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Cicada's Song: A Memoir

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CICADA'S SONG: A MEMOIR

LUZ HERNANDEZ

Masters Program in Creative Writing

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Dean of the Graduate School

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Luz Hernández

2019

Dedication

For my daughters,
whose light draws me along

CICADA'S SONG: A MEMOIR

by

LUZ HERNANDEZ, M.A.

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
The University of Texas at El Paso
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of

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I am grateful to all who have impacted my life.

Abstract

Cicada's Song is a true account of my coming-of-age as a first-generation Colombian-American girl growing up as the only child of two loving parents—one of whom abused me sexually for eleven years, while the other stood by without intervening. Yet the story is not one of resentment, blame, or self-pity. Rather, it is one of identity, self-reliance, survival, forgiveness, and love. Through a series of memories, essays, statements, and poems, the memoir invites the reader on a voyage through my childhood and youth, with stops in my both present-day and recent past, in the hopes that he will see the world—and the individuals in it, including himself—from a different perspective. It seeks to illustrate the point that we all have a past that shapes us but does not define us, that each of us is on our own, individual journey, and that it is up to us to choose our destination.

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Preface

In 2014, at the age of 40, I embarked on the journey of writing down the story I had been carrying for over twenty years. I didn't know at the time how difficult this task would be, how many feelings it would stir up, how many tears I would shed in the process. I only knew that my story needed to get out. At first, I fumbled on my own, writing maniacally, without order, digging up memories of thoughts, images, feelings people, places, experiences—everything I recalled from the first eighteen years of my life. After two years of digging, I sat back and stared at the whole big, tangled mess, trying to find that one loose end that would allow me to begin the unraveling. But making sense of something so immense proved to be a much bigger challenge than I'd imagined, and finally, in a fit of desperation, I turned to the University of Texas at El Paso for help.

Over the past three years, I have been studying the art and craft of creative writing at UTEP. I have taken courses in storytelling, poetry, journalism, prose. I have examined concepts such as narration, truth, fiction, and image. I have written poems, stories, essays and analytic papers, have begun two novels. I have read creative works and formal analyses, have enjoyed combinations of visual and verbal art, have been exposed to ideas and experiments and musings and theories. And all the while, I have remained faithful to my original journey by carrying that story of mine along for the ride, rolling it around and around inside my head, letting it soak up all these influences and slowly take shape. What I have learned along the way is that storytelling of any sort, if it is to be done well, requires three elements: a thorough understanding of the subject matter, a distinctive voice developed specifically for the task of telling that one particular story, and a purposeful message.

The first of these elements, achieving a full understanding of the subject matter, requires time, patience, curiosity, and dedication—regardless of the subject. In the case of a memoir,

however, the process is magnified. The writer faces unique challenges when examining the events and memories she has held for so many years. It is easy to fall into a passive role, to narrate one's life from a singular point of view without stopping to consider that every life is impacted by its surroundings and that everything and everyone within those surroundings, in turn, has their own story to tell. In *The Situation and the Story: The Art of Personal Narrative*, author Vivian Gornick defines a memoir as "a work of sustained narrative prose controlled by an idea of the self under obligation to lift from the raw material of life a tale that will shape experience, transform event, deliver wisdom." (Gornick 91) In order to write a compelling memoir, she contends, it is necessary to view one's own story honestly, unflinchingly, and authentically. Moreover, the memoirist has this same responsibility toward *every* character she paints. "For the drama to deepen," Gornick states, "we must see the loneliness of the monster and the cunning of the innocent." (Gornick 35) As I worked to strengthen my memoir, I realized that I would need to face my own experiences head-on, engage with them, struggle against them, relive them authentically and be willing to embrace my truths, regardless of how painful or uncomfortable they might be.

Before putting my own pen to the task, I turned to two authors whose personal narratives illustrate an ability to fully see: Charles D'Ambrosio, author of *Loitering*, and David Sedaris, author of *Me Talk Pretty One Day*. While the writing styles of these individuals vary drastically, they both reveal a willingness to understand and internalize their characters' thoughts, fears, motivations, joys, and disappointments. This, I felt, would provide an effective model for me to emulate in my own work.

D'Ambrosio's piece, "Loitering," describes the scene outside of a building in which a crime has taken place. The speaker exposes pride and vanity, rather than a sense of goodwill, as the true motivators of a group of journalists waiting outside for a story. "Another TV guy is

practicing a look of grave concern in his monitor.” (D’Ambrosio 47) It also takes us inside the mind of a witness whose perceivable alcoholism causes him to be shunned by the journalists. “It’s obvious he hasn’t been sober in hours and maybe years.” (D’Ambrosio 50) Later in the book, in a piece titled “Documents,” the reader is allowed the privilege of exploring the thoughts of D’Ambrosio’s brothers and father, of getting to see their fears and intricacies through their poems and letters. Though only one actual “document” is included in this essay, the others are recounted by the speaker with seemingly impartial fidelity so that the reader can gain what he believes to be an accurate depiction of their authors. This relationship of trust between speaker and reader stems directly from the authenticity with which D’Ambrosio recreates the people about whom he writes. In my own work, this sense of trust is built up primarily through the details in the descriptions of my parents. Though I speak about their errors, I also discuss at length my father’s joy of storytelling and my mother’s attention to detail and love of learning. This balance of positive and negative traits helps the reader to build a more well-rounded understanding of the characters.

The work of David Sedaris, well-known for its punchy, light-hearted tone, also carries beneath the surface a profound understanding of the characters it depicts. In “The Youth in Asia,” Sedaris recalls stories of his mother bringing a puppy and several other creatures back to life, of different dogs in the Sedaris household, and of his own cats—but throughout these mini-stories are the tales of the *people* in those animals’ lives: the down-to-earth mother with practical advice and a matter-of-fact stance; the empty nest parents who throw all their attention onto their beloved Great Dane; the widower who attempts to replace his last dog with a new one and fails; the heartbroken son who “goes outside to blubber” in the parking lot at the vet’s office after having to put his cat to sleep. (Sedaris 79) An example of Sedaris’ influence on my work appears during the scene in which my cousin, Camila, is frolicking around the living room on the day before her

mother is to arrive from Colombia while I, rather than sharing in her happiness, am angry at her for wanting to leave our home. “Desperate to put an end to her joy, I glance around the room [looking for something with which to hurt her].” (82) When writing this scene, it was necessary for me to put myself back inside my old skin, to fully understand exactly why it was that I felt so angry, why it was that I wanted to hurt her even though I loved her—something I certainly did not understand at the time.

The writings of D’Ambrosio and Sedaris encouraged me to re-examine and analyze the events of my life, as well as the people and emotions surrounding them. My initial memory of each event was only a starting point. With every new draft, I came closer to the truth of my story and of the characters who played a role in it—the most significant of whom were my parents. Because the me of today has forgiven them for their actions, I wanted the memoir to focus on the positive aspects of my life: forgiveness and love. This is why, in earlier drafts of my memoir, I mention the anger and resentment I felt toward them but fail to explore these concepts in depth. By applying D’Ambrosio’s and Sedaris’ principles of seeing and accepting, I was able to let go and allow myself to express the full extent of my resentment toward my parents in *addition* to my subsequent forgiveness. The result was a much more evocative narrative, one that speaks with a greater truth. This process also provided me with the opportunity to better understand my parents, as well as my emotions toward them, both as a child and as an adult.

In the following passage from the first draft of my memoir, one can see the self-restraint I’m applying to my own emotions as I attempt to explain how I feel about my mother:

Gradually, though, the rage that I felt for my Tía Leona began to manifest itself against my mother. I hated it, the hatred itself, because I really had wanted to be a better daughter. I wanted to be loving toward her, but it just wouldn’t happen. I felt

sorry for her because she had always said she wanted us to be friends, but there was something that just didn't let me feel love for her. I loved her as my mother but I didn't like her as a person, and the more time we spent together, the more I started resenting her. Sometimes when we were driving around, I would get so angry that I would look at an upcoming pole on the side of the road and imagine driving the car right into it so that only she would be hurt.

In contrast, by the time I arrived at the same point in time in my final draft, I had processed my emotions from the past as well as those of the present, and I was able to weave those emotions together to expose to the reader my inner conflicts:

Underneath the Normal, there was pain and anger, confusion, hatred. Turmoil. A fucking war. A pile of broken pieces and no idea what to do with them.

And she, right there, my mother. The enemy.

Let me see if I can break this down for you, for me. I blamed her. Still. All along, maybe. Her dominance, her power, her overbearing fist. The pop-pop-pop of unraveling stitches. Her demand for perfection. Her need to pour everything into these rigid, unforgiving molds. Everything a rose, her love of pure, unblemished White. Her Taurus aggression forcing all the players to move at her command.

I hated her.

She was my mother and I hated her. Blamed her for the destruction of my family, for taking him away from us by taking us away. Sometimes we'd be in the car, she distracted in the passenger seat, looking out the window. Me behind the wheel, looking for a pole to ram the car into so that it would look like an accident.

Yes.

Yes. I'm telling you this. You're hearing me right.

I wanted her to die. (116)

Then, in a subsequent passage, I speak about the present-day occasions on which my mother comes to me in my dreams. I apply what I learned from D'Ambrosio and Sedaris to attempt to really see this character as the product of her own story, to also consider *her* perspective within the narrative of mine:

I put my arms around her and hold her like a child.

I give her now what I couldn't then. My love.

I try to understand.

How difficult it must be for one who needs control to have none. For one who doesn't make mistakes to make the biggest one. For one who loves her child to turn away.

Then I wake up, full of, full of *love*, and I cry. Happy tears, maybe. Tears of love and forgiveness and something there isn't a word for. Something like relief, like overcoming, like arriving at your destination. Like knowing you were never really gone. (117)

By juxtaposing the past with the present, I am validating that younger version of myself while also demonstrating how I have changed over the years. The focus remains on the positive traits, as I had originally intended, without taking away from my initial emotions, and it allows me to reach "something hard and true beneath the smooth surface of sentimental self-regard." (Gornick 20) Throughout the writing of my memoir, I continued to pore over the events and people of my childhood memories. I attempted to uncover their stories even as I uncovered mine, and in

the process, I began to truly understand many of the factors that influenced my development as a human being.

The second necessary element of effective storytelling is a well-developed voice that is precisely suited to telling the story one seeks to tell. In *The Art of Memoir*, Mary Karr warns that “most memoirs fail because of voice.” (Karr 35) “Voice isn’t just a manner of talking,” she explains. “It’s an operative mindset and way of perceiving that naturally stems from feeling oneself alive inside the past. That’s why self-awareness is so key.” (Karr 36) Indeed, *The Art of Memoir* is, in itself, a study in the use of voice. Karr adds bits of herself here and there, tucking intimate phrases and expressions into her prose, flavoring her book of theory with personality and feeling, thereby allowing it to live and breathe on its own. Beginning with the second sentence of the very first chapter, the reader encounters “One minute you’re a grown-ass woman, then a whiff of cumin conjures up your dad’s curry, and a whole door to the past blows open...” (Karr 14) and it’s obvious that this is most certainly not your typical, dry how-to manual. It’s not just the cussing, either. It is Karr’s manner of speaking, her casual tone. It’s that *something* that makes you feel like she is sitting there, across from you at the dinner table, speaking between bites of mashed potatoes or peas, periodically raising her fork into the air for emphasis. That *something* was one of the most elusive elements missing from the first few drafts of my memoir; it took a great deal of searching and experimenting to finally find it.

Vivian Gornick describes the idea of an “unsurrogated narrator” as one whose “existence on the page is integral to the tale being told.” (Gornick 6-7) Furthermore, she states that “the ability to make us believe that we know who is speaking is the trustworthy narrator achieved.” (Gornick 17) This narrator is the persona who delivers the truth to the reader from “exactly the right distance:

not too close, not too far,” (Gornick 19) so great care must be taken to ensure that this narrator’s voice and tone have been properly cultivated and developed. In my initial attempts to develop a voice with which to narrate my story, I landed at too great a distance from the mark: my writing was a bit too impersonal, a bit too clean.

My quest to find the right voice to tell my own tale led me to the work of two individuals who had successfully discovered theirs. The first of these was Joan Didion. I had come across her essays in the past and admired her casual confidence and no-nonsense frills. Her *Slouching Toward Bethlehem* collection brought her even closer to me, allowing me to see in detail the intricacies of her craft.

The brush with which Didion paints her scenes, her characters, her observations, is steady and precise. She captures the tender nuances and imperfections of her subjects, painting them with masterful strokes and flawless language, a reflection of her own poetics. The essay, “Where the Kissing Never Stops,” haunted me for days. Didion’s descriptions of Miss Joan Baez, owner of the Institute for the Study of Nonviolence, impressed me as much for their simplicity: “She was born on Staten Island, but... until she found Carmel, she did not really come from anywhere,” (Didion 45) as for their melancholy-tainted profundity: “Joan Baez was a personality before she was entirely a person, and, like anyone to whom that happens, she is in a sense the hapless victim of what others have seen in her, written about her, wanted her to be and not to be.” (Didion 47)

In the same collection, the essay, “On Morality,” begins with an intimate account of the speaker’s current state: she is in a motel room in Death Valley, California, in the middle of summer, with a malfunctioning air conditioner and ice cubes wrapped in a towel placed against her lower back for relief from the heat. Following this description, however, the narration takes a detour from the concrete, the personal, to a much loftier, much more universal tone punctuated by an

unexpected leap from the page in which she addresses the reader directly: “You are quite possibly impatient with me by now; I am talking, you want to say, about a ‘morality’ so primitive that it scarcely deserves the name.” (Didion 159) This shift in tone serves to widen the angle of the story so that it includes the world outside of itself, a strategy that caught my attention because it encourages the reader to enter the narrative space and become an active participant in the discourse. I decided to adopt it in a few key passages of the memoir. For instance, the chapter in which my father’s abuse intensifies after we move to Austin begins with, “How do I tell you about this part?” and a little later, just before I lay out the disturbing details, I move in even closer to the reader with, “But now here we are, you and I. We’ve arrived at this place. This very specific point in the story.” (55) In this way, I am drawing the reader further in, enveloping her into my story, into my life.

The second writer whose work strongly influenced my voice was Myriam Gurba. She is the author of *Mean*, a memoir about pain, suffering, and survival. The narrative begins rather abstractly, luring the reader in with something more like poetry than prose before smacking her in the face with an image so violent that she is forced to snap out of any reality she finds herself in and stand at attention, fight-or-flight instinct fully engaged by the end of page one:

She reaches into her purse. Mexican hair falls across her face.

It won’t look like that much longer.

A man wearing white clothes creeps around the corner of the snack bar. He creeps up behind the girl and swings a pipe. It hits her in the head and her knees buckle. The man raises his weapon, takes another swing, and whacks her again.

(Gurba 1-2)

Mean is an open sore of a book, red and throbbing and fully alive. As the story meanders along through the different events that shaped the speaker's life and person, the wound is exposed, held open for the reader, who is invited inside to explore at will. In this same sense, the entirety of my memoir revolves around the sexual abuse I suffered as a child and youth at the hands of my father. This wound is the one I hold open for the reader, even when it's painful to do so, because, like Gurba, I want the reader to fully understand the reasonings behind my thoughts and actions. I want the reader to understand my motivations, my experience.

The last part of Gurba's book, especially, contains a gut-wrenching sincerity that attempts to make sense of the speaker's guilt: "The privilege of surviving doesn't feel good... It makes me not want to eat strawberries," (Gurba 112) her fears: "Everything takes on a new hue, the color of rape," (Gurba 111) her anger: "it seemed like a good idea to have sex with someone and ruin his family," (Gurba 146) her pride: "I didn't think of him as a pussy—he hadn't earned that compliment," (Gurba 170) and her gratitude: "I'm not glad you're dead, but I'm glad I'm alive." (Gurba 174). In short, the reader becomes a witness to the speaker's survival, and in doing so she becomes a survivor too.

It is one thing to identify the strengths and components in the works of successful authors, but developing those strengths in one's own work is an entirely different matter. After carefully dissecting and investigating the works of Joan Didion and Myriam Gurba, I still found myself facing the monumental task of answering the question Gornick poses in her book: "How does the writer of personal narrative pull from his or her own boring, agitated self the truth speaker who will tell the story that needs to be told?" (Gornick 165) For me, it turned out to be a matter of pronouns and verbs.

I had already rewritten several pieces of the second section of my memoir—the part that begins just after the first occurrence of the abuse—when I decided to rethink my strategy regarding voice. Here is one of the passages before undergoing reconstructive surgery:

At the funeral, the first I'd ever attended, everything seemed dark and solemn, and cold. Regan's father was there, with a thin, unshaven face and a hollow look in his eyes as if he wasn't really able to see anything outside of them. There were lots of people in the pews, teachers and students I recognized from Good Shepherd as well as members of the Valencia family whom I did not. There were three coffins in the front. The center one, the largest of the three, was closed, but the two on either side were open, and each contained the body of one of the girls, wearing their school uniforms and crisp, white shirts.

As we walked up the center aisle, my eyes were glued to the coffin on the left, the one that held Regan. She looked pretty. Calm, almost smiling. Her fingers were clasped together on her chest and held a string of rosary beads and a small white Bible. My mother encouraged me to speak to her, to say goodbye, but my throat felt parched and when I opened my lips nothing came out. This wasn't Regan, and the body in the other casket wasn't her little sister.

