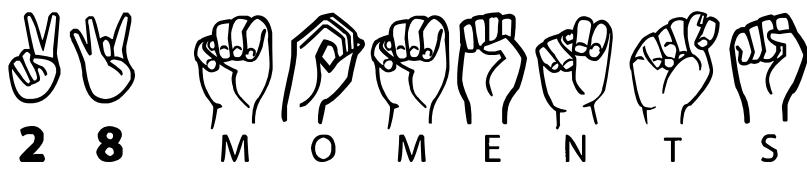


28

Moments





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About the Book

This story was created from a series of 28 prompts. Each finished drabble (based on a prompt) is exactly 100 words long, and they were originally shared on social media as they were completed, allowing readers to experience Dani and Mateo's story day by day throughout February 2021. This book is an updated version of the series, complete with four illustrations and three never-before-seen drabbles. Enjoy.

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

1—Ice cream

Mateo couldn't hear the ice cream truck. My sister and her friends whispered about it, which was stupid, and not just because he couldn't hear the whispers either.

I bought him an orange double-pop. Since I had to split my money between the two of us, I couldn't get anything good like a fudge bar, but I pretended it was good when I pressed it into his hand.

He stared up at me silently.

"I'm Dani," I said. "I like your name."

Abby said I'd make him feel awkward. I told her to shut up. She always had stupid ideas.



2—*Sunshine*

Each time Abby upset me, I stole something of hers. She called it immature. I called it genius. When she ate the last cinnamon roll that Mom had promised was mine, I stole her sidewalk chalk.

I used it to draw snowmen and rainbows and giraffes in the driveway of the house next to ours. Mateo peeked out the window while I was drawing. I added his name in a fluffy white cloud.

Later, I saw him crouched in our driveway. He drew a big gold sun with rays the size of my arms.

In the center, it said, *Dani*.

3—*Chocolate*

I liked chocolate more than people, and not just because it never called me shrimpy or hid my glasses. For my birthday, Mom baked chocolate cupcakes, and the people didn't show up, but the chocolate did.

"It's fine," I said. Mom was calling parents. My ears burned. "I didn't want any stupid kids to come anyway."

Our doorbell rang. Mateo and his mother stood on the porch.

Slowly, like she had to lift the words from a basket, his mother said, "Sorry . . . we are late."

Mateo handed me a wrapped box. He had brown eyes. Like chocolate.

4—*Music*

Mateo and I sat on the grass, ripping the blades and drizzling them across each other's legs. Back in my yard, Abby and her friends shrieked in the sprinklers.

At a familiar, jingling song, Abby raced her friends to the curb just before the ice cream truck pulled into our cul-de-sac.

Mateo watched with a frown.

"It plays music." I wiggled my earlobes. "Dorky music."

I grabbed his arm, positioning it with the elbow bent toward me. His eyebrows lifted. Using my pointer fingers, I tapped out the melody on his warm skin. *Taptaptaptap tap-ta-tap tap tap*.

And he smiled.

5—*Vacation*

“I’m not going.”

Abby snorted. But in the end, my parents didn’t make me. Good. What was there in New York except too many people?

I stayed with Mateo’s family. His dad spoke English, but his mom spoke the language of a breeze. She taught me *dulce de leche* (almost better than chocolate) and *hola*.

“¡Hola!” I said to Mateo.

He saluted back.

Mateo spoke a language, too. He spoke it with his hands. Every day, a tutor came, and Mateo learned to read and write and *sign*.

D-A-N-I, Mateo showed me.

I bent the letters until my fingers ached.

6—*Beach*

Mateo’s abuelita lived in Mar del Plata. He and his mom spent an entire day on a plane to get there. My grandma only lived in Denver, and I’d never been on a plane.

“New York,” Abby taunted. I pushed her.

I stood in front of his house every day, just in case. But he was gone all four weeks. When he finally came home, he brought me a smiling-alpaca keychain. And pictures. The buildings looked like Denver. His abuelita had white hair like mine.

But one thing was new: the orange sunrise over a beach splattered with rainbow crowds.

7—*Dream*

“How does sound work?” I asked Dad.

He talked about little drums in my ears and waves in the air. He plucked a deep string on his guitar for me to watch it vibrate. I never knew sound was a feeling.

“Mateo can feel things,” I said. “So why can’t he hear?”

Dad said maybe his drums were broken.

“We can give him Abby’s,” I said as she walked past. “He’d use them better.”

