

Christian: She was really really tiny—probably like two and a half inches long, one inch wide, like really really light grey fur. She was like literally a little fur ball, like a ball of fur.

Tiara: This is Christian Cruz, a junior at Columbia. And what follows is the story of how he lost someone very dear to him: his pet hamster.

Christian: She had a really pure energy. She was really just simple. She wasn't too rowdy. Like I had another hamster before and he was ungrateful, I'd say, cause he'd always try to escape. But this one was really content with her life. And I could just feel that she lived with a purpose.

David: My name is David Valdez. I'm a sophomore studying chemical engineering at Columbia University. I'm originally from Houston, Texas, and my family is from Mexico. Well she was a very lazy individual. Nah really, when i was like in the room, I'd try and see where she was at, but she'd normally just be sleeping. When I think of the hamster, I think of Christian and like his deep love for animals and nature. He's a very like spiritualistic person. You can tell when he spoke about her, it was a very like strong connection he had with the hamster. And it was kinda like she was his family you know?

Christian: She had a beautiful home, she was spoiled. When I would hear her wake up and run around it like was de-stressing time for me cause I don't know I found joy in simplicity of a hamster's life I guess. For me and JD she was part of our little family – JD loved her too. Every time she would wake up and she would run on the wheel, he would love to watch her too.

JD: My name is Juan Diego Jaramillo, also known as JD. And my roommate is Christian Cruz. Yeah I mean to talk about the room, we call it the cozy cave. That's because me and Chris share a sort of philosophy where we really privilege comfort levels on both a physical and mental level. We're at a university that is particularly harsh, surrounded by a negligent administration and—we both feel this way—people at Columbia are often just assholes in a lot of ways. Our room is sort of a refuge for that.

The animals are certainly a huge part of that. We have all the fish—which sadly some have been passing away—but such is life. When people walk in for the first time, they are like “wow are you serious you actually have fish?”

David: The first time I saw her, it was very interesting cause I had never seen a hamster in a college dorm here. And I was like “oh shit that's fucking cool.”

JD: It's something not a lot of people have—it's also not allowed. But, you know, who cares. You know, it's nice to see life, I guess, behind a glass. You know. It's sort of humbling in a sense. The hamster is—wel—no offense to the fish, but I think the most biologically complex species we had in here. I feel like fish are one category of pet and hamsters are a whole other thing. But maybe we just privilege things that are closer—look more like us.

Sometimes we just watch the fish and we build our own narratives of what they're doing. Some fish are always on the run and moving around. And then there are other fish that just lay in front of the glass on the sand—we call them the boolers. There's another fish, I mean we love this fish as well, but he's a hater, a grumpy fish. He literally just pokes his head out from behind the grass and just stares, like mean mugs the boolers. And so, we see that as a little allegory for our lives. You know, we feel like we're chilling, we feel like we live moral lives. And there's other people that are cool too. And then there's some people that are just not, they're trying to infringe on that energy.

Christian: hamsters just die suddenly, they don't live very long, so every once a while I just like to check that she was alive, but then when I looked she was just passed away right there. But something told me that she was dying soon, I don't know how to explain it really, I really like sensed it. I don't know, I had to process it—I just kinda sat there and processed it—I just wanted to give her a good, uh, good ceremony to pass her on to the next life.

Bryan: My name is Bryan Ontiveros...and I don't have a middle name. I guess it was kinda a last minute thing because the situation itself wasn't expected.

JD: I remember the first thing I wanted to do was like...well we gotta give her a ritual, we gotta send her off. We were gonna do it right at the moment. But we decided it was a little much, and that it wouldn't be the proper sort of send-off. He was thinking what to do. Cause he was like, "I don't just want her dead on the wood chips." And we were thinking about what to put her in cause that's the reason why he wanted to do it at that moment. And I said, "Put her in an iphone box." It just sorta made sense. And yeah the iphone box served as a coffin, which I think was nice, it had pretty good structural integrity. So she was in there for the night, and then the next day, when we woke up, we woke up pretty late. We decided what we were going to do.

Christian: We did the viking ceremony because it's just a tradition, like with my previous hamster, Benito, I also did the viking ceremony. So I think it just felt right. Cause you know the Vikings believe that when you light the body on fire, it goes straight into heaven as opposed to when you bury a body you just wait for it to decompose—so it just felt a little more like it suited her as a little hamster soul.

David: So, he texted us in the morning like, "Let's meet up sometime around 4 or something."