In an effort to follow Vivian Gornick's advice about finding that "unsurrogated narrator," my first step was to replace every "I," "me," and "my," with "Luz," "she," or "her." This simple change, a minor shift in perspective, opened up an unexpected chasm between my little-girl self and my current self, providing the distance I needed to be able to see my life from the outside looking in: "Her mother encouraged her to speak to Regan, to say goodbye, but her throat felt parched and when she opened her lips nothing came out."

Suddenly I was in the story as well as outside of it, like someone just happening to walk in on an event, like a bystander watching, observing, but still very much present. And it was happening, unfolding, right in front of me, in the moment. I felt the weight of that shift at once and responded by altering the verb tenses, too: “Her mother encourages her to speak to Regan, to say goodbye, but her throat feels parched and when she opens her lips nothing comes out.”

Something about this final adjustment of time and perspective clicked. Caused just enough of a disruption to the literary, monotonous tone of the previous version to make me sit up and pay attention. After years of working and reworking those passages, something was finally happening, changing, coming to life. I was beginning to find my voice. I switched back to the first person, but the freedom of writing in the present tense while remaining in that outside observer mode was the key to unlocking my narrator, my persona. Suddenly, I remembered more details, more emotions. I recalled with greater clarity the face of Regan’s father, the fear I felt about that center coffin and what it contained. The shift in narration shook something free:

She is wearing her school uniform, blue and white plaid with a crisp white shirt. Her skin is lighter than I remember. Her hair is neatly combed and her eyes are closed. On the other side of the chapel, her sister looks identical. I stare and stare from my seat on like the eighth row, far enough away to be able to hide behind taller bodies. I’m not afraid, but seeing them both there, lying still and silent inside those fancy white-lined coffins, makes me feel still and silent too.

And then there is that third coffin between them. Full-sized. Closed.

That’s the one that scares me, because I’ve heard rumors of what’s inside. Their mother, sure, but also not their mother. Maybe it’s because I never met her, never heard her voice or watched her enter a room. Never saw the way she fixed her

hair—was it long or short, curly or straight? Maybe it’s because she was a stranger, but what I imagine in that box, sealed up forever, is unspeakable. Pieces, really. Flesh and bone. Not someone who was once alive.

Ahead of us, people are crying. Relatives, probably. Friends of the family. Maybe even other strangers moved by the tragedy itself. I don’t cry at all. My mother puts her hand on my shoulder and nudges me into position behind my father. We walk up to Regan’s coffin. My mother whispers that I can touch her or kiss her if I want to, but I don’t want to. Not at all. (40)

The more I continued to write in this way, the more the story took on a more fluid tone, a more authentic sound, a cadence. At one point, I stopped rewriting each passage and began to write the scenes from scratch instead, allowing my memories of the events, rather than my previous drafts, to guide me. The voice became its own entity, grew raw and pure and honest. At times it soared, poetic, free, while in other places it turned hard and dark and low. Sometimes it was playful, and other times it was pensive. Here and there, the voice leaped up from the page, the way Didion’s does, to address the reader directly, or else it circled back using an inverted second person, a variation in which the “you” clearly refers to the “I”: “Here is what happens in the counselor’s office when you’re seventeen years old and you speak up about what your father has been up to for the past eleven years.” (98) Then, during some of the more difficult moments of the story, the voice refused to speak in prose at all. It demanded to speak in lines of poetry, like Gurba’s, and I allowed it. The memoir contains four such poems, all heavy with emotion, a beautiful kind of pain.

“For me psyche equals voice,” Mary Karr states, “so your own psyche—how you think and see and wonder and scudge and suffer—also determines such factors as pacing and what you

write about when.” (Karr 45) The differently-styled fragments that appear in the sections following the idyllic Part One of my story reflect the shattered remains left behind after a violent act. The voice I use in these sections is laced with a sense of urgency and directness because these are the parts of my childhood that shook me the hardest and taught me the most. It mirrors the different forces at play inside my head and my heart as I struggled to make sense of my life. Part One, by contrast, is lyrical and passive to match my entrance into the world, all the good I absorbed before things took a dark turn, while Part Five is told in a different voice altogether—one that has grown and matured, learned to accept life’s challenges and take responsibility for selecting its own path.

The final requirement in the effective telling of a story is a clearly-defined and purposeful message. Vivian Gornick calls this the story within the situation. She writes of memoirists for whom “a flash of insight illuminating [their steadily changing idea of the emergent self] grew out of the struggle to clarify one’s own formative experience; and in each case the strength and beauty of the writing lie in the power of concentration with which this insight is pursued and made to become the writer’s organizing principle. That principle at work is what makes a memoir literature rather than testament.” (Gornick 117) As an example, she points to a speech she once heard at a memorial service about the speaker’s relationship with the deceased. In order to arrive at something meaningful to share with her audience, Gornick states, the writer of that speech had to comb through twenty years’ worth of memories, searching for just the right story to tell. In the end, she came to understand that a simple narration of her memories of the deceased would not suffice. Instead, she chose to examine their effect on *her*. By focusing on her feelings about those memories—the mix of admiration, intimidation, gratitude, respect, and fear she had always felt toward the deceased—she allowed the honesty of her message to transform her speech into

something powerful and memorable. According to Gornick, this is how one finds the story within one's situation, the message within one's memories. "Truth in a memoir," she writes, "is achieved not through a recital of actual events; it is achieved when the reader comes to believe that the writer is working hard to engage with the experience at hand." (Gornick 91)

When I first began working on my memoir, I had planned to write about the themes of forgiveness, survival, and identity. I thought my message was going to be that every person one meets has a past, a history, and that one never knows what another person has experienced during their lifetime, so we should be slow to judge. However, as I worked and reworked each section, as I molded the entire text into something more coherent and meaningful, more streamlined and *alive*, as I let my voice run free and wild and took the time to really *listen* to what it had to say, I realized that both my purpose and the message of my project were changing. A story was beginning to take shape.

Rather than stop mid-process to analyze it, I allowed myself to simply absorb what it was telling me. I took notes along the margins of my drafts, woke up in the middle of the night to scribble down ideas, to type quick snippets of thoughts on my phone. I inundated my friends and colleagues with existential questions ("Why do some people end up homeless?"), theories about our origins ("Maybe it's all genetics"), and random, breathless observations ("What about our cats? They didn't choose to live here in our home!"). I examined every image that surfaced as I worked to reshape my chapters again and again: shepherds, angels, trees, bridges, traveling, motion. I knew that hidden somewhere within those images was the point of what I wanted to say—the message of my work. I struggled with questions of spirituality—do we each really have a guardian angel? Why do some of us still manage to fall into the abyss? Do we have full control of our decisions as we go through life or is someone else holding the reins?

Digging through a good twenty years' worth of situation to locate the story—that one, glorious *truth* within my memories—was one of the most challenging experiences of my life. In the end, this is what I discovered: When a new life begins, it is simply dropped into existence without warning or consent. Conditions and roles, even preferences, are predetermined, set at random. Call it chance, luck, destiny, or divinity. Nothing that's alive today had any say in how it started. During our formative years, we are set into motion by the forces that surround us. And then, one day, before we've even realized it, the wheel is handed over. We become the navigators of our own course, the makers of our own decisions, and then it's up to us to choose our destination, the force that will pull us along during our journey. Who we are is not limited to where we come from or where we are going. It's a combination of the two: at any given moment in time, it's the direction in which we're moving, our *trajectory*. And for every single one of us, that trajectory is not only unique, but changeable. This is the message at the heart of *Cicada's Song*.

These past three years at the University of Texas at El Paso have taught me a great many lessons about writing and about life. I have learned to observe my surroundings carefully, to take note of these observations and to listen to them closely because they all have something to teach me, something to say. I have learned to trust my eyes and my ears as well as my voice, the input and the output, the heartbeat of humanity. Most importantly, I have learned that the story I came in hoping to extract is still alive and well inside of me and always will be, because it is much more than just a story. It is my identity, my source. In writing it down for the outside world, I have rediscovered it, have come to know it, truly, and I understand now that it will continue to weave its threads into everything I produce

PART ONE

Chapter 1

Already the air struggles to rise above the rainy-season heat. A woman's voice announces our destination—the city of David, on the other end of Panamá—and we sit back as other passengers scramble to gather their belongings. Finally, I step forward, ahead of the girls, with two bags slung over my shoulders and another dragging behind me on its squeaky caster wheels. We follow the line of people toward the rear of a double-decker bus where two young men are piling bags into the underbelly. One of them hands me a pink ticket, which I promptly fold in half and tuck into a side pocket of my purse. Then he takes the largest of my bags and flings it to his partner, who slides it over and leans it against the others.

The girls and I make our way back to the front of the bus and up the metal steps. Inside, the air feels metallic, stale. We squeeze down the center aisle and ahead of us, about halfway down, I notice a man sitting in an aisle seat on an empty row. I check our tickets again. 16A, B, and D. The man is sitting in 16C.

He's wearing a button-up shirt and looks to be on the older side of 60, with graying hair and a straight nose, eyes a bit sunken but quiet and still, hair neatly combed. As we approach, I try to catch his eye, but his gaze is fixed on something at the front of the bus, behind me. I help the girls get settled into the two seats on our left, pulling out books and snacks before placing their bags into the rack above. I try to keep my voice low but I know the people around us can hear our muffled English. They know we're strangers here.

Finally, I turn to face the man.

“Perdón,” I say, which in Spanish is more “I’m sorry” than “excuse me.” He gives a little twitch, as if I’ve awakened him, and turns to the side to let me pass. I don’t. Instead I motion toward the girls. “These are my daughters.”

He blinks at me, waiting. And then, in a much-too formal Spanish, which is the only way I know how to speak the language, I ask if he might consider switching spots with me. A crease appears on his forehead and he squints, confused.

“Could we please trade seats,” I repeat. “So that I can be next to my daughters.”

The man frowns and looks over at the girls. They have already plugged in their ear buds and are sitting with their knees propped up against the seats in front of them, noses buried in their books.

“No,” he says, with that Spanish staccato that gives words a little more finality. “I asked for an aisle seat. I’m not going to sit by the window.” His eyes go back to neutral, back to staring straight ahead, and I step over him, careful to leave a little room between us when I sit. I tuck my backpack into the space between my leg and the wall of the bus.

After I’ve settled into my seat, I move aside the velvety fabric that covers the window. Then the man clears his throat and I think he’s going to complain about the light coming in, but when he speaks his voice is softer than before, almost apologetic.

“I have bad knees,” he says. “That’s why I have to sit by the aisle.”

I turn to him and nod.

“Otherwise I get cramps.”

“It’s fine,” I say in a cheery tone. “I might have to reach over you when they get hungry, that’s all.”

“No problem,” he replies. “I don’t mind.” His mouth arranges itself into something like a smile and then we’re silent again. Him looking ahead, me looking out the window.

I hear the engine’s rumble as the bus begins to move. Above us, cold air blows hard through the vent. I touch my fingers to my forehead, my chest, and each shoulder as we make our way out of the station.

We weave along the city streets and up onto the highway, from where I catch glimpses of the ocean between the treetops, a blue-black strip with ships of every size floating like cumin seeds in a bowl of caldo. Ahead of us, I see the Bridge of the Americas, tall and white, reaching across the banks. I call out to the girls, but they don’t hear me over the hum of the bus.

The man reaches over and taps my older daughter on the arm. She looks up from her book, unalarmed.

“Look,” I say in English, pointing to her window. Her sister opens their curtain and they stare out at the canal cutting through the rainforest. My younger daughter snaps a picture with her camera and then they both settle back into their seats, giggling, to share a package of cheese crackers.

Next to me, I feel the man turn again. He smells faintly of soap and body odor.

“Where are you from?” he asks. An easy question to answer when you’re here instead of there.

“Texas,” I say.

“You’re a long way from home.”

I nod, imagining the picture he's forming in his head. Texas. Land of cowboys and longhorns. Dusty roads and high-heeled boots. He doesn't know my home is in the suburbs. A comfortable house in a quiet neighborhood.

"Are you visiting?" he continues, and his voice is kind. Curious. Almost friendly.

I nod again. "What about you?"

"Brand-new grandson in the capital," he says. "Four weeks old." He beams. "Heading back home now, to my other grandchildren." His Spanish is different from that of other locals I have heard. He pronounces each word clearly, without swallowing his consonants, and I think he might be speaking extra slowly on my behalf. For a few moments he remains silent. Then he clears his throat and starts again.

"Do you have family in David?"

I give my chin a quick lift, signaling the girls. "They do," I say.

The man nods. "Their father?"

I shake my head. "His family."

Neither of us speak again for a while and I pull the curtain open a little more. The grass along the side of the road is shaggy and overgrown. To the west, the sky has begun to darken. We pass a pasture dotted with cows and I'm amazed at how quickly the city has given way to country. Skyscrapers have been replaced by modest homes of concrete painted yellow, white, or turquoise-blue. Hammocks hang like crescent moons from posts on covered porches, and chickens roam free in their yards. I've seen land like this before.

A gentle tap on my elbow pulls me from my thoughts. It's him. When I turn, my older daughter tells me in English that she's cold. I reach down to pull a jacket and a towel from my backpack. The man takes them from me and passes them across the aisle.

“I’m sorry,” I say.

“No problem. It’s my own fault.”

Before I’ve turned back to the window, I hear his voice again.

“I’m Salomón.”

I smile. “My name is Luz.”

“Luz,” he repeats. “May I ask why you’re traveling alone?”

I look up at him. His eyes are calm, with just a hint of concern. I’m confused by his question, since it is he, not I, who appears to be alone. My hesitation seems to make him uncomfortable and he quickly shakes his head and looks down. “I’m—sorry,” he stammers. “I don’t mean to pry.”

That’s when I understand what he means. He’s surprised that I’m traveling without a man.

“It’s fine,” I say. “I’m divorced.”

He nods and waits, thinking. The crease has returned to his forehead. “That must be hard.”

I chuckle. “Not really.” He looks at me again, trying to read my face, and I smile. “We’re still friends,” I say.

“Who?”

“Their father and I.”

“Your ex-husband?”

“Yes.”

The man named Salomón nods, but I can see he’s not convinced. “Why did you divorce, then?”

I shrug. “We’re better off as friends, I guess. We did the best we could.”

He looks down again, at his hands. For a second I think he is done asking questions. He has probably dismissed me as some new-age hippie, the kind of woman who hops around from man to man every time things start to get tough.

A little later, however, the questions continue. “And your family? Your brothers and sisters?”

“I don’t have any,” I say, and he frowns.

“But your parents, they live near you?” I can hear the worry in his voice. Amusing, I think.

“My mother died a few years ago.”

“Oh,” he says, lowering his head again and then giving it a little shake. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine,” I say, and then look over at the girls. “She’s still with me.”

Salomón nods, shifts his weight in his seat, and takes a breath as if to speak again. Instead, he closes his mouth and swallows. He’s trying to figure me out. Wants to make sense of my situation. I watch out of the corner of my eye as he turns his wedding ring around and around on his finger. Finally he clears his throat.

“And your father?”

I turn again to face the window. A smattering of tiny droplets has fallen on the pane and now each one is making its way diagonally across the glass, dancing. Trembling. I feel myself shiver from the cold.

“I don’t talk to him anymore,” I say.

Chapter 2

Here's the thing. If you're missing an arm or a leg, if your skin bears the scars of fire or trauma or disease, if you get around in a wheelchair or by tapping a cane on the floor, people *know*. No need to ask, no need to explain. You wear your past like a coat of armor. And if someone chooses to inquire, at least it's direct. Boom. In your face.

When your battle scars are on the inside, though, things can get a little tricky. A well-meaning person—a new friend you're getting to know, a coworker during a coffee break, a stranger on a bus—will ask a question that cuts right into you, makes you blink, tighten your lips, and swallow your spit to maintain your composure. Then you give them the answer and watch their eyes go cold just before they look away. They'll disapprove, of course. Think you're one of those people who can't manage to put the past behind you, who's unwilling to forgive. How can you be so cruel?

But there's never enough time for the whole story. You let them look away. You shrug off their disapproval. Let them think you're a selfish daughter, the kind who abandons her parents, who doesn't care, who doesn't feel. Let them think what they want because there's no way to explain, no way they can understand, and anyway you don't need them to.

You know your own story, and that's enough.

It's just that sometimes, in the quiet hours, a little part of you wishes they could see what you have seen. Know the things you know. You wish that they could understand, just once.

Chapter 3

My story begins in Brooklyn. Except it wasn't Brooklyn to me then. Not bright lights or honking horns, not the metallic smell of subway air or snow piled high along the sidewalks. All that would come later. In the beginning, it was only home. A small, third-floor apartment. My mother, my father, and me. I remember feeling safe. Happy. Loved.

Three artifacts remain from my infancy. I keep them in a rusty tin decorated with teddy bears, along with some medals from my high school track and orchestra days, old driver's licenses and school IDs, my first rosary, a cross-stitch sampler, and the first pair of baby booties I ever crocheted. From my first days in Brooklyn, I have:

- a baby spoon, its plastic handle white with a cartoon bulldog above a cartoon deer and Asian characters in yellow, red and black
- a strip of copper with rounded ends, curved into what looks like a bracelet, with four pieces of flattened metal attached to the outside
- a folded piece of yellow cardstock with my name, my mother's name, my address, my birth date, and my gender hand-written in black ink under the words "Permanent Record of Immunizations and Tests"

My mother told me, growing up, that the first two of these items were each originally part of a set. The spoon came with a matching fork in a plastic case, a gift from one of her work friends. The copper strip, she claimed, was not a bracelet but one of two clips used to secure my baby blanket onto my stroller when she pushed me along the city streets.