She swatted my braid so it smacked me in the face.

That night, I tried putting earplugs in, but I still heard waves in my dreams.

8—Soothe

Reading frustrated Mateo. He couldn't cut syllables.

I was a "strong reader" (said my teachers), which just meant I liked reading, whether it was about dogs or wrinkles in time.

So I sat next to Mateo. I ran my left finger under the words on the page while my right finger tapped his arm for syllables. *Wa-ter*: tap-tap. *Di-no-saur*: tap-tap-tap.

He hated that one. He thought it should be di-no-sa-ur. Just like he thought it should be re-ad and cre-am. I told him vo-wels aren't syl-la-bles.

When I only tapped once for *soothe*, he pushed the book off the table.

9—Books

Every Friday, Mom took me and Abby to the library. I started dragging Mateo. The towering shelves of books reminded me of the buildings in Mar del Plata, but I didn't know how to sign it to him. Neither of us were good enough at spelling or patience for me to sign a whole sentence letter by letter.

I handed him books. He put them back. Mom brought one in Spanish, and he tilted his head at that. I flipped through the pages until I found my favorite word.

"¡Hola!" I grinned.

I checked out six books. Mateo got one.

MIDDLE SCHOOL

10—“Come with me”

Abby finished middle school before I started. Then she told me horror stories. Kids in lockers. Books smashed. Homework stolen.

Mateo went to Deaf school. I wished I could be Deaf.

“You’d really get bullied,” Abby said, “if you followed your little boyfriend around.”

I bit her. Mom said I was too old for such things and if I tried it again, she’d knock out my teeth. I get my anger from her.

Hate-school, I told Mateo. I’d picked up a few more signs, but my fingers never glided like his.

Wish-you-come-with-me, he signed.

At least that made me smile.



11—*Clouds*

While Abby and her friends watched movies, Mateo and I watched clouds. He had a notebook so we could draw what we found in the sky.

For one puffy pile, I drew a pig. He drew a dog with floppy ears and lolling tongue.

I drew Pacman. He drew an alligator with sloping jaws and jagged teeth.

Drawing wasn't the only thing he used his notebook for. At first, he wouldn't let me see, but after the alligator, he wrote with me watching.

Crawling

Lifting

Over

Under

Drafts

With a grin, I wrote my name big down the page: D-A-N-I.

12—*Gift*

Mateo's favorite color was orange. For his birthday, I dragged Mom up and down aisles, collecting every orange thing I could find: cheese chips and soda, plastic sunglasses and sanitizer, bandanas, suckers, and sticky notes.

"I think we can put the lotion back," said Mom.

"*Orange*," I insisted.

I gathered everything in an orange basket surrounded by orange tissue paper, and with careful strokes, I wrote on orange cardstock:

Orange you glad

it's your birthday?

"The joke is based on sound," Mom warned.

But when Mateo saw my gift, he laughed.

It was so rare I ever heard him laugh.

13—*Hug*

It wasn't so long ago when Mateo had needed my help with syl-lab-les. Now he read Shel Silverstein and Francisco Alarcón. Now he wrote in two languages while I could only write one. And when his school gave him a poetry medal on a red ribbon, his winning poem didn't even include *hola*, so I couldn't read a word.

"Are you only his friend if he matches you?" Mom asked.

"No," I pouted.

"He's growing into something new. So are you."

"What am I growing into?"

Mom hugged an arm around my shoulders. She kissed my forehead. "Whatever you choose."

14—*Pink fluffy unicorn*

Mateo was in Argentina for my birthday. The bitter cut deep. But before he left, he dropped off a box.

Every waiting day itched until I woke at 6:00am to tear the yellow paper. Since that first keychain, I'd adopted alpacas in all sizes, and he always added to my collection. But the mass of pink fur wasn't right. It had a forehead horn. It also had a poem:

*Expecting an alpaca
Until I saw the horn.
Would it be
Better without
Or incomplete?
¡Quién sabe!
But I like your horn.
Hope you like mine.*

I hugged the unicorn tight.

HIGH SCHOOL

15—Smile

In high school, I took ASL. So when Mateo invited me to meet his Community, I wasn't nervous.

Until.

I'd never realized he slowed his signs for me. With his Deaf friends, his hands flew like hummingbirds, and theirs matched, and I suddenly couldn't remember how to spell my name. They didn't spell Mateo's; he had his own name, one I'd never known, one I didn't know if I was allowed to use.

You-meet-how? a girl asked.