Bryan: An interesting thing was that when we walked out, there was like a white pigeon kinda like outside the door. And I think Christian or me mentioned it like "Oh its a sign of good luck."

DV: And then we started walking to Riverside Park which is like a park maybe 5 min away.

JD: It was a long walk, it was much longer than i thought it was gonna be. We went down... past all the purebred dogs, the fur coats. So, we get there and there are rocks--and i was pretty shocked, i had never been down here and i didn't know you could really go out and touch the water...I mean you wouldn't really wanna touch the water really.

Christian: We all stood there. I was at the very edge, like right next to the water.

David: So, the way the casket was set up, it was like the iphone box—so it was the bottom and the top shuts in. Christian had the plan of lighting it on fire, closing it, and releasing it. Then I told him “No that’s gonna put out the fire cause there’s no oxygen goin in.” So like we spent a good five minutes poking holes into it cause that shit is super fucking hard. And then once we got that set up, it also took a long ass time to like set the tissue paper on fire

Bryan: I put some toilet paper in his backpack, cause I realized it’d be good to burn. I also brought a lighter. I was a lighter guy so yeah that was clutch.

JD: Bryan actually found some kindling. Did a great job of finding twigs. Thankfully, everything was really dry cause it was winter. And so we found this kindling and we put it inside the iphone box with the hamster covered in paper towels. And so that gave it, i guess, enough of a critical mass. And really it stayed lit for a really long time. And the wind was picking up to the point actually where we were about to lower her down...

Bryan: I remember the waves got harder. And there was more wind.

JD: Literally the waves started crashing into the rocks and splashing everywhere. Mighty Neptune wanted to bring her to his domain. And so with that, the flaming pyre in hand, Chris lowered her into the water. It was really windy, but he tried to give her a nice solid push. And the imagery was actually astounding. She was actually floating along, and the flames were going up into the air.

David: And, at that point, the music was already playing, it was like some classical music that JD really likes.

JD: I was like, let’s play some uh plainchant, some Gregorian chant in honor. Our conception of the viking ritual is that you send the boat off and you light it on fire, and you sort of--she goes back to nature from whence she came. As well as the freedom that water symbolizes.

David: Everyone else was quiet, but JD came out with this amazing speech.

JD: I guess it’s less talking of mourning and more uplifting and finding an example within her life. She lived simply, but she lived in a place where she was loved, and where she loved others, and where she was comfortable, and really what else can you aspire to.

David: I was just thinking this is a very perfect moment. Cause like the waves were like riding on, so you could hear the splashing of the waves onto the rocks and the classical music in the background - and like everyone was just looking up onto the hamster out in the river. I was

standing in the front, and JD was in the back. And I could just hear his words resonate, and i was like ahh dang that was so nice.

JD: And we were right down there by the rocks. So we just had this view of New Jersey, the water, the rocks, each other. What we didn't really pay attention to was we were literally inches away from the running track. So a lot of upper crust, Upper Westsiders with their Princeton lacrosse jackets and Lululemon yoga pants or what have you. Like, wow, imagine how crazy that must have looked.

David: And after that happened we just kinda stood in silence as the music was playing, hoping that it would wash out into the river. Uh it didn't and like the fire was put out cause of the water that had gotten into the box. And it was kinda like the box started disintegrating within a minute or two. And then, as we were about to leave, we saw the hamster come out of the box. And it was just like floating there and we were like "ohhhhhh no!! Like fuck, we fucked him. We should have left--we should have left. chris was like ohhh god i didn't wanna see her like that. We overstayed our funeral time.

JD: Once the madrigal ended, David put on a Mexican Banda tune that I had never heard before. But it's played at funerals, I think, and events like that. And it was bold and brash as, uh, Mexican songs like that tend to be. But the lyrics were v much about, you know, heavy concepts of mortality and legacy. Part of what made it so special was the fact that this whole ceremony was taken with utmost seriousness. But like this whole ceremony was not questioned at all.

Christian: I don't think they were necessarily there only to support me. I think they also really did value the hamster. So I think that made me feel a certain sense of appreciation for them and so that makes me feel more connected to them as friends and like what i call a family.

JD: I think that's one of the special parts of the relationship is that we all share...we're all finding ways to appreciate things that I guess you could say are stupid or childish....There's just so much messaging of ppl on this campus taking things so seriously. And I think one of the best parts of this friendship is that no one is taking themselves too seriously. There's a very real love and support there. It's a way that we found family here. I mean I don't know if any of us can say we haven't struggled with senses of belonging while here at Columbia. So I consider myself very lucky to be able to claim a home.