The third item, that yellow shot record, worn soft from use and age, reveals a mother's dutiful trips to the clinic, my check-ups, complete with length and weight, the times I was poked

with needles, and the fact that I had the chicken pox as a toddler. After July 25, 1975, there is only one additional entry. It's from September of 1977.

Here is what I remember from that two-year gap:

Grass. Stiff and scratchy and pale, like hay, under a sky that was not quite blue and not quite yellow but something in-between, spreading around us like a great dome, an upturned bowl, 360 degrees of horizon. A place my parents called Los Llanos, where the roads consisted of two matching curves of flattened grass cutting across fields and disappearing around hills. Where city blocks were defined at the intersections of barbed wire fences with uneven posts jutting up from the ground. Where alleys were tree-lined streams and bridges were logs lain between two banks and crossed by foot.

This was our new home. Three and a half walls made of tall, thin poles like bamboo shoots split lengthwise. A loft, called a zarzo, where my parents and I slept on a bed of burlap sacks under a thin cotton sheet. A separate hut for the kitchen, the wooden stove blackened from smoke to match the bottoms of the pots.

I remember a packed-dirt yard. Mother hens that didn't let me touch their babies. A mean-spirited turkey. The herds of cattle, dirty-gray and bony-thin with tails like whips and humps above their shoulders. My father's hunting dog, Guardián. Shiny black with one white paw. A type of plant that grew wild with leaves like ferns that shriveled at the lightest touch. Dormilonas, they were called. Sleepyheads. I remember running around chasing clouds of bees the size of gnats. Plucking them from the air and pinching them between my fingers until they gave a satisfying

crunch. I recall the smell of horses and also of the medicine my father used on them to keep the ticks away.

I remember learning from my mother how to make arepas on a flattened metal sheet. Pressing the dough into the pan with one hand and rounding the edges with the other, then flipping them over, careful not to burn my fingers. I remember walking behind her down a little worn path to the creek behind the house, carrying buckets of water back up, trying not to let them slosh around too much. I remember watching her bent over the stove, dropping pieces of potato, plantain, or yuca into boiling water. A sweet drink called guarapo slurped from a dried-up gourd called a totuma, and the bits of pulp that sometimes came along for the ride.

I remember people, neighbors, gathered around a hole in the ground, hooting and laughing, celebrating. I remember peeking into the hole and seeing, at the bottom, an animal like a giant, hairy pig laying on its side, dead, on a bed of leaves.

I remember fire. Dancing walls of red and orange, a sound like that of wind blowing, howling, and the straight-edged patches of black grass that followed after the flames had been extinguished, smoke uncurling from the ground, the crackle, the smell. But never any fear.

And I remember the sound of cicadas, fierce and strong, a thousand strong on hot days. I remember finding their empty shells clinging to walls, how my father would tell me they'd done it to themselves—screaming and buzzing until their bodies gave out and burst. How sad I felt for them.

I've seen photographs of these days. Square, flat, and motionless with neat, white borders. The yellow grass. The rickety house. Me, with hair in messy wisps, lightened by the sun, looking up at the lens of my father's black Minolta, holding lemons, a sack of floppy-eared puppies, or someone's hand. Standing where I was told to stand, smiling when I was told to smile.

But photographs are nothing compared to the visions in my head, the animated clips, full-colored and alive. I remember how my mother and I would take a weekly trek to a bend in the creek with a pail of dirty clothes and a blue rectangle of soap. How I would splash in the water, watching as she scrubbed each piece of clothing over a flattened stone, the suds cascading over the edge, and afterward, how she'd hang the clothes on branches to dry before joining me. How she used the same blue bar of soap on my skin and hair, how she'd scrub my arms until the dirt came off in little rolls and disappeared into the water, how she'd fill my head with stories of her childhood and her youth. Stories she would repeat, at my request, again and again over the years. My mother a little girl in the hills of Santander, getting up before sunrise each morning to milk the cows, collect the eggs, and feed the pigs. My mother playing with her sisters, finding nests of wild baby rabbits tucked among the spears of grass, looking into the clear waters of a mountain stream at the polished stones beneath the surface. My mother begging her father for permission to go to school, and once there working hard to catch up to the other students, earning her teachers' approval and in the end becoming a teacher herself.

I remember my father, too. My Pipa. Dark-skinned and narrow-eyed like the other men who rode on horseback over the fields, herding cattle. I remember how on rare occasions he would ride over to where I stood watching and scoop me up onto his horse. I remember the view, incredible from this new height, the thrill of knowing that any moment I might fall to my death, and the peace of mind from knowing that my father would never let that happen. I remember riding with him, Guardián loping happily beside us, until we reached an open field away from everything. How we would lay down side-by-side with our backs against the grass to look up at the wide expanse of yellow-blue above. How he would tell me stories of distant lands and princesses with seven brothers and young men on deserted islands and old men who put fish guts on their friend's

eyes to make them see again. How he would grow silent again and raise his arm to point out a group of tiny specks gliding in the distance. Chulos, he called them. His favorite animal.

“If I could be born again and start my life all over,” he would say, “I would choose to be a chulo so I could fly high above the world dando vueltas in beautiful spirals.”

I remember our nights. Everything so black outside I couldn't see my hand in front of my face. The inside lit with candles and my father's lantern. My parents speaking grown-up talk while I sat on the dirt floor, my back against a post with Guardián's head resting on my lap, my fingers scratching him between the ears until he fell asleep. And all around us a symphony of frogs and crickets and other night-time creatures, the rhythm of their song like a pulse.

Chapter 4

September of 1977. The needle goes back on the record.

I was not quite four years old when we left behind the quiet of Los Llanos, the endless sky, the open fields, and returned to New York City, to a world of chaos and noise, of lights and bright colors, of straight edges, right angles, concrete and metal and glass. Of weekly excursions to the Botanical Gardens, Central Park, the Bronx Zoo, and other capital letter places, my parents and Tíos and Tías laughing, breathless, playful, more excited than the children. Everything shiny and new.

But the past is carried within, and back in our apartment, away from the colorful madness, life continued as before. Happy. Loving. Warm.

My grandmother, Mamita Clementina, lived across the hall with my mother's younger brother, my Tío Toñito. Years later, I would hear the story of how he once fell down a flight of concrete stairs in Colombia and nearly died. I would see the photo of him in the hospital looking thin and pale, his body suspended inside a metal contraption with rods and bolts and screws, his head completely shaved. But the Tío Toñito I knew was no helpless victim. In the evenings, when the weather was nice, he would take me out for walks through the neighborhood, weaving up and down along the streets to take in the sounds of other people's record players and the smells of other families' dinners, all mixed together with the constant honking and the car exhaust and the breeze and the fumes from the subway. Often, our walks led us down to the harbor, which was only a couple of blocks from our home. There, at the edge of the river, we would stand and look out at Manhattan's shimmery skyline and the beautiful bridges that stretched way out over the water. Tío Toñito would rattle off facts he found impressive about the Empire State Building, the Twin

Towers, or the Brooklyn Bridge, but what interested me most were the massive cargo ships docked along the pier right by where we stood. Solid and unyielding like giant iron bricks. Standing there with my hand in my Tío's, they made me feel tiny and insignificant, but also safe.

On lazy Saturday mornings, I liked to wander across the hall, where Mamita Clementina would be sewing or crocheting or sitting at a window reading verses from her prayer book, her gray-green eyes clear and twinkling with a look of mischief mixed with innocence. She wore plainly cut flower-print dresses, generous at the waist, and black slip-on shoes. Every now and then, she would hand me a caramel cube wrapped in cellophane and tell me stories about her childhood while I sat at her feet and let the sweet milky candy fall apart inside my mouth. Then she'd run a hand over the top of my head and remind me to always be a good girl.

Once, she handed me a plastic doll with eyes that closed when you turned her on her back.

"Her name is Mariela," Mamita said. "Cuídela bien."

I held the doll in my hands. Made her eyes open and close and open again. Touched the chopped-up tufts of hair that stuck out from the little holes all over her head. Ran my fingers over the thin and tattered fabric of her dress. Saw the pink of her cheeks, nearly faded, and decided that Mariela was the most beautiful doll in the world. My grandmother made new outfits for her out of fabric scraps and gave me an old handkerchief to wrap around her like a blanket, and for the longest time, that doll came with me everywhere, her gentle eyes watching, grateful.

When my mother saw Mariela, the first thing she did was check under her skirt. Then she made a clicking sound with her mouth and used another scrap of fabric, this one starched and white, to make her a pair of underwear. Only instead of adding elastic along the waist, like she always did with mine, my mother sewed them right onto her, pulling the thread tight and securing it with a double knot to make sure it would never come undone.

On Saturday afternoons, my parents and I often loaded up into a subway train to meet with friends and relatives inside crowded apartment living rooms and church basements. The spaces would fill with loud conversation, thunderous laughter, and too much food. My parents grew lively and happy at these get-togethers, singing and dancing with the other adults, while the children were left to play in a back room or a corner. Sometimes we wouldn't get back home until very late at night.

Most of the time, however, the three of us spent quiet evenings together in our apartment after they both came home from work. My mother would make her pots and pans sizzle in the kitchen while my father watched the Spanish news on TV. After dinner, they sat at the table with stacks of books spread between them while I played with Mariela on the floor. When I asked what they were working on, my mother showed me one of her notebooks, its pages covered with marks and figures I did not understand, and told me that she and my father were studying to take a test.

“We won't always live here,” she explained. “If we pass this test, we'll have more opportunities.”

Chapter 5

After we'd been back in New York for several months, my Tío Toñito started joining my parents at the kitchen table in the evenings. Instead of books, they'd spread out maps and atlases, using a dictionary to help them translate information about each of the fifty states. They were tired of the cold, they said, and were determined to find a warmer, calmer place to live.

Eventually, my dad bought an ugly brown station wagon with side panels that looked like planks of wood and a floorboard so rusted that I could see the pavement through little eaten-away holes as we drove along the city streets. We left New York at the end of spring and hopped around between rental houses and apartments in Florida and Texas before finally settling down in a suburb called Garland, just north of Dallas, on a street called Shorehaven.

The Shorehaven house was fancier than any other home I had ever known. My father and Tío Toñito painted the inside walls bright white, and sunshine flooded the living room through the window that overlooked the back yard. The inner part of the yard had a raised area near the back for a flowerbed. To the right, a tree with a trunk that split close to the ground stood tall and proud. I could almost hear it inviting me to climb its gnarled branches.

A pebbled path led beyond a wooden fence into the outer yard, which was covered in lush, dark-green grass all the way to the far edge. A small weeping willow grew out of the earth in the back corner, its branches still not long enough to properly sway.

Tío Toñito and Mamita settled into the two bedrooms that faced the street. My parents and I shared the larger bedroom in the back while we worked on converting the garage into two rooms and a closet. We adjusted quickly to our new surroundings, and within days it felt as if we had lived in the Shorehaven house for years.

A few weeks after moving, my father found a job as the janitor at a Catholic school and traded the station wagon in for a red Mercury Monarch. My mother started working as an aide in a nursing home. They would both leave early, while I was still asleep. Mamita would wake me up mid-morning for breakfast, and I would spend the rest of the day with Tío Toñito. Every day, just before lunch, the two of us would go for a walk. We soon discovered how close we lived to the nearest park. A big playground stood in the center of it like a castle under a canopy of trees, but I rarely played on it. It was much more interesting to explore. Together, my Tío and I wandered through the little dirt paths that fluttered in and out among the ribbon of trees that ran through the length of the park.

One day, in the middle of our wanderings, it began to rain. My Tío pointed to a huge tree with big, sagging branches that reached all the way to the ground. Together we ran toward it, laughing, just as raindrops started their crescendo over our heads. Tío swept some branches to the side and we both stepped in. We sat on the soft earth with our backs against the trunk and listened to the rain fall around us. Everything smelled of dirt and grass and rain and I felt as if we'd stepped into a magical fairyland house in the woods. When the roar died down and turned to light tapping, we emerged from the tree, walking all the way back home as the remaining rain drops fell on our skin like tiny wet stars. Everything peaceful and good, the world a quiet, joyful, harmless place.

Around five o'clock every afternoon, my father's keys jingled at the front door. This signaled to me that the day was almost over, and though I was glad to have my father home, a part of me wished he would stay away a little longer. When my father was around, Tío Toñito changed from child to adult. My grandmother would serve dinner and we would all gather at the table to eat, the

adults talking about whatever it is adults talk about at the end of the day, while I picked through the pile of rice on my plate, trying to remove all the pieces of onion with my fork, even though my grandmother always swore she hadn't put any in.

After dinner, the men would turn on the television set to watch the Spanish news. That was my cue to disappear until my mother came home from the nursing home. Sometimes she would arrive long after the sun had set, wearing her white dress, white stockings, and white shoes with thick soles. She took advantage of the little time we had together to begin teaching me how to crochet. I was used to watching her nimble fingers twist and bend, transforming simple rolls of yarn into a pair of baby booties or a bedspread, but when she placed the hooked crochet needle into my hand I struggled to even hold it correctly. She coached me patiently at first, adjusting my fingers and my wrist, teaching me about tension and how to form each stitch perfectly, but over time she grew more frustrated with my errors, pressing her lips together in disapproval when my stitches did not meet her standards. If she deemed a single stitch too tight, too big, too loose or otherwise imperfect, she had me pull the loose end of the yarn so that it pop-pop-popped its way back to the offending stitch. Then I had to correct the stitch and begin again from that point forward.

Once I finally learned how to make a chain of loops according to her specifications, we moved on to more complex projects, like potholders and blanket squares. Later, she taught me to cross-stitch, showing me the correct way to make my little Xs on the fabric. Even the back side of the cloth had to be correct, with only vertical lines showing.

Late at night, my parents and I would gather in their room to say our nightly prayers. I recited the first three of these, the Our Father, the Hail Mary, and the Glory Be, on autopilot, not paying attention to the words at all, but then came my favorite one, a prayer to the Guardian Angel.

*Angel de la Guarda, mi dulce compañía,
No me desampares ni de noche ni de día.*

The words felt magical and comforting to me, and when I spoke them my eyes wandered to the place on the wall where my father had hung a framed picture of a golden-haired angel with big, majestic wings floating behind a pair of children as they crossed a rickety bridge. I marveled at the thought of having a supernatural being at your side at every moment of your life, ready to catch you, to protect you from harm.

Chapter 6

At the end of that summer, my mother announced that I would be starting the first grade in September, at the school where my father worked. She took me to K-Mart and bought me supplies I had never even dared to dream of: a box of 48 brand-new Crayola crayons with a built-in sharpener in the back; two fat pencils; a set of watercolors with its own brush in a plastic case; and a Charlie's Angels lunchbox with a matching Thermos.

Even more exciting than the school supplies was the crisp blue-and-white plaid uniform I would get to wear to school. My mother picked up the special fabric from a warehouse and sewed it herself. The skirt reached down to just below my knees, and she left a two-inch hem, explaining that this way she could simply let it out as I grew. Attached to the skirt were two wide bands that went over my shoulders. A jumper, it was called. On the left band, just above my heart, she sewed a diamond-shaped patch with the initials GSS, Good Shepherd School. She also purchased a red sweater and added the same patch to it in red.

On the night before the first day of school, my mother sat me down in the kitchen to wind my hair up in pink foam curlers.

"Are you excited?" she asked.

I tried to nod, but her hands held my head in place.

"You're a very lucky girl," she continued, picking up another curler. "Not everyone gets to go to school with their father."

"I know," I said.

In the morning, my mother released my curls one by one and then combed through them to make sure they were smooth and bouncy before sending me off to climb into the passenger's

seat of the Monarch. My dad and I rode to the school together while the sky was just beginning to go pink. Along the way, we passed by a church with an enormous stone sculpture of an angel, all in dazzling white. I had seen the angel in full sunlight before, but at this early hour, lit up from below in the near-darkness, it took on a different kind of radiance. It seemed larger, somehow, its eyes more fully opened.

I was still thinking about the angel when I heard the clicking of my father's blinker. We had arrived at the school. We went up the front steps and into the front office, where a man with streaks of gray in his hair and a square-shaped mustache took my hand. My father said a quick goodbye and turned from me before I could protest. The man walked me down a few corridors until we arrived at the first grade classroom. He knocked on the door and a woman with short black hair opened it. She smiled at him and they exchanged some words. Then she turned around to face the rows of children now looking up at me. I didn't understand what she said to them, but I heard a strange version of my name emerge from her lips: L'zalba. As she continued to speak, I stared at the faces before me. One of them stood out. It belonged to a girl with long blond hair and fair skin, and when our eyes met she gave me a big smile. I decided at that moment that she would become my friend.

The students in my class, I soon discovered, were well-behaved and helpful. Though not a single one of them spoke Spanish, they understood my attempts at communicating in English, and when I made a mistake, such as calling the teacher "Teacher" instead of "Mrs. Williams," they corrected me gently. Before long, I had more than doubled the bits of English I had picked up during short stints at different day care centers I had attended during our migration from New York.

The girl I had noticed on my first day became my best friend, just as I had hoped. Her name was Suzy and she had big brown eyes and a quiet demeanor. When we were released to play in the yard, Suzy and I walked arm in arm around the fence line. Sometimes we crawled into the space behind the bushes and walked unseen next to the wall of the church.