While I scrambled to remember *ice-cream*, Mateo smiled.

Dani-my-first-friend.

And he didn't spell D-A-N-I. I had my own name, one I'd never known.

16—Rainbow

"It's a culture," I told Dad, "and every time I learn part, I realize ten things I've done wrong."

We were out hiking. Abby kept stopping with her new camera to capture this rock and this stick and this aNgLe. Mom stuck with her so Dad and I could go ahead instead of go insane.

Light rain misted the air. I shivered.

"After we make mistakes," Dad said, "we choose: Do we run or do we climb?"

Together, we crested the hilltop and enjoyed the faint rainbow leaping from the horizon. For all her pictures, Abby missed the best one.

17—Dragon

Dad was the one who wanted a pet. Mom voted for a happy little parakeet. Abby insisted on an ugly pug. He came home with a fat bearded dragon. When Mateo first met Frank, the spiny lizard waved slowly from inside his jungle tank, and Mateo grinned.

He-signs! Mateo waved back.

I-wanted-alpaca, I told him. Even the cute wave couldn't win me over.

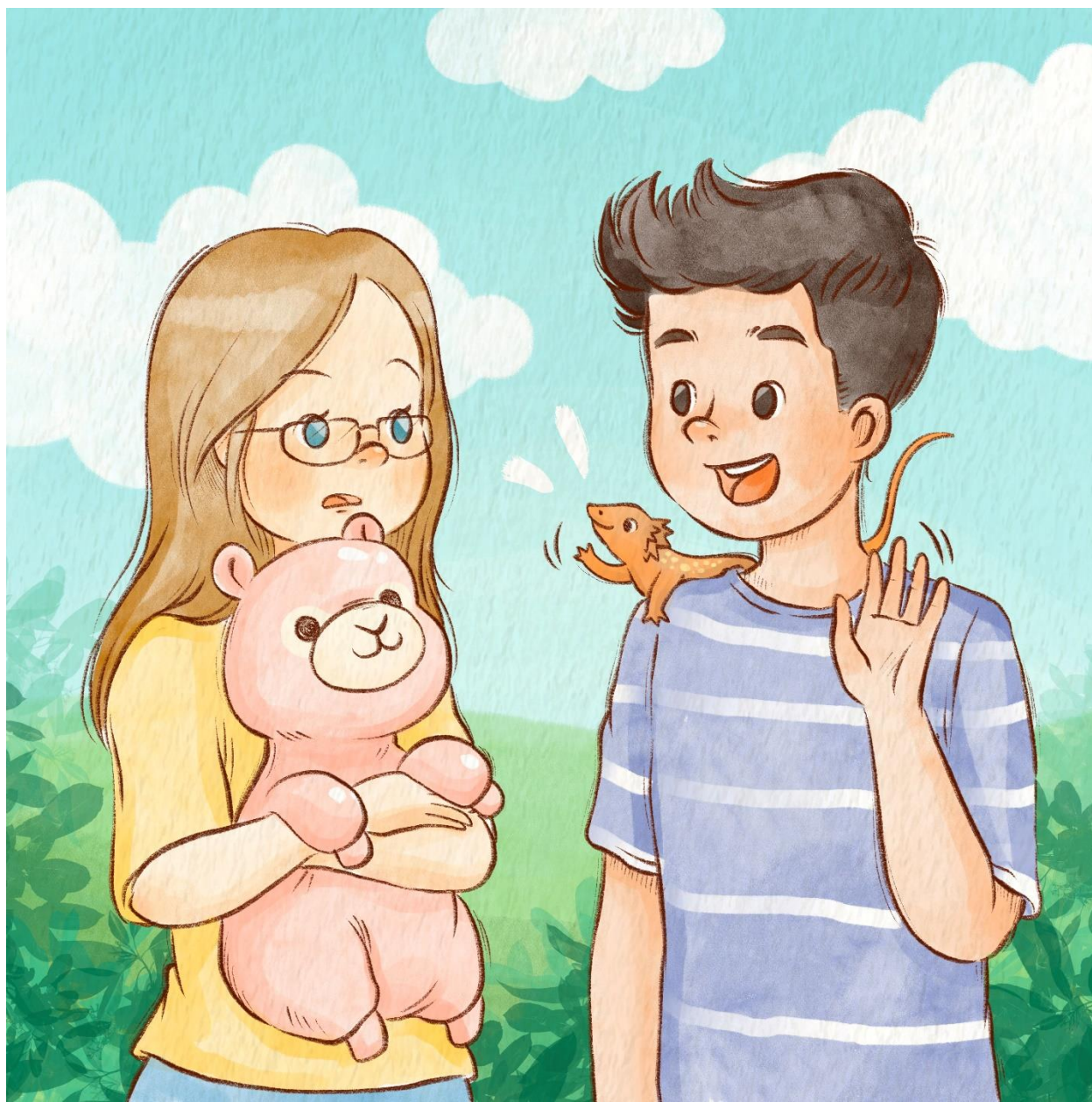
One-alpaca, he joked, *not-enough-for-you*.

