

This Was Not Supposed To Happen

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English 200: The Writer

May 26, 2026

His mother is at the register when she goes into labor. The bakery has been open for fifty years by then, longer than she has been married, longer than her husband has been alive. She does not leave. She finishes the customer in front of her, then the next one, and somewhere in there, Alessandro is almost born on the floor of a pastry shop in Rome.

He grows up inside the work. By the time he is old enough to remember anything, Alessandro is already in the shop, playing with dough, watching his father, learning the rhythm of a family that does not stop. School *used to be* interesting; however, it was not important. School comes second to the bread. His brothers work. His mother works too. His father works especially hard. Even his grandmother works. Payment came in the form of motorcycles and clothes, material things. It was not cold, hard cash that could perhaps free him to do something else, go somewhere else. His lineage had built this shop from the ground up, and it was his *duty* to ensure its success. There was no other option. The shop is the family, and the family is the shop, and there is no real distinction between the two, and that is just how things are.

Across the ocean, in the capital of the Dominican Republic, Santo Domingo, a girl is being taught by nuns who hit her when she gets the wrong answer. Her mother is in New York. She has been in New York for years, sending money home, and the girl knows her mostly through envelopes addressed to “Nelly” that arrive and through the absence the envelopes are meant to fill. New York was an incomprehensible place; one with tall buildings, traffic jams, and restlessness. It was impossible to imagine living there. And that’s okay, as Nelly lives with her sister and a nanny in a house that never really felt like hers. She thinks that her mother will finish up in the United States, move back to the motherland, and life will continue as normal. Normal: where the school is strict, and the nuns are strict. The country is hot and bright, and the only thing she has ever known.

Neither of them knows the other one exists. Neither of them is supposed to end up in New York. Neither of them is supposed to end up anywhere except the lives they are already living.

But they do.

Alessandro is in his mid-twenties when he decides he can no longer keep doing it. His life could not amount to just the bakery; he felt a push to do something different, something fulfilling. He could not keep living in an apartment right above the shop; the apartment that was for sleeping only. Not to love, not to foster familial bonds; it was one that you left at sunrise and returned to at sunset. He is good at the work; it's quite easy for him, actually. But he is not free. He looks at a map and decides that the place to go is farthest from where he is. He finds a company in Philadelphia willing to hire an Italian pastry chef, and he goes. Alessandro's brother comes with him for eighteen months, then turns around and goes home. Alessandro does not. He stays. His English is below zero. The apartments in America do not have the right tile, not like the one back home. The people do not care about the small things the way people in Italy do. He notices this, files it away, and keeps going.

Nelly has already arrived. She has been here for years by the time he lands in Philadelphia, though she does not know him, and he does not know her. She came at eleven and a half, in winter, in clothes that were wrong for the weather, a weather she hated. Her sister came with her. Her mother met them at the airport. The cold was the first thing she hated in this unfamiliar place. The language was the second. The fact that she could not go outside and play, as she did before in DR, in the dangerous streets of New York, was the third, and it stayed with

her longer than the other two, because the other two she eventually got around. Nelly vowed that when she was older, she would give herself more freedom, more than her mother gave her.

She goes to middle school in Brooklyn in an ESL program and is slowly acclimating to this foreign place. The fall is gorgeous. The language is not so bad; at times, it can be beautiful.

Nelly goes to Eastern District High School in the eighties, when there are gangs in the hallways, and her stepfather walks her partway in the morning because he does not trust the corner. She stayed away from English speakers; she simply did not know how to interact with them.

Fortunately, Eastern District High School had many Spanish speakers. She graduates and attends a CUNY Senior College, not a community college, because she did well enough to skip the stop most kids like her are told to take. The Senior College does not have an ESL program. It does not care that she is afraid of writing. She struggles. She finds a job at the supermarket and discovers she likes numbers, that numbers are a language she does not have to translate. She becomes the head cashier and keeps the books. Inspired, she transfers to LaGuardia Community College and earns an associate's degree in business administration. In her early twenties, despite arriving in winter and at a school with no help, Nelly has built the beginning of her working life.

A year or two later, Alessandro gets to New York. He was scammed out of his job in Philadelphia: an Italian man approached him and said he would give him a job in the city with twice the pay. Naively, he trusted the Italian linkage they shared and moved the next day. Much to his surprise, the man did not abide by his word, and, being someone who never looked back, he found a different job instead of just going back to Philadelphia. Alessandro works in a pastry shop in the city, and he is good at what he does. Customers tell their friends about the sudden increase in quality, and a line forms outside the door. A line that is partly his. Alessandro does not know why; he's just making croissants, *sfoogliatelle*, tiramisu, and the small almond cookies

his mother used to set out on Sunday mornings. There's nothing special about them to him. He is making the things his family taught him to make, in a country his family has never seen, for people whose names he cannot pronounce.

Nelly walks in. She is dressed for a city that has finally started to feel like hers, and she stands at the glass case, leaning slightly forward, eyes moving across the trays, taking longer than she needs to. She points at one of the pastries laid out. She says it wrong, the way everyone says it wrong the first time, and Alessandro corrects her without making her feel corrected. She laughs. He hands her a paper bag, warm at the bottom. She pays and walks out into the city with a pastry in her hand, and the beginning of something she does not yet know is beginning.

Nelly comes back; she loves his pastries. She comes back the next week, and the week after that, and at some point, the visits stop being about the pastries. Alessandro starts saving her the freshest piece every morning. She starts arriving when the line is short, and then when there is no line at all. They talk on the sidewalk as he pulls up the metal gate in front of the shop. They talk in the small wedge of time between his shifts, with his hands still smelling of butter and sugar.