“Have you ever tasted these?” she once asked me, snapping off a white honeysuckle from its stem.

I shook my head and watched, fascinated, as she put the back end of the flower to her mouth.

“Try it,” she said. “It’s good.”

I did as she had done and smiled when I tasted the sweet nectar.

Suzy also told me about her family. She had older brothers and a twin sister, and though she assured me that I was the lucky one for not having siblings to compete against for attention, listening to her talk about them made me long for a sibling of my own.

During the remainder of my first year at Good Shepherd Catholic School, I made more friends and learned a great deal of English, including songs and poems and hymns. I heard the same Bible stories my grandmother had taught me and learned the Ten Commandments in English. School felt like a different version of the world I had known at home.

I didn’t get to see my father as often as I’d imagined during the day. He was always busy, it seemed. Every once in a while, I would hear his rolling trashcan coming down the hall and I would look through the window in our classroom door until I saw him go by. Sometimes he would peek in and wave. At least once a week, when there was a problem with the heater or some other appliance, or if there was a mess to be cleaned up, I would hear his name over the loudspeaker.

Later, when I asked him how he had learned to fix so many problems, he would smile and say “Todo tiene solución.” Everything has a solution.

After school, when all my friends had gone home, I would walk from room to room with my dad. Soon, I learned his routine by heart: he would enter a classroom and empty out all the trashcans first. Then he removed the container part of each pencil sharpener and tap-tap-tapped it against the side of his trashcan to remove all the pencil shavings inside. Next, he used a fresh-smelling spray and an old towel to clean the blackboards until they were smooth and shiny, and sometimes, if the teachers had already gone home for the day, he would spray their desks as well. The final step in each room was to vacuum the carpet.

Sometimes, while he worked, I would play with the toys and learning materials on the teachers’ shelves, but often I would put the things away and help him out instead. I brought him the trashcans and helped tap the sharpener containers. In this way we were able to finish cleaning the rooms a little sooner.

“You’re the best secretaria I could ask for,” he would tell me, and I was glad that I was able to help him do his job.

Other times, late in the evenings, we sat together in side-by-side desks and he would show me tricks and shortcuts for math, making sound effects for the different operations and pretending that every problem was a puzzle to be solved. Soon I adopted his fondness for playing with numbers and math became a game.

My father was proud of his job and liked to show me the proper way of cleaning things. Every time he came across a piece of dried-up gum stuck to the carpet, he took out his collection

of keys and opened the pocketknife attached to it, using the blade to scrape off the sticky material. Black scuff marks on the hallway tiles came off when he rubbed them with the soles of his shoes.

“Every job you do,” he said, “you should do to the best of your ability. Always take pride in your work.”

One day, just before my birthday, my father and I found ourselves inside the teachers’ lounge at school. Everyone had gone home for the day and this was our last room before heading out. My father had already dusted the tables and cleaned the bathroom. Now he was vacuuming the carpet. He had gone around the corner to a little alcove and left me sitting on a couch flipping through a magazine. Finally, the humming stopped, and my father came around to unplug the machine. He wound the cable around and around his forearm and hung the loops on the hook behind the vacuum’s neck. Then he walked over to where I sat and sank into the couch beside me.

“What are you reading?” he asked, and I showed him the magazine.

My father took it from me and thumbed through the pages. Then he closed it and placed it aside. Behind him, through the windows that lined the top of the room’s back wall, I could see that the sky was beginning to darken. Then my father spoke again.

“Has your mother checked you recently?”

I shrugged, not understanding his question.

“For a rash,” he said, and cleared his throat. “Has she been making sure that you’re not chafed?”

I shrugged again and picked up the magazine to put it away, thinking it was probably time for us to leave, but my father stayed still.

“I think it’s a good idea if I check, just to make sure,” he said.

I thought about what he was saying. It was true that my mother used to check me for a rash in my private areas, but that was a long time ago, before I learned how to clean myself properly. I couldn’t remember the last time my mother had looked, and I didn’t think it was necessary to do so now, especially since we were not in the bathroom. The suggestion confused me.

Still holding the magazine in my hand, I watched as my father lifted my legs and helped me lie down lengthwise on the couch. I felt him raise the skirt of my uniform and remove my underwear. Then he spent about ten minutes checking me for a rash.

When he finished, he returned my underwear and told me to put them back on. Then he stood up and, pushing the vacuum cleaner ahead of him, stepped out the door and into the hallway.

I followed.

PART TWO

Matter

I am not the little girl
I used to be.
Or I am, inside,
but things are different now.
I'm bigger, yes, but also more
like another state of
who I used to be. Like steam,
when before, I was ice.
Looking back, I see myself: a girl
in plaid, white shirt never quite
as white as all the others'. Straight hair brown,
down to my chin. Bangs above
my black-brown eyes. A tiny smudge
of a mouth. Blistered knees and dirty
sneakers. Shorts under my skirt.
Today the molecules have found
a new arrangement. I am a woman, free
and strong and whole, my fingers
on the keys, my instrument of truth. I stand
my ground, unflinching, yet
beneath it all I still
wear shorts
under my skirt.

Chapter 7

And what is there left to do but turn the page? At six years old, you don't ask questions. You don't fight back. You take what's given to you, good and bad. You deal.

At six years old, you sit still and listen. Pay attention. Honor thy father and thy mother. Todo tiene solución.

My life did not change after that evening in the teacher's lounge. It only maybe shifted a little, took off in a slightly new direction, a new trajectory. Maybe I ended up here instead of there, but maybe that there would only have been inches from the here. Who knows?

In any case, there's the day of your birth, you know. A cold Thanksgiving afternoon, your mother alone with the doctor, pushing you out all blood and slime and flesh, your first cry.

There's that, and then there's the birth of *you*. That thing that presses down, puts its thumb on you, leaves its mark for you to carry on, forever and ever, Amen. Oh, lots of things leave marks, of course. Scratches, dents, and bruises. But there are things above the other things. Beneath the other things. The things that shape you to the core.

And you don't know it, then, of course. At six years old there's nothing there to recognize. You take it, like you take everything else. Let it shatter you, say thank you, and continue on your way.

Chapter 8

It's the summer after first grade. My parents and I are back in Colombia. In Bogotá this time, where the sky is white and the houses blocky, pushed together without room for yards or gardens. Everything covered in concrete. My mother has repeated the rules about our visit at least a thousand times: Behave, listen, stay close. Say sí señor and no señora. Don't be a grosera. She doesn't even have to threaten me. It's enough to give me her look that says Do what I say.

My other grandmother, my father's mother, lives on a second floor. Her hands are cold and smell of cilantro. Her thin hair falls in silver ringlets and when she smiles I see that she has silver in her mouth, too. She is a lively old lady, eyes dancing, hands clasped together under her chin, but she doesn't seem to see me the way Mamita Clementina does. It's as if I'm something pretty to be admired, a doily or a fancy vase. She speaks to me, but it's from afar. I feel the separation.

Later my parents take me along with them when they go to visit their friends, and it's the same thing.

"Can she speak English?" they ask, and my mother smiles.

"Go on," she says to me. "Say something."

I turn to face the group of strangers and say, in English, "I don't know what to say." Their eyes grow wide and they shake their heads in awe. My mother mentions that I can also sing, and then they beg me to do that too. I'm a roadside attraction.

When I'm not performing tricks, I follow my mother's rules and sit quietly beside her during these visitas. The only time I come alive is if the owners of a house have a pet. Dogs or cats don't look at me the way people do. They have no expectations, don't care what language I speak.

Sometimes while I'm off in some corner petting an animal, I overhear people talk about how strange I am, how quiet or serious or not like a child at all. Once, I hear somebody say that I

am arrogant, una creída, but it doesn't bother me. I don't feel creída. I just don't know what to say, and nobody here will talk to me like I'm a person.

One day, my father asks if I would like to go to a party with him that night.

"Is Mamá going too?" I ask, and he shakes his head no.

"She's going to a visita by herself," he says. "But you and I, we're heading down to a parranda on the first floor."

After my mother leaves for her visita, my father livens up, whistling as he wets his comb in a cup of water and runs it through his night-black hair. He splashes a sweet-smelling liquid on his hands and slaps his cheeks. Then he takes me by the hand and leads me down the concrete steps.

Before we even make it to the door, we hear the music. Crisp, steady beats with accordions and guitars and a man's high-pitched crooning. A young woman in a silk blouse and pants opens the door and gives my father a hug, calls him Tío. She hugs me too, and smiles before leading us into a small room already filled with people and talking and dancing and food.

"These are the Puentes," my father says. "Say hello to your cousins."

The Puentes aren't like the other people my parents like to visit. They are young and chatty. They smile big smiles at me and run their fingers through my hair. They do not make me speak in English or sing. They just laugh and keep on talking, letting my dad into the conversation and allowing me to listen in. Then another young woman claps her hands together like she's just remembered something, and she jumps up from her seat.

"Let me go get Iris so you can play!" she says and leaves the room only to return a minute later with a girl whose hair is the color of wet sand. She takes one look at me and waves me over.

“Go on,” my father says, giving me a little push in her direction.

I stand up timidly, not sure if I should go, but Iris reaches over and takes my hand.

“Vámonos,” she says in a friendly voice, and the others laugh.

I follow Iris into a narrow bedroom across the hall, where two other children are playing on the floor. At first, I’m not sure what to say, but Iris smiles and tells me all about her grandfather’s farm in a place called Acacías.

“*Our* grandfather,” she corrects herself, laughing. “We’re cousins, did you know that? We have the same abuelo.”

I nod. And then curiosity takes over.

“Who are your parents?” I ask.

“My mother was your father’s sister,” she says. “But she died.”

“So you live here with your dad?”

“No,” she says. “He died too.”

I don’t believe her. For a second, I think she’s only making these things up, wonder if she’s even my cousin at all. But then she tells me the specifics. Her mother got sick and had to go to the hospital. She died of her disease. Her father worked as a guard at a bank. Somebody tried to rob the place and shot him, and that’s when he died too.

“Who do you live with, then?” I ask.

“My brothers and sisters,” she says cheerily. “There are seven of us and I’m the youngest.”

It’s hard for me to make sense of everything she says that night, so I don’t even try. Iris and I play dolls and house, and she teaches me some Spanish sing-song poems. It’s very late when my father knocks on the door of the bedroom and tells me it is time to go. As we walk by the room

where the loud music had been coming from before, I notice empty bottles on the floor and people slumped down on the chairs asleep.

We tiptoe up the stairs and down the hall to our room, but the creaking of the door wakes my mother.

“Do you know what time it is?” she hisses at my dad. “I told you I don’t want her down there with them.”

I think about Iris and her siblings. I don’t understand why my mother doesn’t like them. They are the nicest people I have met on our whole trip. Still, even after I’ve changed into my pajamas and crawled into my corner of the bed, after my parents have turned off the light and started snoring, I can’t stop thinking about everything I learned that night. The thoughts swirl around and around my head like water going down the drain. I can’t imagine what would happen to me if both of my parents passed away.

Chapter 9

Life at the Shorehaven house in Garland is waiting for us when we return from our visit to Colombia. On Sunday mornings we don't eat breakfast at home. That's one of the rules. We put on nice clothes and arrive at the church on empty stomachs thirty minutes before service begins so that we can sit together near the front. Once mass starts, we do not speak, not even in a whisper. We stand, sit, and kneel at the designated times, and we are not to turn around and look at the other parishioners or at the choir members singing from the back balcony. We do not cross our legs.

Both of my parents volunteer as church lectors, so every couple of weeks one of them is called to the podium to read from the big prayer book. I like to hear them read, pronouncing each word clearly and slowly, sometimes pausing to look at the audience for a second or two, which makes the words sound even more important.

The part of the ceremony I most look forward to is when we get to shake hands with each other and the people around us. That's the only time I'm allowed to look around, and people smile as they reach out their hands. Afterward, it's time for the final ritual: Holy Communion. Two ushers walk up to the front along the center aisle and begin to release each row in order. My mother has explained the rules about this too: only those who have completed the sacrament of Communion may go up, and then only if they are not living in sin. From my seat I watch as people in the rows ahead of us make their way to the front to receive the Communion wafer from the priest. As each row empties, only purses, coats, young children, and sinners remain behind. When the ushers move to our row, both of my parents stand and walk toward the center aisle.

Every week, I grow more and more excited about this portion of the mass, because I am in second grade now, and at the end of the year we will all get to complete the sacrament of Holy Communion and join the procession.

Halfway through the school year, I find out from my teacher, Mrs. Davis, that we will be completing *two* sacraments in second grade, not just one.

“The sacrament of Reconciliation is even more important,” she says, “because it’s how you get yourself prepared to receive our Lord. It’s like you’re getting cleaned up from the inside.” She tells us all about the little rooms—vestibules, she calls them—at the back of the church where you go to tell the priest your sins. “It’s like you’re speaking directly to God,” she says. “But you shouldn’t be afraid.”

I think about her words. I’ve never felt afraid of God. During class we sometimes read about children who make wrong decisions, but in the stories, God is never mad at them for their mistakes—he’s only disappointed, and it’s understood that as soon as they change their ways and turn to good, he will be happy once again.

Telling my sins to God is something I would like to do. The thought of telling them to the priest, however, worries me. Father Martin is friends with both of my parents, knows them by name and laughs with them when we stop for coffee and donuts after mass. I can’t imagine telling him about my dad.

Mrs. Davis reminds us to speak clearly and directly when we’re talking to the priest. She teaches us a new prayer called the Act of Contrition, which is like a fancy, old-fashioned I’m sorry, and has us practice saying it over and over again until we can recite it from memory. She tells us exactly what to say from the moment we step into the confessional until we step out, but what I focus on is what I will *not* say when I’m there.

I will not tell the priest about my father.

I will not mention about how he calls my nonexistent breasts *hormiguitas*, little ants.

I will not speak of how he touches me.

A week before the much-awaited ceremony, our class walks out in single-file and makes its way into the church. It is the day of our First Reconciliation, and each of us gets a turn inside the confessional with Father Martin.

When my turn comes I lie and tell him I have stolen money from my mother's purse. He tells me to be good to her and assigns me two Hail Marys and a Glory Be. I come out solemnly, like all the others, and kneel at a pew to say my prayers.

"Do you feel any cleaner?" Suzy whispers to me later, as we're walking back to class.

"I think so," I say, and she nods.

"Me too."

Then the big day arrives, and the girls are resplendent in their beautiful white dresses, the boys sharp in their suits. We gather in the classroom while the church fills with people, and then when it's time we enter through the side doors, two by two. The choir sings from the balcony as we walk up the center aisle with our hands held palm to palm in front of our lips while everyone looks on.

Finally, it's time to go up for Holy Communion, and Father Martin places the wafer on my tongue. I hold it there for as long as I can, even after sipping from the wine chalice and making my way back to my seat. I lower myself onto the kneeler and close my eyes, listening to the choir's gentle song. I try to speak to the version of God I like the most: the forgiving one, the one who is my friend and understands me the way Suzy does. I ask for forgiveness for my real sins and when I open my eyes again I realize the wafer is gone, but I feel happy and relieved, and I think that it has worked.

Chapter 10

We keep chickens in the backyard, about seven of them. Plump little hens that cackle softly as they roam around the inner yard, and one magnificent rooster with feathers that look brown until they catch the sun and reveal their shimmery greens and blues. My favorite of the hens is a speckled black and white one. La Sarabiada, Mamita Clementina calls her. The Speckled One. I call her Sara for short. I go out every day after school and Sara lets me walk right up to her and scoop her up. Hold her close, feel her warmth. Scratch her head. Sometimes she falls asleep, her eyelids closing from the bottom up as her body relaxes into me.

I talk to her too. Not with my voice, really, but with my mind. I have whole conversations with her and I know she understands. She is a friend.

In time, she starts expecting me when I come home, running up to the back door as soon as she hears the hinges squeak. She looks forward to our cuddles. I love her and I feel her love right back.

One day, I hear a big commotion in the yard and I run outside to see what's going on. One of the hens is shrieking and flapping her wings, while the rooster, seemingly out of his mind, is standing on her back, gripping onto her with his claws.

“Mamá!” I cry out and race back inside, bursting into the back bedroom, where I find my mother calmly folding sheets. “The rooster!” I scream, out of breath. “He’s killing a hen!”

My mother smiles and brings the corners of a sheet together neatly.

“We have to help!” I cry again, wanting her to snap out of her domestic trance, but still she only stands there, watching me.

“It’s okay,” she says, and I shake my head.

“No!” I shout. “It’s not okay, it’s—one of the hens, she’s getting *hurt*. We have to—”

But I see that it's no use. She hears me, but the words aren't getting to her, and then it's like my racing heart is quickly running out of gas. No longer smiling, she finishes folding the sheet into a smooth-edged square and sets it on top of the dresser. Then she sits on the bed and pats the spot beside her.

For the next half-hour, my mother speaks to me of eggs and life and body parts whose names I never even knew existed. The more she talks, the more I want to hide, but all I can do is look straight ahead at the bumps of paint on the wall in front of us. My mother tells me about how a woman's lips are connected by a line that runs inside from her mouth down to her breasts and her private areas, and that's why you should never kiss a man. She says the word sex like it's a disease, something you would never want to catch. Then her voice takes on a more somber tone.