You-right. 50-alpaca.

500-alpaca.

5,00000000-alpaca. I laughed. *Every-alpaca*.

With Dad's permission, Mateo lifted Frank out and carried him on his shoulder. They weren't a bad pair, both of them smirking silently around the house.



18—Bouquet

I wasn't going to prom.

Until Mateo asked.

He rented a tux, and he gave me a bouquet. While I was all weird angles in a navy dress, he was a dream.

You-sure? I asked repeatedly until he answered *You-beautiful* and my fingers lost the ability to speak.

At the dance, I introduced him to friends, and to my shock, he said:

“I'm Mateo.”

He hated voicing. But for my sake, he put on a smile in a crowd of hearing strangers, and he voiced, and he danced to music he couldn't hear.

And I kissed him on prom night.

COLLEGE

19—Letter

College was the worst mistake. Maybe it wouldn't have been if I'd stayed close to home or chosen the same university as my boyfriend.

I spent my days immersed in Deaf culture, failing ASL literature and the theory of interpretation. Meanwhile, for the first time in his life, Mateo was the only Deaf student surrounded by hearing.

We were a goldfish in salted water and a dorado in fresh.

Switch degrees? I asked in an email.

Tempting, he admitted. *If only I could speak and you could write.*

Maybe it was the right tank after all. Even if it burned.

20—Homemade meal

My roommate thought I was crazy; I was always on a video call. While doing homework, while brushing my hair, every spare minute.

For Valentine's Day, he made me a German chocolate cake with strawberries. I drooled just seeing the picture. The temptation to fly across the country had never been stronger. But I made him promise to make me one in person over the summer.

"I don't know how you do it," my roommate said.

I told her, "We're used to climbing walls."

Then I gathered my books, blew Mateo a kiss through the phone, and headed to class.

21—Quality time

Every Sunday at 6:00. That was our time: no homework, no excuses.

But the semester sank deeper with every week. My eyes were bloodshot and strained from constantly tracking a visual language from my teachers, my classmates, my assignments. I wanted to turn them off for a day. Maybe don headphones and sink into music I didn't even like as long as it was calming.

Mateo didn't have that option. His eyes did more heavy lifting than mine ever did.

And as soon as I opened my app, saw his face, saw his smile.

The sight was always worth it.

22—*Kitten*

Mateo texted me in class: *Oops*.

As soon as I exited the building, I called him. The little bundle in his arms had fluffy brown ears and a smudgy brown nose between blue eyes.

Oh-my. I couldn't help my smile.

Mateo rubbed a finger gently between the kitten's ears. It opened its mouth wide and shrieked in return, loud enough to make me laugh.

She's-deaf, he said. Then, with a frown, *Found-her-in-dumpster*.

The kitten wriggled and shrieked again. I wanted to boop that smudgy nose.

His apartment didn't allow pets. So he moved. And he named the little shrieker Lucita.

23—*Lizard*

When we finally got home for the summer, Mateo greeted me with a kiss and a smile that made my heart spin.

But it was nothing compared to the grin that blossomed as he carried Lucita into my parents' house to meet Frank. I wished for my herd of alpacas. 50 alpacas. 500 alpacas.

Lucita danced back and forth in front of Frank. The lizard eyed the kitten without moving.

When he finally took a step, the kitten jumped in the air with a shriek and scabbled out of the room as fast as her tiny feet would carry her.

24—*Amusement park*

In our final summer before graduation, Mateo had a surprise for me: the advance copy of his first poetry collection, *The Ocean in Kansas*. It was bilingual. It was amazing. It was the best part of every side of the boy I loved.

And I had a surprise for him in celebration: tickets to the closest Six Flags.

He was a terrible driver, happy to look at anything but the road. I drove us there. Then he showed me up at every carnival game and laughed while I screamed on roller coasters.

Until the tallest drop.

