it. I want to give all clients my undivided attention.

CYNTHIA:

I like your undivided attention.

[*Ximena gestures to the recorder or moves it closer.*]

XIMENA:

Did you want to share anything today? Any memories?

CYNTHIA:

Oh god. I can't even think of anything. Maybe I'm all shared out.

[She forces a laugh and Ximena forces a smile, but Cynthia then seems scared of that thought. When she talks again, she speaks quickly.]

CYNTHIA:

Can you imagine! Iceland! How many miles is that even... and to think the furthest I've ever gone is New Orleans for a honeymoon.

XIMENA:

You never went to New York City? The Midwest? Anything like that?

CYNTHIA:

Never had a need. My parents went down to the Keys after they retired, then Kaitlyn was in Orlando for college. By then my whole life was here in West Palm. My husband, our friends, my cousin Hilary. Of course, my husband passed ten years ago - I already told you, yada yada, the whole mishap with the stent - but did I tell you about Hilary? She passed just about five years ago.

XIMENA:

I'm so sorry.

CYNTHIA:

Breast cancer. I guess we must have some sort of predisposition. Of course, mine is different. Skin cancer just makes sense if you know me. I'm a walker. I love to walk and I don't just mean in the mall.

[At some point in the next section, Ximena begins performing a basic little manicure session on Cynthia. Hand lotion, removing old polish, putting on new polish, etc.]

XIMENA:

Me, too.

CYNTHIA:

Oh really? Where?

XIMENA:

Any park. Mizner plaza. Dog parks; I take my little guy down.

CYNTHIA:

The yorkie... Stewie, was it?

XIMENA:
You and that memory, Cynthia. I swear.

CYNTHIA:
Oh, yours isn't bad.

XIMENA:
I'm good with a face, bad with a name.

CYNTHIA:
You're young, you're pretty, who needs names? [*Ximena chuckles, waves her off*] Your name, Ximena. What is— where is that— god, I'm sorry, I know I'm not supposed to ask.

XIMENA:
It's Cuban. My grandparents made their way over to Miami, my parents moved to Boca.

CYNTHIA:
Of course. Mizner, that's Boca Raton, not here... you drive a half hour to me each day?

XIMENA:
I've done clients as far as an hour and a half each way.

CYNTHIA:
Oh, you poor thing. Driving from Boca. Right through flocks of snowbirds.

XIMENA:
I learned to drive here. I'm used to it. What were you saying about Hilary?

CYNTHIA:
Well, it just made sense. She got breast cancer, she was always this sort of mild, feminine woman. When I think of breast cancer, I just think of the very idea of being a woman. I got skin cancer, I was more of a wild child, running around in the sun, playing sports. I loved tennis. Haven't played in years... Sometimes things just make sense, is what I'm saying.

XIMENA:
Were the two of you close?

CYNTHIA:
Best friends. But total opposites. She loved to travel. She filled my Kaitlyn's head with stories. Two peas in a pod. Hilary went to Spain, ten years later on the dot, Kaitlyn went. Hilary went to Tokyo, almost ten - eleven if you want to split hairs -

Kaitlyn went to Japan for two whole weeks! Hilary went to Iceland, almost ten years ago to the day, well... actually... what day is it?

XIMENA:
April 18th.

CYNTHIA:
Yep, almost to the day. When Hilary went, the day was April 19th.

XIMENA:
Your memory!

CYNTHIA:
Well, I drove her. Picked her up on April 29th. She had a mammogram on April 30th. That's why it's so easy for me to remember that. Five years she fought hard.

XIMENA:
It's nice that you can remember so much about her.

CYNTHIA:
She had a travel bug, for sure. Not me.

XIMENA:
Not at all?

CYNTHIA:
Miami was a fine enough vacation for me. We'd do girls' trips overnight there, her and I. Get some ceviche together, shop a little, hit the beach. I did some sunbathing, if you didn't put two and two together.

XIMENA:
Did you travel with your husband?

CYNTHIA:
Just that one time to New Orleans. He hated it. Too much noise, he said.

XIMENA:
And you?

CYNTHIA:
I liked it fine. I loved the coffee. I liked the airports. Is that silly?

XIMENA:
I like Palm Beach airport. Something soothing about it.

CYNTHIA:

A little one, kind of. Compared to the others around here.

XIMENA:

That's what I like about it.

CYNTHIA:

Did you ever travel to Cuba?

XIMENA:

No. My parents did after my grandparents, my mom's parents, died. To honor them. I was too young.

CYNTHIA:

That's so lovely. I didn't travel to honor my mom and dad. Dad grew up here, Mom in New Jersey. Not such an honorable place.

XIMENA:

No less than here.

CYNTHIA:

I guess I'll never know.

[Again, Cynthia is uncomfortable with the silence. She looks over to Ximena to fill it, but Ximena smiles serenely, perfectly comfortable with pauses.]