"Men will want to touch you," she says. She warns me about strangers, teachers, uncles. Each word falling from her mouth like a drop of liquid fire burning a hole where it lands, getting closer to its mark.

"Even fathers," she says slowly, watching me, "have been known to touch their daughters."

The random bumps of paint on the wall seem to shift in silence, taking on different shapes, some of them like faces watching me. I'm aware of what my mother is saying, but I'm concentrating on keeping my own face still and empty of expression. I swallow, feeling the weight of this moment, understanding its importance and at the same time understanding nothing. Then, calmly, as if she's still just folding sheets, she says the words aloud.

"Has your father... ever... touched you?"

"No," I hear myself say, and the word fills up the room.

I wait for her next move—an accusation or a plea, an explosion of anger or exasperation or defeat—but she only gives a little sigh.

“Está bien,” she says. “But you’ll tell me if anyone tries anything, right?”

I make my head bob up and down.

“Good,” she replies. “You can always talk to me about these things.”

I nod again, knowing I will never talk to her about these things.

A few days later I get home from school and La Sarabiada is not in the back yard. I call her name and walk around looking for her in all the corners. Finally, I go back inside to ask my grandmother if she has seen her. She suggests that maybe she got out and ran away, but then my Tío Vicente, my mother’s tall and dignified brother who is visiting from Florida, calls me over and shows me his plate. La Sarabiada’s head is laying there, gray and dead and still, between a pile of yellow rice and cubed potatoes.

Chapter 11

Sometimes we call her Ronald Reagan as a joke. Not very creative, I know. She is Hispanic, like me. One of three in our class. Her hair is black and wavy and her skin is dark. She's smart and kind, and she's funny.

At the end of 4th grade we try out for the drill team. Regan, me, and like twenty other girls. We learn the dance, the marches. We shake our pompoms, point our toes, and smile, smile, smile. We smile until our cheeks hurt, but with her it's different. Regan smiles even when she's not performing. She is always happy.

During lunch we sit together and she keeps smiling, telling jokes. She makes me laugh and pieces of my scrambled egg sandwich come flying from my mouth.

That summer, we go our separate ways. On a Sunday morning, I arrive at church with my parents. My mother is serving as the lector so she's going over what she is supposed to read when someone hands her a slip of paper. The petitions. She reads them aloud.

"For Mrs. So-and-so, who is suffering with a broken hip. For the Such-and-such family, whose son was diagnosed with cancer..." And then, in the same voice, like maybe she's reading a list of groceries or things to fix around the house, "For the souls of Regan and Erica Valencia and their mother."

My ears go numb.

"Regan?" I ask.

My mother looks at me with a wrinkle between her eyes and I tell her that Regan is my friend from school. Her sister Erica is in the second grade. They aren't dead. There must be some

mistake. But my mother asks around and finds out about a highway, a bridge, a crushed car. It isn't a mistake.

She is wearing her school uniform, blue and white plaid with a crisp white shirt. Her skin is lighter than I remember. Her hair is neatly combed and her eyes are closed. On the other side of the chapel, her sister looks identical. I stare and stare from my seat on like the eighth row, far enough away to be able to hide behind taller bodies. I'm not afraid, but seeing them both there, lying still and silent inside those fancy white-lined coffins, makes me feel still and silent too.

And then there is that third coffin between them. Full-sized. Closed.

That's the one that scares me, because I've heard rumors of what's inside. Their mother, sure, but also not their mother. Maybe it's because I never met her, never heard her voice or watched her enter a room. Never saw the way she fixed her hair—was it long or short, curly or straight? Maybe it's because she was a stranger, but what I imagine in that box, sealed up forever, is unspeakable. Pieces, really. Flesh and bone. Not someone who was once alive.

Ahead of us, people are crying. Relatives, probably. Friends of the family. Maybe even other strangers moved by the tragedy itself. I don't cry at all. My mother puts her hand on my shoulder and nudges me into position behind my father. We walk up to Regan's coffin. My mother whispers that I can touch her or kiss her if I want to, but I don't want to. Not at all.

Up close, I can see that she's wearing makeup. She looks pretty, actually, her mouth almost a smile. Her hands are clasped together and she's holding a rosary, a string of crystal beads. Someone close to us remarks that she looks like she is sleeping.

“Say goodbye,” my mother says. I look at the place where Regan’s forehead ends and her scalp begins, see the whiteness there, a chip in the illusion. I don’t know what to say. I wonder what she would say if she could see herself like this. She’d make a joke.

We walk by her mother’s coffin and I keep my eyes glued to the carpet, trying not to think. Then there’s a quick glance at her sister and we’re heading back to our seats when I see him. Her father.

Broken. Shattered. Empty. Cheeks sunken in, head hanging low, eyes unseeing. Apagado.

On our way back home, I sit in the back of the car and try to push my thoughts away by looking out the window at the world, but all I can see is that man, alone.

Alone.

And something seizes me, takes hold.

I look up at the back of my father’s head above the driver’s seat, his shiny black hair, the curve of his ear, and it’s then that the tears begin to fall.

Chapter 12

The best thing about 5th grade has nothing to do with the fact that our little girl jumpers have been detached from our skirts. It's not that our classroom is now on the other side of the gym with the big kids. It's not that my mother has finally let me grow my hair long and style it the way I want, or that all the kids and teachers in the school know who I am.

The best thing about 5th grade is not that I'm on the drill team, that I get to wear my cute red and white uniform, shake my pom-poms, kick, march, dance, perform. It's not that I make the basketball team and get to learn the intricacies of this new game I've never played, feel the rhythm of it, the weight of the ball, the new movements of my body.

The best thing about 5th grade is Mrs. Chatelain.

I love her right away because she's loud and wild and silly. She's from some place called New Orleans, which sounds foreign and strange, and loves to talk to us about her past. She shows us the ceramic pots she made in college, tells us about a childhood spent in Catholic school with real nuns, and about throwing beads in the middle of some colorful parade. She goes on and on about Greek and Roman mythology. She says she once was friends with someone named Bruce Springstein, and though I've never heard of him, I nod because he sounds important.

Mrs. Chatelain is magic. She speaks to us like we're people, not just children. Best of all, she is a lover of words. She reads aloud to us from *The Secret Garden*, transforming her voice so that she sounds exactly like Mary Poppins. Then she moves on to *A Wrinkle in Time*, followed by *The Pinballs*. Every new book she introduces us to is filled with characters that are not characters

at all but brand-new friends that will stay with me forever. Mary, Dickon, Meg, Charles Wallace, Carlie, Harvey, Thomas J.

One day, Mrs. Chatelain announces that she's going to charge us a nickel for every mistake we make in grammar or usage, and my heart gives a grateful leap because now it's a game, a challenge. Every nickel dropped into her tin is a lesson learned. I'm growing, sharpening, polishing my English. By the start of the second semester I'm keeping all my nickels in my pocket, and for the first time in my life, I'm writing.

Writing.

Stories and poems and plays. Essays, letters, comic strips. Mrs. Chatelain loves to give us writing assignments, and while other students complain, I rejoice, devouring them. I write for fun, too, the pages of my notebooks filled margin-to-margin with my loopy, leaning handwriting. But the one thing I never even think of writing about is my father. It's like that part of my life is locked away and sealed up tight. Not even Mrs. Chatelain can get it out.

At the end of the year, the entire school gathers inside the church for the annual award ceremony. It's our first time to join the upper grades in receiving individual awards for our academic accomplishments. I'm certain I will get the award for math because I've earned the highest grades in the class, but when the math award is announced, it's Lisa Johnson's name that's called.

I'm still a little dazed when I hear my name for something else, and as I go up to the front to receive my award I realize it's for writing. Writing. I didn't even know that was a category. Writing is like breathing, like drinking water. Not something I'm good at, just something I do.

But then I look down at my name on that certificate, Mrs. Chatelain's signature beneath it, and it feels official, heavy, important. Like a door, maybe, or at least a window. Something rising, opening up.

I feel awake.

PART THREE

Chapter 13

During the summer after 5th grade, my parents sit me down to let me know they have a big announcement. They tell me they've decided to move again, this time to a city called Austin, so my mother can go to school and become a real teacher.

Early on a Saturday morning, we say our goodbyes to Mamita Clementina and Tío Toñito and pack up the Monarch with our clothes, a tent, our sleeping bags, some cooking supplies, and a cooler. We head down Interstate 35 and it feels like just an ordinary road trip. I'm excited about the adventure.

Three and a half hours later, we reach a cluster of buildings just north of the Colorado River. My mother points out the state capitol and the stadium at the University of Texas.

"That's where I'll be going to school," she says, and though I can't see her face from where I'm sitting, I know she's holding her chin up with pride.

We pass the big glassy buildings and continue beyond the river, past shopping centers and apartment homes, past tree-lined neighborhoods with houses like the one we've left behind. Finally, my father pulls off the highway and turns onto a two-lane road that twists and turns along farmland dotted with cows. Grassy hills in the distance remind me of Los Llanos.

A few miles later, a narrow road opens up into ours, with what looks like the remains of a stone brick wall rising out from behind some bushes. Bold, black letters spell out McKinney Falls State Park. My parents sign in at the park office and then we head to the numbered spot that will serve as our home for the next two months.

We get our groceries—a half gallon of milk, canned pasta, sandwich fixings, a carton of orange juice, and one bag of ice—every two days from a corner store. During the day, my father takes the Monarch and heads out to look for work. When he gets home in the afternoon, my mother and I climb in and we all go cruising through different neighborhoods in town, jotting down phone numbers from the For Sale signs of houses that catch our eye.

In the evenings, we return to the park and stoke up the campfire. The canopy of trees protects us from the heat and shrouds us under the calls of a thousand screaming cicadas as we eat our dinner on a rickety picnic table we've covered with a plastic tarp. Then my parents sit and make their plans, looking through the *Greensheet* for job opportunities and homes for sale, while I lie swinging on a hammock looking up at the sky until it grows so dark I can see the twinkle of stars between the leaves.

On the weekends, we explore even farther, heading out to the west side of Austin—the rich neighborhoods with greener trees and wider roads, with houses that could have fit two Shorehaven houses inside them. Sometimes we head out to the Hill Country, where the land rises higher and the valleys sink deeper, like a rumpled-up blanket left discarded on a bed.

With every passing day, I grow more excited about the upcoming school year. At Good Shepherd, new students were the most popular, as everyone wanted to win them over as a friend. I imagine how much fun it will be to have others wanting to win me over. I can't wait to laugh and play with new friends, join the sports teams and excel in my schoolwork as I had back home.

Within a few weeks of beginning his search, my dad finds employment as the janitor of a huge Methodist church on the north side of town. After that, my mother and I leave with him in

the mornings and drop him off at work. Then she drives us around all over Austin to run errands. We drive onto the University of Texas campus and she points out the tower from which some crazy man once shot a bunch of students.

She has me wait on a bench outside as she enters one building and then another to speak to different officials at the school.

“What did they say?” I ask every time she comes back out, but she only shakes her head.

“I need to talk to someone else.”

We drive to downtown Austin, where she talks to people about helping us get a house, but no one there gives her any good news either, and we end up inside an air-conditioned library to wait until it’s time to pick my father up from work. From the back seat, I listen to her tell him about the day’s defeats.

One night, after we have had our dinner and washed everything up at the water spout beside the driveway, my mother sits down on the bumper of the car and begins to cry. I step over to her and ask her what’s wrong, and she tells me she has mamitis.

“I miss my mother,” she says, wiping her tears. Then my dad comes over and tells us gently to get inside the car. We drive to the main office of the park, where there is a payphone, and my mother calls Mamita Clementina. She talks for about half an hour, maybe longer, while my father and I wait in the car. Then she waves us over so we can say hi too.

“Take care of your mother,” Mamita says to me.

“Sí, señora.”

“Tell her everything will be okay.”

“I will,” I say, but I never do.

Chapter 14

A few days before the beginning of the school year, my parents finally get the news they've been hoping for. A bank has approved them for a loan.

The house is on the southwest side of town, with pretty pink-white stones like a mosaic on the front wall, a lush, green yard, a shed, and a two-car garage. Inside, the carpet is soft and tan. The bedrooms are big, and enormous windows flood the living room and kitchen with natural light. The best feature about the house is the back yard—nearly half an acre, with plenty of room for pets, gardening, and playing. There is also a tree for climbing.

With an actual address now in hand, my mother and I go to the school district offices to ask about registering. A woman informs us that I will be attending a school called Blackshear, and she points to a little dot on a map. The school is miles from our new address.

“It’s a way to promote diversity,” the woman says. She hands us a paper with a list of intersections and times, highlighting the one that will be my bus stop. When we leave the office, we drive over to the school and discover that it is located in a not-so-beautiful part of town, where windows are boarded up or hidden behind iron bars.

The school itself stands like a fortress, blocky and solid, taking up its own block. A public school. I have no idea what to expect, but I’m excited about belonging to the life inside that building.

We have still not moved into our new home when the school year begins. My parents and I arrive about half an hour before the bell, and one of the ladies at the front office directs us to an

open area at the side of the building. My stomach feels tight and empty as I look and hear and smell my new surroundings. The lady opens the door to reveal a gravel yard with children standing around in clusters separated by size, talking and laughing with their friends.

“You’re going to have a great day,” my mother says, and my father gives my shoulder a squeeze.

“Good luck,” he says.

Then they step back into the school building ahead of the office lady, leaving me to face the sea of kids on my own.

My teacher’s name is Mrs. Rosa. She is short and stocky, with straight black hair that falls to her shoulders and choppy bangs. She meets us out on the blacktop and herds us inside, down the hall, and up the stairs. By the time we spill into her classroom, students shouting and hooting and tumbling over their desks, I know that everything I had imagined about my first day of 6th grade was completely wrong.

Nobody notices me. Not a single person says hello or even smiles in my direction. Instead, the students in Mrs. Rosa’s class communicate in shouts, exchanging jokes with each other and telling stories about what they did over the summer break while Mrs. Rosa sits at her desk looking over some papers.

After several minutes of ignoring us, Mrs. Rosa stands and attempts to give a motivational speech about starting a new year, about being good citizens, and about maintaining high grades. No one seems to be listening. She gives us a packet of work to complete, but most of the students

ignore it, choosing instead to continue with their conversations. Some don't even have a pencil to write with.

I sit at my desk against the side wall, working on the packet and thinking about my old classmates back in Garland. I imagine them sitting silently in their plaid uniforms and starched white blouses, listening to their new teacher explain the rules and procedures, maybe wondering about me.

By the end of my first week at Blackshear Elementary, I have cried, shouted, hit someone, and made it to the principal's office. Every day, my parents ask me how my day went and I tell them it was fine. I'm sure they can sense it isn't what I'd expected, but my mother just tells me everything will get better and my father says new things always take time to get used to.

I don't tell them about how loud and wild the students are, how the teacher barely tells them anything or how they don't listen anyway. I don't tell them that some boys who sit near me call me "Looooose," and laugh like it's the funniest name they've ever heard, or how the school smells like rubber cement and mold.

Over the weekend, all I can think about is how much I do not want to go back to school. I ask my parents about the possibility of letting me attend the private school at the church where my father works, but they say it's too expensive. I ask if I could be taught at home by my mother, but they tell me that's against the law. When I ask if I can go to a different public school, they shake their heads and tell me once again that these things take time.

On Monday, my mother drops me off across the street and I walk up to the building by myself. Inside, I make my way to the hallway that leads to the blacktop, but just before I reach the side door, I notice a yellow mop bucket and a couple of brooms pushed against the wall just ahead. I wander over and find a sort of alcove with broken desks and cleaning supplies. I decide to stay in there until it's time to go to class. But then, when the rows of students start filing in with their teachers, I don't join in. Instead, I wait until the hall is silent, and then a little longer still. Finally, I step out of the alcove and look around. Everyone is gone.

I wander farther down the hall and find a door with a narrow window. Through it I see the street that runs along the front of the school. I give the door a little push, expecting it to be locked, but to my surprise it gives way without question. I step through and find myself outside the school, outside the fenced-in blacktop, and just a few feet from the street.

My heart pounding, I take a step forward. No one is in sight. I let the door close behind me and walk to the sidewalk, then turn and walk along the fence. I keep expecting to hear an adult shout at me, ask me where the hell I think I'm going, but the only sound I hear is that of birds singing their morning songs.

Before I know it, I've arrived at the end of the block. I keep going for one more block and then make a right. I remember seeing my school on the city map, and I know that Twelfth Street is just to the north. I also know that Twelfth Street meets Airport Freeway, and that Airport Freeway intersects with 43rd Street, and that my father works at 43rd and a half.

For over two hours I make my way through the city. The morning is warm and sunny, and as I pass in front of shops and gas stations I feel as if I'm watching a world in which I'm not

allowed—the world of adults. At one point I see a police car and panic, feeling conspicuous with my backpack over my shoulders. But then I take a deep breath, hold my chin up, and walk past them without looking over, hoping I can pass for someone that belongs on the street at this hour.

Finally, I turn onto the street of my father’s church and step inside to the office. I ask for him at the reception desk and the ladies look at each other for a second before one of them picks up a walkie-talkie.

“Mr. Pinilla,” she says while holding down the button, and when I hear my father’s choppy English my heart flies up into my throat.

He comes in through the double doors leading in from the school, and before his eyes have even focused on me I’m already running at him, throwing my arms around his neck. My eyes flood with tears and I can barely get out the words when he asks me what happened.

“Don’t make me go back,” I beg, but my father only sighs.