Then he screamed, too.

GRADUATION

25—*Lake*

Graduating without a decided job was scarier than college had ever been. But we celebrated anyway, by the lake. I threw my hat and hugged my parents. Mateo spun me in circles. Abby took pictures. When Mateo slipped on a rock, she almost dropped her camera.

“Can he swim?!” she cried.

It was a stupid question, and not just because he was in shallow water. He splashed me, and I splashed back.

Afterward, Abby sent the pictures. We were sisters after all; I’d spent four years learning to translate words, and here she was translating moments.

I liked the interpretation.

26—*Award*

I took an interpreting job close to home, at a high school. Mateo worked as a copywriter for a design firm. And whenever either of our moms asked about weddings, we both turned truly deaf.

He picked me up from work one day with his hands shaking, showed me an email on his phone.

I’d never heard of the award, but I crushed him in a hug all the same.

It’s-big, he managed, eyes misting. *Too-big*.

They called his collection “a beautiful blend of cultures.” There was a cash prize. A banquet.

One-award—I grinned—*not-enough-for-you*. *500-awards*. *Every-award*.

He laughed.

27—*Poetry*

Though I was thrilled to be Mateo’s date to the awards banquet, when he asked me to be his interpreter, I choked on something not swallowed.

You-know-my-voice, he insisted.

To *be* his voice was something else entirely.

But while he signed on stage, I spoke to the room:

“So much of poetry is sound. I know sound—that might surprise you. I don’t hear it; I feel it. And I send it back. My world has a place in yours and yours in mine.”

It was beautiful. But I ached for everyone who couldn’t read the beauty in his hands.

28—*Sunset*

At sunset, we sat on the front porch of childhood. A lifetime of memories—one neighborhood hardly seemed big enough to hold them all. We remembered alpacas and birthday parties. Sprinklers and ice cream in the summer.

Mateo disappeared inside and returned with orange popsicles that matched the light haloing the clouds.

There was a diamond ring around my popsicle stick. He knelt, and I felt the giddy urge to push him over, or maybe to jump in his arms.

You-like-my-name, he asked, *enough-to-take-it?*

I laughed. *Maybe-enough-to-hyphenate.*

I'll-accept.

While we kissed, his mom shrieked from inside the house. Busted already.



AFTERSTORY

Popsicle

An orange popsicle had marked each important beginning. First, when I met him. Second, when he proposed. It was only natural it should mark the next one, yet my hands shook when I pulled a box from the freezer at the grocery store, my nervous heat fogging the glass door.

Mateo was at a writing workshop, and he came home with a smile. I handed him an orange popsicle. On the stick, I'd drawn a circle with two lines in a positive sign.

He frowned at it. Silence.

Then he dropped it, and his hug lifted me off the ground.

Match

We bought two chocolate cakes: one with pink frosting, one with blue. Had my upset stomach let me, my nerves would have sampled both of them before my ultrasound—so for once, the nausea was a good thing.

The wand moved across my slick belly. On the screen, a head. Perfect little toes. Mateo crushed my hand as we both waited without breath.

Then the nurse's smile. Tears leaked down my cheeks, and Mateo laughed, the happiest sound I'd ever heard (since the first ultrasound, at least).

We came home to our families, and we cut the matching pink cake.

Serendipity

It was lucky my job had new insurance policies. Three months of maternity. It was lucky Abby and Tucker had a pile of outgrown baby clothes from Sophie. Luckiest of all was her birth, just after midnight, the best gift. We shared a birthday. She arrived pink and scrunchy, screaming louder than Lucita.

"Hi, Millie," I whispered.

Mateo stroked her cheek. To her wide-open eyes, he signed, *C-A-M-I-L-A. You-beautiful.*

I thought of spelling his name in chalk. I thought of prom night. A thousand moments leading here.

I clutched my baby with one hand and my husband with the other.

About the Author

Elizabeth Lowham dreams of a future house that is seventy-percent library, with at least three lavish window seats fit for a princess. Her reality is five bookshelves and a rocking chair, which isn't so bad, either. She lives with her husband and son in the Loveland area of Colorado and believes it to be the most appropriate place any romance author could hope to live. Apart from reading and writing, her hobbies include sewing, sketching, dancing, eating, and other -ing verbs.

Plus yoga.

Elizabeth has a Bachelor of Arts in English. She works as author, editor, and solicited screenwriter. Subscribe for updates at <https://lizlowham.wixsite.com/author>

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