He asks her to dinner. She says yes. He takes her somewhere Italian, because that is the only kind of restaurant he knows how to choose, and he watches her try to read the menu, and is charmed by the way she does it, the way she does not pretend to know what she does not know.

She takes him to a Dominican restaurant next, and he surprises her halfway through the meal by ordering her water in Spanish. She looks up. He shrugs. He tells her he picked it up at the bakery in Philadelphia, where most of the cooks were Mexican, and the only way to get through a shift was to learn the words for *flour*, *sugar*, *hurry up*, *careful*, *behind you*, *almost done*. He learned the kitchen first. The rest came after. Alessandro is fluent in the ways that

matter; good enough to be understood, and good enough to understand her when Nelly switches without thinking, which she does sometimes, mid-sentence, the way bilingual people do when the word they want is in the other language.

They date through the city the way two immigrants date through a city, which is to say cheaply and on foot. They walk. They eat. Nelly cooks him *la bandera* and watches him taste it for the first time, and decides somewhere in the middle of that meal that she is going to keep him.

The years come in slowly. He keeps working. She keeps working. They move in together. Her mother approves. His mother, who is three thousand miles away, approves of whoever her son approves of.

It is 2006. Like many times before, Alessandro takes Nelly out to dinner. He has carried the ring in his jacket pocket for longer than he should have. She goes to the bathroom, and he drops the ring into her drink. She comes back and does not see it at first. She is in the middle of saying something, and he is watching her over the rim of his own glass, waiting. She lifts the glass, tilts it, and then Nelly sees it. She stops talking, which is itself a kind of answer because she does not stop talking for most things, and she looks at him, and the rest of the restaurant goes on eating around them as though nothing is happening.

She says yes.

They get married. They have me.

I was born on a Sunday, February 21, 2010. Mom is in the hospital and so is my dad; for the first time, the three of us are in the same room.

The doctors rush in. They tell my mom that she is bleeding internally and they have to take her back into the OR. The next two weeks are not hers; she is in the ICU, intubated, half her uterus removed because by the time they got to the bleeding it had already taken too much. She fell into a coma. The first word she says when she comes out of the coma is my name. She says it through a tube, before the nurse can ask her if she knows where she is, because she does not need to know where she is. She needs to know where I am.

My mom is told she almost died. She is told she cannot have another child. She doesn't care; she only wants to know how I was doing. She is told that I am fine, that I am being held by my dad, that I am waiting for her. My dad and I have been in the waiting room for two weeks. He has held me, fed me, and walked the halls with me. He has not had real sleep in what feels like ages. He has been told twice that he might lose his wife. He does not yet know that she's going to be okay.

When the doctors tell him that my mom is going to be fine, he is relieved. We come home, the three of us. We become a family the way families become families: slowly, and without anyone noticing it is happening.

Years pass. Since my mom cannot have another child, my parents adopted a daughter. She is my sister. Her story is hers to tell.

I do not know when it all started to come apart. Probably there were many small moments, and they accumulated quietly in the gaps between the parts that a child is allowed to see. What I remember is the texture of the house in the years before. I remember my dad coming home late, smelling of the bakery, kissing the top of my head before he went to wash his hands. He asked me how my karate practice was. I responded the way I always responded: "Good." My

mom is sitting down in front of some papers, bills probably. We, along with my sister, ate dinner; the table was unusually quiet that evening. My sister and I wash our plates and go off to our rooms. Slowly, the noise from the dining table rises. It starts off as a conversation, then the volume of their voices rises, as they themselves rise and go to the kitchen; it's a full-blown argument now. I stay in my room. I hear the slam of the door. My dad is not in the kitchen anymore, and my mom is on the floor, crying.

The next time I saw my dad was months later on my birthday. He came back with two Nintendo 3DS games and a homemade cotton candy machine. It was fun, and then he left. After that, he came when he could. Sometimes it was weeks. Sometimes it was months. He brought things: a video game, a piece of clothing, and a small stack of pastries from his job. The pastries were the best part. They tasted the way they had tasted when we all lived together. They tasted like he was still home, even though he was not.

I lived with my mom. She kept moving up at her job, the way she had been moving up since the supermarket, by being good at the work and by being the one who stayed late. It was her job now to take care of my sister and me. The Driver's Licensing Unit at the New York City Taxi and Limousine Commission gave her more and more to do, and she did it. She is now the person who runs it. The cars, the drivers, the regulations, the entire industry her father drove in for forty years.

It took my dad a while to find his footing, but he did eventually, mainly through determination and love. At first, he lived in the "bad parts" of New York City, but through his job, he met a woman who ended up becoming his wife. They live in Jersey City now. He is still in pastry. He is still in the kitchen before the sun comes up, still pulling things out of the oven before most of the city has begun the day, still doing the work he was doing when his own

mother went into labor at the register, fifty-something years ago. The work has not changed. Only the address has. He is still in search of a life where he doesn't have to work as much.

He still works in New York. He just sleeps somewhere else. The river between him and my mom is narrower than the ocean either of them crossed to get here, and it has turned out, somehow, to be the harder one to cross.

Alessandro and Nelly do not speak apart from when they need to. Alessandro has her blocked. I move between them. I carry one of their stories in one pocket and the other in the other pocket, and I am the only person anywhere who has both of them.

When I think about what I inherited from them, I used to think of the obvious things: the hair that is sometimes curly and sometimes straight, the languages I half-speak, the way I work too hard at things and cannot quite remember how to stop. I think now it is also this: two people who came from very far away and built something together and could not keep it. The building was real. The not-keeping is also real. Both of them are mine.

He makes the pastries. She runs the taxis. I am the one writing this down.

References

Fortini, Alessandro. Personal interview. 24 March 2026.

Rodriguez, Nelly. Personal interview. 1 April 2026.