“There’s nothing I can do, m’ija,” he says. “I know this is hard, but we are all making sacrifices.” His voice cracks when he speaks the last word and his eyes look wet as if he, too, might start crying at any minute. But then he gives his head a little shake and tells me he needs to get back to work.

“Let me stay,” I say. “I can help.”

My father shakes his head. “I’m sorry,” he says. “I need to take you back.”

In mid-September, we move into the new house. Without furniture, curtains, or proper bedding, every space looks vast and empty, a blank slate. But even naked, the house is beautiful, the nicest place we've ever lived.

Gradually, I start adjusting to school, and by adjusting I only mean that I have learned to accept the misery. There's no laughter here for me, no smiles, no giggles. No uniform to camouflage my differences. No history, no past, no memories. No friendly father to make me famous. No friends.

At Blackshear I'm a nada. A no one. A little black stain on the wall.

Then I get home.

An empty empty house. I fix myself a glass of milk and put some cookies on a plate. Park myself in front of the television set we've propped up on an upturned crate. Watch She-Rah and the Thundercats until the doorknob on our front door turns.

My mother has found a job as a nurse's aide. Most nights she doesn't get home until past eight, so it's just my dad and me for hours.

A big, wide, empty house. Solid walls. Closed windows. Silence.

The thing begins again.

At first it's more of what I'm used to. Fingers here and also there. My breasts are sprouting now. Lemons, he says, amused. But there's a freedom here he's never known. A dark world full of possibilities, and before too long his fingers step aside.

Chapter 15

How do I tell you about this part? I've recounted the story a thousand times. When it's reduced to a smattering of sentences I can step away and skip the details. Speak in metaphors, unwavering.

But now here we are, you and I. We've arrived at this place. This very specific point in the story.

My hands shake as I type. My eyes begin to drown. I melt into my chair, disappearing, hiding. My heart beats loud and fast. That blinking cursor watching, waiting. Demanding.

How can I say to you that when his fingers moved aside it was to make room for his tongue?

A therapist once told me what my father did was rape. I disagreed. Still do. I'm at odds with the word. Rape is violent, painful, angry. Rape draws blood, leaves scars. Rape breaks the skin.

To call this rape feels like taking something that isn't mine to take. To call this rape feels like rape itself.

My father broke me.

Salt Water

This is the point at which
I put on my sweats and head
to the gym. This is when
I pound my feet against the floor,
fold my hands into fists
send them flying through the air.
This is when I shake
and jump
and squat
and lunge
and bend
and push
and pull
and sweat
and sweat
and sweat
the tears out
from my pores.
This is
pain is life
is love,
survival
of the fittest.

Chapter 16

Even prison has its good days, and though I don't want to admit it, things at Blackshear really do start to improve. The boy I hit during the first week of school now talks to me instead of teasing. His name is Raul and we always work together when we have group projects.

Sometime during October, we are told that we'll be starting music classes and may choose an instrument to play. My heart is set on the flute, but my mother decides the violin is a better choice, so that's what she checks on the form.

The following week we go to a music store and the man at the counter brings out a black violin case. He unlatches it so we can see the polished wood and carved spirals, and when he takes it out to play I know that my mother has made the right decision.

Music lessons take place twice a week. Only five other students and I have selected the violin, so the six of us meet in a little room at the end of the hall. At first we sound terrible, a collision of high-pitched yelps and scratches, but our music teacher is patient and helps us sound less terrible as time goes by. Little by little, I gain more confidence when drawing the bow across the strings, and though the songs we learn are childish, I begin to feel a sort of power when I'm able to make the violin do what I want. I enjoy the feel of the strings beneath my fingertips as I play and the indentations that remain on my skin after I've finished.

Behind the shed in the back yard, my father builds a raised wooden cage where we keep two big, white rabbits. I name them Peanut Butter and Jelly. Peanut Butter is slow. His ears flop limply over his cheeks and his pink eyes are dull. All he seems to think about is how to sneak up on Jelly from behind to mount her.

Jelly, however, is brilliant. A rabbit with a positive attitude, you can see it in her eyes. They're pink, too, and her fur is white like Peanut Butter's, but something is different about her. Her ears are slender and strong, and when she looks at me she *sees* me. I like to take her out and hold her, let her lick my hand. Jelly is my friend, my confidant. I love her and I know she loves me back.

In time Jelly becomes a mother and now there are a dozen baby rabbits, all pink-eyed and white. They don't fit into my father's cage, so we give in and set them all free in the yard. Some of them disappear, squeezing through holes in the fence to meet their freedom or demise, but most stay put, hopping around the yard, eating everything they want, and soon we're up to twenty, thirty, forty.

One day, I come home from school and open the door to the patio. A part of the neighbor's fence has fallen over and their three large dogs are galloping in our yard. Scattered on the ground are bits of white stained red. I scream, getting the dogs' attention, and they leap back over the broken fence.

We have lost a dozen rabbits, at least, but I don't stop to check on them. Instead I head straight for the shed. The door is flung open, hanging from its hinges. Drops of blood dot the floor. I step inside and peer into the wooden box we filled with hay when Jelly gave birth to her most recent litter. A pair of rage-filled eyes looks up at me and Jelly growls, terrified. Tucked into the hay around her are her babies, all fifteen, all alive. She's ready to die for them. When she sees it's only me her face softens, relieved. I pet her head and tell her what a wonderful mother she is, how glad I am that she's alive.

Later, on a day when my mother is supposed to be at work, I'm in my parents' bedroom, lying face-up along the foot of their bed. My legs are draped across my father's lap. My jeans are unzipped and his hands are on me.

Then I hear a small sound. I look up in time to see the doorknob turning, turning.

The door opens.

I look straight into my mother's eyes.

Then she backs away, slowly, slowly.

Closes the door with a click.

I Do

I don't hate you, Mother, but I do
ask myself the questions
I wish you'd answered long ago. Now
you've left this place, the memories, the scars
you walked away and took your voice
your reasons, must have had them, must have
wanted to cry out, to help, to speak
out, but your voice was broken too
a nada, woman, no one
all alone like me, like me
you lived your life, confused, how can I
blame you, really? Not your fingers,
not your mouth, but still your sin,
your eyes, your silence.
I don't hate you, Mother, but I do
ask why.

Chapter 17

At the end of May, I walk out of Blackshear Elementary for the last time in my life. I climb into the bus that will take me and the other kids from my neighborhood all the way across town. I forget to give a real goodbye to the other kids—the students who will attend the nearby junior high school. I don't think about the fact that I may never see them again.

In the middle of July, my mother receives a phone call from her sister in Colombia. They talk for a long time, and I try to piece together the whole conversation from what I hear her say.

“Are they moving to America?” I ask her when she hangs up the phone.

She nods. “Only Tía Uva and the girls,” she says. “They will be living with us for a while.”

My heart pounds hard with excitement. I remember my cousins Liz and Daisy from our visits to Colombia. One six months younger than me, the other six months older. When we were little my mother would take me to their house and we would play in their room and sneak up to the top of their kitchen cabinets for a nibble of the sweet tablets their mother used for making hot chocolate.

Two weeks later, my parents are setting up new furniture in the master bedroom, which I will now share with my cousins. We arrange three twin beds in a row.

After they arrive we're all a little shy with each other. I show them the animals, the shed, the yard. The girls seem quiet, adjusting to their new surroundings. Sometimes they cry because they miss their father and their friends, but within a couple of days we're laughing and playing together, and it's like they've always been here with me.

My mother has me play my violin for them and then my Tía decides her daughters will play too. We find two affordable violins in the weekly *Greensheet* and I try to teach my cousins what I know.

On the first day of 7th grade, the three of us get on our bikes with our violin cases attached to the back and ride together to the brand-new junior high school two miles away. Everything inside is bright and new. We can smell the fresh paint and plaster in the hallways.

The only class we share is orchestra, fourth period. Our teacher is Mr. White, with thinning, reddish hair on the sides of his head and a mustache over his smile. Mr. White welcomes us to class, asks me to translate for Liz and Daisy when I explain they don't speak English.

Once we start playing along with the other students in the orchestra, it's like language never even existed. Music takes over and brings us all together. The orchestra room becomes our favorite place in the whole school, and we often stop to visit before and after classes.

The problem for my father, now that the house is always full of people, is finding a place to be alone with me. Sometimes, at night, he takes me for rides in his car, has me sit up front and lower my seat back all the way so he can touch me while he drives.

His other solution is to convince my mother he needs my help at work on Saturday afternoons. We leave right after lunch and he drops me off at the school's gymnasium so I can play basketball for a few hours while he cleans the church offices and classrooms. In the late afternoon, he comes back for me. We head over to the main building of the school, which on the weekends is deserted. At the end of a second-floor hallway is one specific room he prefers over all the others, probably because it is dark and can be locked from the inside. The room is at least twice as big as

the other classrooms and contains several large, round tables and stacks of chairs. I imagine this is where the teachers gather on Friday afternoons for meetings or training sessions, or maybe the Parent Association gathers here to plan the school's activities. To me, however, the room has a much different purpose.

It's in this room that my father and I lie in silence on the carpet, and he puts his hands and mouth on me. A narrow window faces the back of the building, and the little sunlight that pours in is broken up by the swaying branches of trees lining the sidewalks, their shadows like lace dancing against the walls and ceiling.

As I look around at the legs of the tables and chairs that surround us, I think about the people who gather in this room during the week, and what they would say if they knew what went on while they were gone. I also wonder what would happen if one day someone were to walk in on us—maybe the church pastor or a teacher who had left behind some important notes. Would they gasp? Call the police? Come in and snatch me away? Would they even know that I am his daughter? And how would my father react?

Thinking these thoughts is a way to pass the time, but I know it is pointless. No one ever comes.

As evening approaches on these Saturdays, my father and I head downstairs into one of the massive dining halls, where there might be a family celebration or a wedding reception taking place, clusters of nicely-dressed people laughing, eating, talking, and drinking. I walk around looking for something to help with—passing out packets of birdseed wrapped in tulle or picking up trash that hasn't quite made it into the bins—while my father helps out with the big projects like putting out trays of food or setting up the sound system.

When my help isn't needed, I am free to wander through the school. One night, I am walking by a kindergarten classroom when I think I hear a tiny tapping sound, like Morse code. Curious, I step in and hear the noise again. Ahead of me is a glowing light and as I move closer I see that it is coming from a heat lamp attached to a glass aquarium. Inside the tank, on a bed of straw, are three caramel-colored eggs. One of them is cracked.

I am glad I didn't bother to turn on the light when I walked in, because for the next hour I have the room all to myself. I watch, enthralled, as a tenacious baby chick pecks at the opening, causing pieces of broken shell to fall onto the straw below.

I feel something like awe as I observe this scene, a closeness with that hatching chick and with whatever force in the universe has allowed me to be a part of its first few moments out in the world. I'm amazed at how small that little chick is, and how wet, and how utterly defenseless, there, alone in the tank with its brothers still safely contained inside their shells.

I return to the dining hall as the guests are beginning to file out. I help wipe down counters and put away chairs. I sweep birdseed up from the back porch and line the trash cans with fresh bags. The last guests to leave smile at me and thank me for doing such a great job of helping my father. They don't know it's not my choice.

Chapter 18

A few weeks into my first semester of junior high, I start my period. My mother has already taught me what to do, but she has also mentioned that the start of a girl's menstruation means that she can now have children. The thought terrifies me. My cousins, on the other hand, congratulate me as if bleeding is a grand accomplishment.

Then one day, my math teacher sends me to the office with a note, and I am asked to have a seat in the counselor's office. She takes a look at my report card and tells me I should be in honor's classes. When I step out of her office I'm holding a printout with the names and room numbers of four new teachers.

The new classes are only slightly more difficult than the old ones. The real challenge, however, comes in the shape of a student by the name of Jennifer Stone. She is taller than most of the other kids, with stringy hair the color of muddy water, squinty eyes that shine like metal, and a smile like the hiss of a snake. Jennifer Stone is mean.

For the next two years, it feels as if Jennifer's primary purpose in life is to torment me. She teases me about my thrift-store clothes, my garage-sale shoes, my hair. She makes faces when I walk by, and some of the other students laugh. Then she notices that the tag on the back of my jeans says "Funny Girl." Even more ammunition for her daily taunts.

"How's it going, Funnygirl?"

"Got any jokes today, Funnygirl?"

"Aww, Funnygirl doesn't like me very much, does she?"

I don't say anything back, but every time she looks my way I feel ugly, poor, and decidedly nonAmerican.

The only times I'm happy at school are when I'm with my cousins. Liz and I try out for the basketball team and make it through all the rounds. On Wednesdays we get to wear our uniforms, maroon and white, and though neither of us gets much time off the benches, we're happy to be a part of the team that ends up winning the city championship. My mother's face is always in the bleachers, cheering us on.

At our orchestra concerts, we wear white blouses, long black skirts, and maroon sashes made of silk. We step up onto the stage with our instruments and make beautiful music in the darkness. The audience claps for us, and afterward, our parents congratulate us, their faces bright with pride and love.

In the spring, all three of us join the track team and get to sit together on the bus on the way to the stadium in our bright yellow tank tops and shorts. We race around the track, win medals, get faster. I feel like I can do anything with my cousins at my side.

Then, over the summer, their father arrives from Colombia. The four of them move into an apartment a few miles away and I'm back to being alone.

Near the end of the year, I'm on my way to 3rd period one day when I see the top of her head. Jennifer Stone. I suck in my breath, tighten up, prepare. We're heading into the same room.

Every day she makes a comment about me. My ugly shoes, my greasy hair. I don't even bother blushing when she does it, because it's expected now, a given. Nobody else in the class will talk to me except Mrs. Elderwood, who took notice of me after I turned in a rewrite of "The Soul of Caliban" told from the perspective of a pink eraser on a kitchen table.

Jennifer's head gets closer. I pick up my pace, hoping to make it in before she does, but then she spots me too. Practically runs over to me, already smiling, already plotting, already thinking of what she will say to hurt me today.

Suddenly I feel something bubble up inside. Something like courage, or maybe just tiredness. I slow down, watching her, and wait for her to reach me. That ugly smile that isn't friendly but only a lure. That stringy hair around her face. The eyes that flicker with amusement at another's cost.

She reaches me and then it's like a standoff right there in the hallway outside of room 217. She's looking down at me. I'm looking up.

The moment she opens her mouth to spit out whatever hateful comment she's concocted, I lift my right foot from the floor and wind it back. Then I shoot it forward, full force, straight into her shin.

She doubles over right away. I step around her and walk into class. Take my seat by the wall. A few seconds later she comes in, too. Not hobbling, exactly, but also not her normal, confident self.

And that's it. Jennifer Stone stops tormenting me that day. The teasing. The snide remarks, the hurtful comments. All of it gone.

One day, she's laughing with her friends at some other kid who wears a big belt buckle and leather boots to school. Kickers, they call those kids. Another word for countryfolk, cowboys. Then I see a lightbulb go on in her head and she turns to look at me. I watch her, cautious, waiting.

“I know someone else who’s a kicker,” she says, and she’s smiling, but her smile is different now. Like she’s speaking to me, though nobody else knows it. Like it’s our inside joke.

I turn away.

There comes a point when even white loses its luster.

Chapter 19

At some point between junior high and high school, my father decides to teach me how to drive. We start by practicing in empty parking lots and country roads. His voice is always steady, always narrating what I should be looking out for, what I should be thinking about. As I grow more confident behind the wheel, our weekly lessons become just time spent together, two people on a casual drive through the neighborhood.

These are some of the things I learn from my father:

When changing a tire, use a wooden block to stop the car from rolling. Slightly loosen the nuts before lifting the car from the ground. Remove them when the car is up, but in an alternating pattern, not straight around. Reverse the process on your way down.

When you're behind the wheel and about to come to a full stop, ease up on the brakes at the very last second to avoid jerking your passengers forward.

Never switch gears while the car is moving.

When you're at a restaurant in Colombia and the waitress is pretty and you want to let her know you like her, turn your empty coffee cup upside-down on its saucer.

When you're with your girlfriend and you want to let her know discreetly that you're in the mood, take her hand in yours. Run the tip of your index finger across her palm in a scratching motion.

In life, people will always let you down. You can never count on anybody except yourself. You are all you have.

Always make sure there's an ice scraper in your glove compartment and jumper cables in your trunk.

Chapter 20

Every two or four or six or eight weeks, I get the curse. Really just whenever it decides to show up. And it's never light. Never just three days of spotting, a teaspoon here or there. No. When it drops by, it's Extra Strength. Cramps for days and blood and blood and blood.

Maybe it only feels this way to me. Maybe it's the same for everybody. Doesn't make it any less unbearable. This so-called monthly bleeding thing makes me angry at god. At men. At my own body. It comes gushing, by the gallon, forcing its way out of me.

My mother sees my stained underwear and takes me into the bathroom. Shows me how to scrub the stains out with my knuckles, the way she used to scrub our clothes in the creek when we lived in Los Llanos. I watch the red-pink water in the sink.

Then one day she hands me a box.

"Tampons," she says. "They'll make it easier."

She leaves me alone in the bathroom to figure it out. I take out the paper with the instructions. Stare at the diagrams, frown, concentrate, try to make sense of the words. Put one foot up on the toilet seat like the lady in the drawing.

And I take a stab.

Again and again I try to find the opening, but all I feel is pain. And now I'm crying, angry, hurt. My mother hears me and comes back in.