CYNTHIA:

You should go to Cuba one day too.

XIMENA:

But I don't speak Spanish.

CYNTHIA:

Not at all?

XIMENA:

Well, I understand it fairly well. And I can say a little. But not enough really to hold a conversation. That's why I went into this line of work, actually.

CYNTHIA:

You became a death doula because you didn't know Spanish?

XIMENA:

I couldn't communicate well with my grandparents. When they both passed, they seemed so scared in their final hours. There was so much between us to say, but we just couldn't get the words out.

I decided to spend my life helping people transition in a way that made them feel seen and heard.

CYNTHIA:

You're doing a good job.

XIMENA:

Oh, I try.

CYNTHIA:

No, really. I feel heard with you. Your grandparents would be proud.

[If Ximena lets her emotions show, this would be the first time so far. She doesn't let Cynthia see any tears though. Cynthia looks a little nervous, like she got in trouble in class or something.]

CYNTHIA:

Can you believe you've been coming to see me for three weeks now and it's the first time I asked you how you got into such an unusual line of work?

XIMENA:

We're both here for you, Cynthia. Kaitlyn, too.

CYNTHIA:

Not Kaitlyn.

XIMENA:

She'll be back soon.

CYNTHIA:

I know! I just, I wish—

[Cynthia can't chat her way through these emotions now.]

CYNTHIA:

I wish she'd stay there until it's over! I wish she'd be one of those people who accidentally leaves the room at just the right moment. I wish... I wish it could just be you in the room at the end.

[Anything like hand lotion and nail polish has stopped. Ximena listens, quiet and still, with utmost attention.]

CYNTHIA:

Can we do that? Can it just be you in the room when it's time?

XIMENA:

Arrangements like that can be made. But... I'd like you to think about it a little more.

CYNTHIA:

I had to be the one in the room every other time. With my mom, my dad, Roger, Hilary. It's the loneliest feeling in the world. No matter how many times you have to do it. And I don't want Kaitlyn's last memory of me to be like that. Like *this*. Oh god, what if I start to go while she's gone and she comes back to me, but it's not *me*?

XIMENA:

It's still you. It's always you.

CYNTHIA:

It's not the same. That part's the loneliest of all.

XIMENA:

It may be lonely, but with someone else there, at least you're not truly alone.

CYNTHIA:

You'll be there, right? So she has someone?

XIMENA:

I'll be there.

CYNTHIA:

Look at me. Crying buckets. Ruined my nails you did so nicely. Can I smell those flowers?

[Ximena hands them over. Cynthia is overcome with the nice smell.]

XIMENA:

Gardenias today.

CYNTHIA:

She's a good listener, she's pretty, she's a working professional, and she gardens? Gentlemen, form a line!

XIMENA:

No gentlemen callers lately, I'm afraid.

CYNTHIA:

What happened to the paramedic you told me about? With the nice eyes?

XIMENA:

Ghosted. After the second date.

CYNTHIA:

You're kidding.

XIMENA:

I wish!

CYNTHIA:

Ghosted! How do you like that? Soon it'll just be your clients doing that to you.

[Just the music plays for a pause. Then Cynthia snorts at her own joke. Ximena thinks it over, then lets out a loud laugh.]

XIMENA:

I'll never forget that.

CYNTHIA:

Tell that one to your death doula friends.

XIMENA:

I don't have any.

CYNTHIA:

None?

XIMENA:

I mean, there's a network, but we don't exactly hang out.

CYNTHIA:

That sounds lonely.

XIMENA:

Maybe a little. I don't mind working alone.

CYNTHIA:

Maybe a little loneliness is good for us from time to time.

XIMENA:

Maybe so.

CYNTHIA:

What do you really think about that?

XIMENA:

About loneliness? [*Cynthia nods, listening intently.*] I like solitude. Sometimes. But it's not for everyone. And we all have the right to make that decision.

[Cynthia thinks, smelling the flowers.]

XIMENA:

For what it's worth, I think you should have Kaitlyn in the room when it's time.

CYNTHIA:

I will. I don't know where that came from. I guess I just got scared.

XIMENA:

That's understandable.

[Ximena reaches for her manicure supplies again. Cynthia holds her hands out.]

CYNTHIA:

Thank you for understanding that I can't possibly go into the next phase with messy nails.

[Ximena flashes her own decorated nails.]

XIMENA:

Trust me. I feel you.

CYNTHIA:

I knew I liked you.

XIMENA:

Me, too.

CYNTHIA:

I didn't travel at all. I used to always say it was because I already lived in paradise. What could be better than here? It's called the Sunshine State, for chrissake. Why bother leaving? Then I realized... I was scared then too. What if I left, and liked it more?

[Ximena just looks at her. Cynthia looks back. For once, they're both comfortable in the silence. Soft music plays in the background, then fades out with the lights.]

End of play.]