

The Dictionary of Maya Rivas

Ballet: Ballet used to feel like I was carrying helium balloons. My body was light. My happiness was effortless. I soared. When I finished dancing they slowly detached from me. I watched them float away until I had none left. Picture Mary Poppins slowly sailing down. It was heavy without them. I always knew the balloons would come back when I tied my pointe shoes the next day; lifting me a mile into the air.

Familia, definition 1: My familia is just like reading. In grade two I spent most of my English class with my head on my desk admiring the texture of the wood. I scratched pencil lines across the grains while my book sat untouched in the corner. Sometimes, with a little nudge, it fell off the edge. When I tried to read it the words rose off the page and shook like wet dogs. Other times a vortex twisted the letters out of place. It made the backs of my eyes hurt and my head pound. I prayed to God to help me understand, to help me make the words settle and still. I get it now. I know why they do what they do. But I still don't like to read. Now and then I need to push the book over the edge so I can hear the loud, surprised thump it makes when it hits the floor. The words and my family feel the same to me. How can I possibly learn to find harmony with something that won't stop fighting me?

Familia, Definition 2: Familia also means friends like heat lamps. Definition two is the family you get to choose. This kind of family feels like a pas de deux. When you and your partner's bodies and thoughts are perfectly in sync. I met Margot first. She asked me to be her best friend during nap time in kindergarten. She told me her cousin was also named Maya and that it was the most pretty name she had ever heard. Jane started playing with us at recess and never left.

We met Cameron at the 7-Eleven on my street corner. He is a beautiful artist. Both him and his art. The three of them are my everything, everything, everything. For my fourteenth birthday, Cam painted a dancer on my bedroom wall. She is still there, soaring across the white surface in pointe shoes and a blue tutu, the colour of the sea. Margot and Jane did thick yellow splatter on top. He said it looked like Banksy. I said it looked like Misty Copeland. She is the first thing you see when you enter the door. My very own fierce angel.

Use in a sentence: *My familia doesn't understand my familia.*

University: University felt like a fancy ribbon tied tightly around my neck. It looked pretty but I couldn't breathe. I could have been the first in my family to get a higher education, even if it was a crappy, cheap one. I knew I was blessed to have the chance. When I kissed my mamá goodnight I saw the stacks of books on her bedside table. The titles were long. They moved on and off her night table so fast, only staying there for a few days. When she brought the books back to the library it was as though she had never touched them. The plastic-wrapped covers were pristine. The pages were never folded. It was as though she believed God was judging her on their cleanliness. She did not accept my resistance to school. I'm not sure if she tried or not. While she worshiped words they played tricks on me. I did not want to live inside a textbook. I wanted to dance my way forward and away. I told my mamá I did not want to go to college. She told me that people did not want to watch Mexican ballet dancers.

Ugly: For this word, I have a list.

1. I saw the looks on my parents' faces when I got C's and I felt no guilt.
2. I did not tell my dancing friends that the Academy paid for everything; that I used their pitiful outreach program.

3. I knew what words hurt people and I wielded them anyway.

Clack: That is the sound of pointe shoes and a wooden floor. Loud and distracting and the most beautiful sound in the entire world.

Hff: That is the sound of Cam's breath when he falls asleep during a movie. It is the noise he makes when his eyes become slits and his chest rises and falls more slowly. I used to imagine his breath sounded like waves on a shore. I always wanted to see the ocean. I had heard it was vast and limitless and blue like a heartbreak.

Crunch: That is the sound of a dancer's legs when hit with a car while walking home after a recital. The raindrops on the cement looked like little explosions in headlights. The street had four lanes and a freshly painted crosswalk. The first car stopped. The second car didn't. I lay crumpled on the pristine white paint with my leg twisted at a sickening angle. The rain kept falling on my broken body as car doors slammed.

The rain kept crashing as sirens wailed.

The rain plummeted down on me and that stupid, fucking, brand new crosswalk.

La Fe: Faith is bright red. It used to be a pretty colour, one that made me think of leg warmers and the fiery colour of Jane's hair. A colour of belonging and promise. And then all of a sudden my beautiful colour of belief began to burn brighter and angrier. It scorched the inside of my chest so I had a constant pain right by my heart. It became the colour of Advil. A pale and sickly red. I was told I had shattered my leg and I would need physical therapy. I might be able to run again but I would not be able to dance anymore. The doctor's words were confusing. It took

me a long time to understand what she was trying to say. And even then I didn't fully get it. No God would be so cruel. How could I have faith in someone who destroyed my life and my future with a mere crash? My family prayed for me. I never told them I knew their words were utterly useless.

Pity: Pity has a consistency thick like honey; slowly making a mess as it leaks through a voice or across a countertop. It's not sweet though. It is bitter like the Blackstrap Molasses my tía used to stir into her hot water in the morning; sticky and suffocating like a cast.

Lost: I knew what I wanted to do with my life. I had a plan. This did not fit into it. The grief that came with starting over at 17 settled itself in my chest. Its weight made it hard to breathe, made it hard to move. Who knew sadness can be so heavy? An anvil on my heart.

Infinite: When the grief began to crush my chest I called Margot. I told her I was sorry I had been ignoring her calls and I hoped she was having a good summer break and that I was never going to be the same kind of happy again. She told me to wait. Cam's dented blue pickup truck pulled up outside my house that afternoon with Jane and Margot waving from the back window. The three of them would always be my everything, everything, everything. We pulled out of my driveway and flew down Highway 53 with music blasting out of the speakers. I listened to the mix of radio and my friend's voices for hours. I started to cry when I saw the deep blue of the ocean. The water was made of sunlight and blueberries. Tears ran down my cheeks and into my smile. I reached across the gap in the seats and took Cam's hand. Our palms fit perfectly together. We parked and settled ourselves into the powdery sand, laying on our backs with our hands on our

stomachs. The sun drifted lazily across the sky. My tears wouldn't stop falling. There was no other word for it. Infinite, infinite, infinite.

Maybe: Maybe I will miss ballet forever.

Maybe I need to have faith in God even when he does crappy things.

Maybe there is no God and we are simply on our own.

Maybe I will go to University.

Maybe my words and I will always be out of order.

Maybe I will find a school that knows how to work with a brain like mine.

Maybe I will travel the world on a boat instead.

Maybe, with time, my family will recognize my anguish.

Maybe, perhaps, perchance,

I will find my helium again.

Maybe.