"Let me help," she says, not with kindness but with impatience, and though what I want is to throw that whole box of plastic tubes and cotton stoppers out the window, to rip out my whole vagina along with my uterus and anything else that wants to go, I put the tampon in her hand.

She stabs around some more. I cry silently. Hate her hands on me, hate her in this room with me, hate her.

Hate her? Do I hate her at this point? No. It's something different. I hate the things my father does. I hate knowing that there's no way out. I hate feeling as if I've taken on her role in these things, like she's not doing what she needs to do for him and so he's had to stray. I hate feeling like I'm sacrificing myself for her, for him, for all of us.

Do I blame her? Yes. Stupidly, yes. I blame my mother. Here she is pushing this invasive thing up into me and I blame her for what my father has done. And maybe a little part of me, quietly, gently, timidly...

...fucking hates her.

When she's done I watch her wash her hands, the red-pink streams like tears rolling down the drain.

Chapter 21

Before the end of my freshman year at Crockett High School, my parents lose the house. We move into a second-floor two-bedroom apartment just down the road from the school. I don't mind. The new place means I don't have to ride the school bus, and I start taking advantage of my after-school freedom by going for walks.

Garrison Park is on the other side of the school, with a public swimming pool, picnic tables, and a whole forest of big, leafy trees. Nestled under their shade is a basketball court with good hoops. I like to head over every chance I get. Most of the time I'm by myself, pounding the ball against the concrete, practicing my shots, weaving around an imaginary defender.

A month before I enter the tenth grade, my parents and I take another trip to Colombia. We've been back several times over the years. It's always the same: we arrive in Bogotá, stay at my grandmother's house with the concrete walls, go on day trips, visit old friends and relatives, run boring errands, eat great food.

This time, however, we fly into the coastal city of Barranquilla, at the mouth of the river Magdalena. My father's sister picks us up from the airport and we all pack into a taxi that weaves along streets crowded with vendors, shops, and colorfully-dressed locals. These are not like the people of Bogotá. In Bogotá, people wear silks and pressed cotton. In Barranquilla there are strappy tops and sandals, shorts and fluttering skirts with flower prints. The air is warm here, and most people on the street have skin that's dark and smooth like wood.

Dusk has fallen over the streets when we arrive at my aunt's house. She lets us in and we meet her husband, a lanky bearded man with light skin and hair that hasn't quite made the transition

from brown to gray. Then my aunt introduces us to three girls. A teenager, probably a couple of years older than me, though her olive skin and perfectly sculpted eyebrows make her look like a grown woman, and two younger girls who look like twins, both with fair complexions, rounded faces, and hair the color of café con leche that reaches down past their waists. One is a bit smaller than the other. Her name is Camila. Remember her.

We all sit down in the living room for a visita. My parents, my aunt and uncle sip black coffee and talk about nearly forgotten adventures they shared in the past, old memories, former lives. Eventually, the two little girls wander off into the kitchen to play with a fluffy white dog they've let in through the back door. I want to stand up and join them, but I'm too shy so I remain sitting between my parents, trying to stay awake as the adults recount their stories.

Later that night, my father's youngest sister, Leona, arrives from work. The house explodes with laughter and greetings as she gives each of us a tight hug and thanks us for coming all the way from America to visit.

"You have to stay at least a week!" she gushes, but my father shakes his head.

"We're on our way to Bogotá," he says. "The plane leaves in the morning."

Tía Leona makes a sad face, pretending to cry, but her dark brown eyes twinkle and she gives me a silly smile. "Well, then we'll have to have some fun tonight."

She suggests we all go for a walk through the neighborhood, and I look over at my mother, expecting her to say it's too dangerous or too late. She has always said that nothing good happens on the street at night. To my surprise, however, she accepts my Tía's invitation and within minutes, we're all outside in the moonlight, walking down the center of the street. My Tía Leona flutters between my parents, throwing her head back with laughter every few minutes as they reminisce. The rest of us walk quietly, enjoying the night breeze that blows in from the Caribbean.

Sometimes, without warning, the two youngest girls dart away from the group, chasing each other into the sidewalk or jumping up onto a retaining wall and teetering along its length like gymnasts on a balance beam. Their laughter fills the darkness, and I admire the way they speak in that quick Colombian accent, their voices trickling like a playful brook. Though they are several years younger than me, I feel certain that if we were staying a few days longer, I would be able to join them in their fun.

The next morning, my parents and I head back to the airport to catch our flight to Bogotá. The rest of the month is another whirlwind of visitas and day trips. One afternoon, I'm leaning out through the open second-story window, taking in the fresh air, when a woman appears from behind the corner bakery. She's holding a little girl by the hand, and they're making their way toward the house. When they get closer, the woman looks up and I recognize my father's face in hers.

"Hola, Luz Alba!" she cries out, and I realize it's my Tía Leona. The little girl is Camila. I run downstairs to let them in. My Tía greets me with enthusiasm like before, but her eyes betray a look of worry. Next to her, Camila looks smaller than I remember, and somehow empty, like a mirror without a reflection, suddenly frightened and shy.

"Say hello," my Tía says, giving Camila's hand a little tug, but the child only glances at me and quickly turns away.

Later that evening, when my parents arrive from their errands, they sit down with my Tía and speak for a long time. Twice I step out of the bedroom and into the bathroom, hoping to listen in on their conversation, but the only thing I'm able to make out is my Tía crying.

The following day, my mother explains that Camila will be going back to Texas with us.

“She’s an American citizen,” my mother explains, “so Tía Leona wants her to go on ahead of her while she stays back and gets her things in order here.”

As I listen, my mind begins to race with a thousand thoughts. Camila will be living with us. My parents will be her parents, which means that I will get to be her sister. I will no longer be an only child.

On the flight back home, Camila and I sit together near the front of the plane while my parents sit a few rows back. She hasn’t said a word to me since she arrived in Bogotá, and though I long to start bonding with her, I have no idea how to begin the conversation.

I can still see the lines on her face from where the tears fell when she said goodbye to her mother, and she looks as if she might start crying again at any moment. The plane begins to move and I want to ask if this is her first flight, if she is afraid, if she wants me to hold her hand, but somehow it seems best not to say anything at all. I can’t imagine how it feels to leave your entire life behind at eight years old.

It’s not until the plane begins to pick up speed down the runway that I finally give in and speak.

“It’s okay to be scared,” I say. Her eyes get big as she looks at the speeding world outside her window, and she leans forward as if to get a better view of the airport, but she does not reply. Then the plane tilts its nose up and gives a little dip that makes my stomach rise. As the houses and cars outside grow smaller, I speak again.

“Your mother will be there soon.”

I don't expect her to acknowledge me at all, but I feel a thrill when she turns from the window to offer me the faintest of smiles.

Chapter 22

What more is there to say to you about Camila except that we failed her? This eight-year-old child entrusted to us by her mother. A whole, entire life ahead of her. We brought her to the land of opportunity. Took her in, fed her, clothed her, put a roof over her head... and then collectively failed her. Each of us in our own way.

Will I tell you about how my mother judged her, a child, called her ungrateful for not eating her Froot Loops at breakfast? Called her a thief for picking out pieces of chicken from a pot of arroz con pollo? Called her disrespectful for not saying her prayers loudly enough at night?

Will I tell you about how she was made to walk home from her elementary school, at eight years old, more than a mile, in a country she had never known, without knowing the language, the culture, the ways?

Will I tell you how she slept in a fold-out cot behind the couch in the living room? How we had her long locks chopped off so they now fell in heavy waves around her face, made her look like a boy? How we dressed her in thrift store clothes, second-hand blue sneakers, and a too-thin winter coat?

Will I tell you how she took it all without complaint? Always a smile on that little round face of hers, always a spark in her eyes?

I can tell you how we walked together, she and I, to Garrison Park on the weekends. How she would sit on a picnic bench to watch me play. How she'd jump to her feet and run to retrieve

the ball for me when it bounced into the grass. How afterward, we'd sit and talk about her former life in Colombia, about her school and her friends and her pets, and then about my life here.

I can tell you how we spent hours in my bedroom drawing, listening to music, doing our homework together. How we sat together on the couch watching movies and TV shows, laughing, joking, playing.

But then I will also have to tell you about the time I came home early from school, opened the front door to find her lying on the carpet in the living room and my father sitting down beside her.

I will have to tell you how I watched them for a moment, unbelieving. How I felt the anger creeping up into my eyes, blurring them, weakening them, turning me to stone. How I swallowed, took a step backward onto the porch, grabbed the doorknob and slammed that door so hard I thought the frame would snap right off. How I ran down the steps two at a time, screaming, sobbing, wailing. How I kept on running until I reached an empty corner of the park and flung myself down at the base of a tree. How I cried until my eyes were raw and night fell over me, the whole time thinking only, "Why?"

I will have to tell you, also, how I walked back home that night, in the dark. How I went up the stairs, opened the door and stepped into the apartment. How everything was quiet. How my mother was washing dishes in the kitchen and my father was watching the news. How I walked right past them and into my room, where I found Camila sitting at my desk, drawing. How we didn't speak a word about what I'd seen. Not that night and not ever.

Will it matter if I tell you that the next time my father reached down to put his hand on me, I looked him in the eye and said, with finality, "Don't do this to her." How I hoped that he would

take that as a threat. How I prayed that he would never again come close to her in that way, never again put another hand on her. How I rushed out of school after every practice, trying to beat him home so that he wouldn't be alone with her.

Will I tell you how I blame myself for what he did and how I hate myself, even now, today, for not telling anyone about what I saw. How the worst part about that night was realizing I was no better than my mother.

I don't have to tell you this.

You already know.

Chapter 23

During Christmas break, Liz and Daisy move away to Garland. Although I have other friends, the school seems empty and quiet without them. I go from class to class in a daze, no longer rushing to meet them in some corner to exchange notes and jokes.

On Saturday mornings, I wake up early and go for a jog through the neighborhood, the loop we used to run during cross country season. I listen to my footsteps on the pavement, the sound of my breathing. I try to sweat out my loneliness. When I come back, I feel calmer, more refreshed, but then Monday morning comes again, and I don't know how I'll make it through the week.

My father, probably wanting to distract me, comes home one day with a pair of finches in a cardboard box. Our kitchen window has an extra-wide sill, so he transforms the whole thing into a birdcage, adding wire mesh and dowels, a little wooden box with straw. When he lets the birds in, they seem terrified, confused. I think they'll probably die of sadness from being able to see the outside without ever being a part of it. In time, however, they seem to grow accustomed to their surroundings and start fluttering about, their constant chirps filling up the house. One morning, my mother spots some tiny eggs inside their box, and a few weeks later, there's a whole other finch flying around.

Somehow, I manage to survive the rest of the semester. I finish basketball season, run track by myself, perform at the orchestra concerts, keep up with my grades, and contribute a handful of drawings and an essay about running in the rain to *Pen & Ink*, the school's literary journal. I also start writing letters to Liz, letting her know about the little things that happen at school, which of

our friends has started dating or driving or working. I tell her about moments that remind me of her and how much I miss having her at my side. I decorate the corners of my letters with flowers and vines, twists and loops and curly-cues. Smooth and melodic. I decorate the envelopes, too, like a PS after sealing my words inside.

Just before the end of the school year, my Tía Leona calls to say that she is finally going to fly over from Colombia. Camila is ecstatic. I am not.

On the day before her mother is supposed to arrive, Camila is smiling, singing, dancing. My parents leave us alone in the apartment while they go out to run some errands, and as the minutes drag on I become more and more annoyed. I snap at her for not washing her dishes, for leaving a mess with the art supplies in my room. I want her to get upset, to stop being so obnoxiously *happy*, but nothing fazes her at all. She hums while she washes her dishes, picks up her mess in a flash. Then she starts jumping around on the living room furniture like a goat, and suddenly I'm filled with rage.

“Get down!” I scream. “Stop being so annoying!”

She laughs, continues to frolic. Her eyes are brighter than I've ever seen them. Desperate to put an end to her joy, I glance around the room. On the kitchen table is a drawing she made the night before of herself and her mother holding hands. I walk over, snatch it up and roll it into a tube.

Finally, her laughter stops.

“Don't you ruin that,” she says. “It's for my mother.”

But I'm already heading back toward her, already enjoying the sadness in her voice. I raise the paper tube into the air and bring it down against her shoulder. I know it doesn't hurt, but she screams as if I've cut her with a knife.

"Don't ruin it!" she cries. "I made it for her! Don't you ruin it!"

The light is gone from her eyes. She's crying.

Disgusted and ashamed at myself, I throw the crumpled paper at her feet and watch her dive down for it. Watch her pick it up like it's a live thing and begin to smooth it out against her chest.

I'm fucking mad. Mad at her for wanting to leave, mad at her mother for coming to take her away. Mad at my mother, mad at my dad. But more than anything else, I'm mad at myself. Camila is the closest I've ever come to having a real sister, and this is how I treat her.

I want to tell her that I love her. That I will always love her. That I want her to be my sister forever, but the words get stuck inside my throat. Instead, I just go up to her and put my arms around her shoulders.

"I'm sorry," I say. "I shouldn't have done that."

And she hugs me back.

I know that we still have that night, the next few days, maybe forever, but somehow this feels like the end.

Chapter 24

Tía Leona lucks out and finds a job right away as a live-in nanny up in Round Rock, a good thirty miles from our apartment, and just like that, they're gone.

After that, I'm lucky if I see Camila once a month. The apartment is empty without her, quiet. The only sound is the chirping of the finches, which I've grown used to. My father doesn't take me to his church as often anymore. Instead, when we're alone at home he takes me into his bedroom, into their bed. While he does the thing he does, I play the old connect-the-dot game with the bumps of paint on the ceiling. I watch the faces appear, looking down at me. Some watch with curiosity. Others with disinterest, disgust, or horror. When it's over, I put my clothes back on and go into my room to read or write or draw until my mother comes home and it's time to say our prayers.

In the middle of the summer, my parents announce that we are going to move again. They are looking for a place on the north side of town. For the next few weeks we go out in the evenings to do the house-hunting thing all over again. Everywhere we go, I pay attention to the nearest high school, imagine myself going to school there, becoming a brand-new person. I'm about to start my junior year of high school and I'm determined to make it a good one.

Finally, we find a tiny rental house in north Austin, a few blocks from a school named McCallum. My parents meet with the owners and sign the paperwork. On a Sunday afternoon, days before we are scheduled to move, my father takes me into his bedroom once again.

He removes my pants and folds them neatly beside me. I am already doing my looking-for-faces-on-the-ceiling thing when I hear him mumble something. I ignore him, and then I hear

him mumble again. Probably another apology, another promise that this will be the last time. I shrug. The faces appear. New ones, old ones, ones I have forgotten.

What makes me look back down from the ceiling is the fact that I haven't yet felt him touch me. Instead, he's standing at the foot of the bed, watching me. When I finally look at him, I notice that his hands are down, down below his waist.

His pants are unzipped.

There is a bit of tan-colored flesh protruding from the opening.

I gasp. Shriveling up like those sleepyhead ferns I used to play with in Colombia, las dormilonas. I shove my entire body against the headboard.

"I'm only going to touch you," I hear him say. His voice is calm and steady. His eyes pleading.

I shake my head. I shake my head, I shake my head, I shake my head.

Finally, a single word escapes from my lips.

I hear its coldness, like death. A low, guttural, animal-like sound.

"No."

I begin to shake and my eyes remain wide open. I can't blink. I stare and stare into his face until finally he backs down. Zips his pants back up. Drops his hands to his sides. Steps out of the room.

And I stay there, pretzled up and shaking, for a long time. I'm afraid. I'm mad.

I'm fucking done.

PART FOUR

Chapter 25

The day we move into the new house, it rains. I mean, it rains. Big, fat raindrops. Millions of them. I sit on the floor of my bedroom next to the open window and listen to them, smell them, feel them on my face as they splash on the sill and cut through the screen. It rains and rains and rains and I feel happy, like the house is sending all this water to welcome me.

For the next couple of weeks, I take my basketball and my bike and go exploring while my parents are at work. The high school has a basketball court in the back, but the hoops are damaged and the floor is slanted, so I keep looking, riding up and down along unfamiliar streets until I reach a park with big, wide trees like giant umbrellas, branches reaching down almost to the ground. I find a court that's clean and smooth and white, and nearly every time I go back I'm the only one on it, so after a while it feels like somebody put it there just for me. Like it belongs to me. Or maybe I belong to it.

When the school year begins, I'm ready. I walk in angry, hard. Each hallway is a river of strangers rushing by, here and there pooling into a knot, circling around and around before moving on.

And me? I'm a blank slate.

In the classrooms, I am quiet. Detached. Unseen. It's nice this way. I get to observe my surroundings without really being a part of them. By eleventh grade, all the roles have been

distributed and it's easy for me to sit back and blend into the shadows. I've even decided to give my violin a break.

Everything feels different at McCallum High School, like I'm in a foreign country, and even though I don't have any friends, I feel comfortable inside these walls.

During lunch, I buy a dollar's worth of dinner rolls and sit on the floor outside a classroom to eat and read or doodle in my notebooks. It's a quiet existence, this. Peaceful. Safe.

Of all my classes, my favorite is English. Ms. Harrington is tall, with graying hair that falls past her shoulders. She hands out college-level work like it's mid-May instead of mid-September, but she has a playful nature, a dry sense of humor, and a toughness that I appreciate. In Ms. Harrington's class, we read Shakespeare and Hemingway and compose profound reflection pieces about our experiences with the work. We write sonnets in perfect iambic pentameter and learn the meanings of words like "ambiguous" and "punctilious." Ms. Harrington pushes us hard and demands our best always. I give her everything, and in exchange, she writes nice things at the top of my papers. What I enjoy most is the way she smiles at me when she hands me back my work, like we share a secret. I respect her, and I feel that she respects me too.

The class that ends up changing my life, however, is chemistry. For the first month, we work independently at our desks, but then one day, the teacher announces that it's time to start conducting experiments. He points to the lab at the back of the classroom like it's a sacred place, an amusement park we ought to be happy to visit, but I barely turn my head. I would much prefer to stay at my desk for the rest of the year, balancing equations in my notebook.

When it's time to move, the class comes alive around me, scurrying to pair up and head to the back. I don't lift my head until after most of them have left. A few seats ahead of me, in the row next to mine, is a tall girl with super-tight, reddish-brown curls and a pair of thick glasses. I look up at her just as she begins to scan the room, and when our eyes meet she smiles a big old smile like she was expecting it. She gets right up and comes over.

"Wanna be my partner?" she says. I shrug and get up, following her to one of the empty lab stations in the back.

I learn that day that the girl's name is Susanne Michaelson. She has an older brother and a black Labrador retriever. Her parents are divorced. She lives with her mother, plays the violin, and is *very* comfortable talking to strangers. Best of all, when it comes to the lab, she is bold and unafraid, mixing up chemicals and adjusting the knob on the Bunsen burner while I stand back for moral support. Later, when it's time to show our work, it's my turn to take the lead as I explain to her why this or that number must be doubled, or how this or that molecule will join with another. We are perfect complements in chemistry class, and as the weeks go by, we become complements outside of class, too.

My dinner roll lunches in the hallway come to an end when Susanne invites me to have lunch with her. She tells me to meet her outside under one of the trees at the front of the school, and when I get there, I'm surprised to find not only Susanne but about five or six of her friends as well. Not the perfect, popular girls with smooth hair and flawless skin, but girls like me. Different and odd and real. They swallow me up into their group, into the waters of the school, and soon I'm laughing with them, joking and being silly.

Here is what I learn about Susanne over the next few weeks: She is fearless in life as she is fearless in the chemistry lab. She says everything that's on her mind and isn't afraid to make a fool of herself. She's bright and honest and loud. She knows she's different and she doesn't care. The more I get to know her, the more I see that all kinds of people gravitate to her. She's friendly and non-threatening, but there's something more. She acts exactly the same with everybody, adults and kids alike. Like nobody can hurt her. Like nothing can scare her.

Soon we're spending time together before school and between classes. When she finds out I also play the violin she goes insane.

"You have to join the orchestra!" she cries, and then goes into a days' long discourse about the director, the other members, and how much fun we will have together once I join.

Then, one day, she invites me to spend a Saturday at her house. I tell my mother it's for a group project, and after she drops me off, Susanne snatches me right off her front porch and into her bedroom. We lie on her bed and listen to music, talk about boys, look through old photo albums, and watch TV for the rest of the afternoon. Then my mother comes to pick me up and I go home in a happy daze because at some point in the middle of our conversations, Susanne refers to me as her best friend.

At school, I begin to struggle with my history class. It's college-level, too, and way out of my league. When my papers come back, it's like I'm watching the week's weather forecast on TV, temperatures just beginning to feel the chill of fall. I'm not concerned until the teacher pulls me aside and explains that at McCallum, history and English go hand in hand. Flunking out of Honors History means I'm also out of Ms. Harrington's class.

The news would have devastated me, I think, but when I walk into my new English class, I see Susanne's frizzy braids and my heart fills with joy. She moves over to a row with an empty seat behind her so we can sit together, and then my English grades take a nosedive too, because we spend more time talking and passing each other notes than doing any actual learning.

One day, when I meet Susanne during passing period, she announces that she's not going to class.

"I have Group today," she says, and I look up at her like she's making up some new excuse for skipping school.

"No, really." Her voice is sad. "We meet once a month."

She explains that what she calls Group is a meeting in which students whose parents are divorced gather in the cafeteria with the counselor to talk about their feelings. I walk her to the meeting, and as she turns to walk away from me, I take a peek inside. Several students are arranging chairs into a circle, and for a reason I can't understand, I want more than anything else to join them.

Later, I go up to her in the hallway and tell her that next month I'm going with her to Group.

"I'll just tell them my parents are divorced," I say, laughing, but Susanne turns to me and her face is not amused.

"You don't know how lucky you are," she says. She's never said much about her father or her parents' divorce, but that day I learn not to make jokes about what she's gone through.

Still, the thought of being able to talk about your feelings with a group of other students starts to nibble at me. I want a group of my own. When I tell Susanne this she tells me there are lots of groups at McCallum.

Then one day, in the middle of English class, when the teacher isn't looking, she whips around in her seat and drops a copy of the school newspaper on my desk. It's folded back to a page with lots of little blurbs in different fonts, like the classified section of the *Greensheet*. I pick it up to take a closer look, and Susanne shoots me a quick smile over her shoulder.

The title of the spread is something like "Find Your Place." It's not classifieds for things or jobs, but for clubs and organizations. Chess, Board Games, French, Movies, Books. Each title is followed by a paragraph describing the group. My eyes grow wide as I read through them—I had no idea there were so many!

Then my eyes focus on one little square of text above the others. "MAC Survivors Club," it says in big, bold letters. "A safe place for survivors of child abuse to meet, talk, and support each other." The words turn blurry as I read, seem to float up into the air. Seem to enter right into me, tightening around my throat. My breathing quickens. Child abuse, I read again and again. It's a term I've never heard. Never knew there was a name for it. Never knew it was a thing. Never knew there might be others.

Something washes over me then. Something like a light, you know? A little flicker, a flash. A thrill. All I can think is that there are students like me at this school. Here, within these walls, maybe sitting right there next to me. Others. I want to stand up on my chair and shout. Want to find them at that very moment and go to them, to throw my arms around each of them, to listen to their stories. Most of all, I want to speak.

I want to tell them.

I want to let everything out, to release my words to them, to tell them everything that's happened to me, everything I know, just for the chance that they might understand.

The teacher is on the other side of the room, bending over a desk to help a student, when I touch Susanne on the shoulder. She turns around. Sees the happiness on my face. Sees me tapping my finger on the newspaper and looks down, smiling, curious to see what I have chosen.

I don't know what I'm expecting her reaction to be. It's a lot to take in this way, without words. Her smile vanishes the moment she realizes what I'm pointing to. Her eyes grow dark, and in that instant I suddenly understand that I have just released the secret I have carried for nearly my entire life.

Avalanche

First crack, the silent
snowflake falls, landing weightless,
undetected. First cut, first move—
a white knight jumps, declaring
war, a game of chance. First light,
a golden dagger slices
through the dark. A kiss
betrays, a single note suspended
on the tip of a baton
before the crashing, falling
waves collapse, destruction rolling
thunder crushing, pain
of love and loss and death, the grand
beginning of the end.

Chapter 26

The counselor at McCallum High School is very pretty. Her office is small and neat, decorated with inspirational posters and nicely-framed degrees.

“My name is Miss Evans,” she says when I walk in. “Feel free to sit down.” The chair on my side of the desk is cushioned and comfortable. I sit and watch her write some words on a notepad with a freshly sharpened pencil. Then she stops, puts the pencil down, and folds her hands on the desk.

“I hear you’re interested in joining one of our organizations,” she begins.

My heart jumps inside my chest and I nod.

“Could you tell me which one?”

It sounds like an honest question, like she only wants to know so she can schedule me into the right meeting, give me the correct information. But something about the formality of the visit, the fact that I’ve been called out of class with my name on a pink slip, and the image of Susanne’s face when I pointed to the newspaper keeps me from speaking.

Miss Evans tries again. “We have all kinds of clubs here at McCallum. There are some for kids whose parents are divorced—that’s the one Susanne belongs to. Do both of your parents live at home?”

I nod.

Miss Evans nods too, but slowly, methodically. “Does anybody else live in your home?”

I shake my head.

She watches me for a few moments, like she’s waiting for me to say more. When I don’t, she continues.

“Susanne tells me you might be interested in joining MAC Survivors. Is that true?”

I look up at Miss Evans. Her skin smooth and brown like the caramel candies Mamita Clementina used to give me as a child. She's smiling and her eyes are kind. I want to trust her. I look down at the neat stacks of papers on her desk, at her hands, still folded. Her polished nails. The wooden sign on her desk with "Stacy Evans" in gold. Then I take a deep breath, swallow, and nod.

Miss Jones picks up her pencil and scratches it against the paper.

"Well, I can certainly help with that," she says, almost cheerfully. "The group is small, but the kids are great. You'll get along with them. They're very friendly."

I nod again, feeling a knot tighten in my stomach. I want her to tell me where to show up for the next meeting and send me back to class. Instead, she puts her notebook and pencil down again and looks at me.

"Before we can get you set up, though," she says, "I'd like to ask you a few questions. Is that okay?"

I look up at her with no expression. Or maybe there is something on my face that only she can see. Something the framed papers on her wall have taught her to see. Looking into her eyes feels like a trap.

The part of me that has been sealed up for the past ten years—the frightened little first grader inside me—begs me to remain silent, to get up from my seat and step out of her office. But now there's another me—this new and improved 11th grader with brand-new friends and a brand-new attitude—who wants me to move forward. Who tells me this is my chance.

I imagine myself meeting with the Others in the cafeteria, our chairs arranged into a circle. I imagine their faces, soft with sympathy and understanding. Their eyes like mirrors, knowing. I imagine what it will be like to speak to them, to laugh with them, to allow them into my life.

I feel my head move up and down in a barely noticeable nod, and Miss Evans smiles.

Weeks pass.

I'm called to the office every few days for my sessions with Miss Jones. Questions and questions and questions. I tell her everything, all the way from the beginning. Once I start, it all comes raging out of me like she's cut a vein. I couldn't stop if I wanted to.

I answer everything she throws at me and watch her make her scratchy marks into her notebook. Her face doesn't change much as I speak. Sometimes her eyebrows will come together in confusion and she will ask a clarifying question, but for the most part, she's quiet.

Me, though? I'm a mess. An open faucet. Every time she asks a new question I have to stop to process her words into images in my head and then translate my answers back into something she can understand. The tears roll hot down my cheeks, mixed with snot and sweat and babas. I go through no less than three boxes of tissues in that office.

Sometimes I stop in the middle of an answer and beg her to please not tell my mother.

"She can't know about this," I say, desperation dripping from my voice. "She can't find out."

Miss Jones smiles like she's agreeing, but she never promises not to tell.

Chapter 27

At home, my life continues.

I decorate my walls with pictures of beautiful boys from teen magazines. A little bit of America inside my room.

On Friday nights after our prayers, I like to sit at my side window, which overlooks the neighbor's house. I turn my light off and peek inside their living room, shadows dancing, talking, laughing, drinking. I hear their music playing, light and happy. It comforts me, makes me feel like I'm right there on the edge of something grand and big, exciting. America.

On Wednesday nights, I go to catechism classes to prepare for my next sacrament. Confirmation is when you choose, of your own free will, to continue practicing the Catholic faith. It doesn't feel exactly like my own free will when my parents drive me to the classes, but I also don't put up a fight. The teachers are nice, which means the kids are unruly, but we get to do arts and crafts projects with a Jesus-twist. It gives me something to do, and afterward, when I step into the night, I feel calm like I've been meditating.

The rest of my days are filled with drawing, reading, writing. I fill up a whole journal with bad poetry. Sonnets, acrostics, couplets, free verse. Nothing significant, since I keep all the good fuel locked up inside of me, but at least they're words. Sounds. Letters. Ink on pages. Friends.

Chapter 28

Here is what happens in the counselor's office when you're seventeen years old and you speak up about what your father has been up to for the past eleven years.

First, she asks you ten thousand questions, which you do your best to answer. Then she informs you that she has to alert "the authorities." You fight it, of course, say she promised not to tell anyone, even though you know good and well she never promised anything. You cry your tears and throw your fits, though, because it's worth a shot.

Then a white guy appears, in uniform. Your counselor offers to stay in there with you while you talk to him, but you feel betrayed by her and decline the offer, so then you're stuck with this guy staring at you. This guy with his own little pad of paper, his own pencil, his own ten thousand questions.

And what is there to do but turn the page? You answer his stupid questions and feel your blood begin to rush inside your veins. When your counselor asked her questions, she was at least sensitive about it. She at least only asked follow-ups related to what you just told her. When this guy does it, though, it's some weird memorized list. He asks about specific actions, things you never even knew people did, but now you do and you're disgusted.

Then he asks if you would like to press charges, if you want to send your father to jail. If you could, you'd say "Fuck no!" But you're seventeen, a good little Catholic girl, so you only look at him with fuck-you eyes and tell him no, of course not. And that's when you learn that you got lucky. That seventeen is a magic number because at seventeen you have a choice. You learn that if you had told your story in October, you'd be screwed. But since your birthday has passed, you're in the clear. No charges. No jail.

Just let me talk to the Others, you plead inside your head, but you're starting to think all that was just a ploy, a dangling carrot, a trick to get you to speak. Maybe you're the only one.

After the white guy finishes having his way with you, your counselor says there's someone else. Child Protective Services. The following week they show up, and you want to sink right into your shoes. Another man, this time with a friend who seems to be new to the job.

The man in charge asks his questions like the others.

Sometimes they sting and you cry, and then he looks at his partner and says, "This is normal," and you want to punch him in the face.

Then you're mad and tired and just want it all to be done, and for a while you shut down. He asks the questions and you only stare back with your mouth closed because he's an asshole just recording your words. Doesn't care, doesn't know, doesn't feel.

And he turns to the other man and says, "Sometimes this happens," like you're not fucking there. Like you're a god damn animal in a lab, some stupid test dummy doing tricks while they look on.

You begin to run out of tears.

Here is what happens outside of the counselor's office when your life begins to unravel.

After each of your sessions, no matter what time of day you come out, Susanne is always there to receive you. She doesn't ask about the details. You simply walk together, sometimes in silence, or else she'll start acting goofy, trying to cheer you up.

One day you're on your way to lunch and she stops walking. Turns to face you, tears welling up in her eyes.

"I'm sorry," she says.

"For what?"

"For all of this." She shakes her head. "The whole reason you're going through this is because of me."

And you want to tell her that's not true. That speaking up was your own decision, that you don't blame her. But the words don't come, because maybe even though you know it was time for this to happen, and even though you know she did it out of love, and even though you're not angry with her, and even though a part of you is glad it's all coming out finally, finally, after all these years, there's still that little-girl part of you that's afraid and wishes you had kept your mouth shut.

Your school days are full of holes from all your trips to the counselor's office. 80s and 70s on your report card. A big fat 67 in English. In English! You stop caring.

At home you're an empty shell. Deep down you know this is the end, that it's only a matter of time. You look at your mother and father with pity. Poor, unknowing souls.

Your journals fall apart at the seams, overflowing with words. Poems sprouting from the pages, laced with sadness. You write in Spanish, the language of your tears. You write to Liz. Long, rambling, nothing-letters because that's all you have to give.

You draw on notebook paper. Faces, women with long flowy hair. Eyes staring hard back at you, questioning, beckoning, wondering.

Survival, you might call it. This limbo place, this in-between. The place where you live but don't really live. The setup just before the final act.

One day your father lets the finches loose in the back yard and they fly up, up, up into the highest branches of the tallest trees. They hang out for just a few seconds before realizing they don't have to stay anymore, and then they're off, gone, disappearing into the gray. And you wish you were up there with them.

Chapter 29

Summer vacation begins in June. My parents go to work in the mornings and I stay at home enjoying my freedom. Drawing, writing, reading, going out on my bike, playing basketball, watching tv, napping. Every day the same. Every evening our nightly prayers. Again and again and again.

And I think I'm in the clear, right? No school means no counseling sessions, no strangers asking questions, no pencils scribbling on pads. No risk of family destruction.

But then one day the phone rings and I answer it.

"Hello," says a man's voice. Gentle and soft, with a hint of an accent. "My name is Daniel."

A pause, like he's thinking, and then, "Are you Mrs. Pinilla?"

I chuckle.

"No," I say. "That's my mother. She's not here right now."

Another pause.

"Could you please take down a message for me?"

The man gives me his telephone number, asks me to have my mother call him. I write the information on a piece of paper by the phone, and when my mother comes home, I tell her.

No big deal.

Except there's something about his voice. Too soft. Too gentle. Too nice.

Two days later, on a Friday, I'm still thinking about it. After dinner, my father heads into the living room to watch the news. My mother gets up to wash the dishes.

"Did you ever call that guy back?" I ask her.

"What guy?"

"Daniel?"

"Oh, yes," she says, turning on the faucet. "I did."

"Who was he?"

"I don't know." She scrapes a bit of food into the trashcan. "He says he wants to meet with me in person, so I'm going to his office on Monday morning." Soap. Suds. More water. And then, "Do you know someone named Stacy Evans?"

I blink.

I freeze there where I stand and stare at her back, which shakes a little as she scrubs.

My eyes turn blurry.

My head begins to spin inside.

Everything feels heavy, slow, like the whole world has been submerged underwater.

Then she looks over at me and I realize she's waiting for an answer. I shake my head. Barely move it, really. Try to hide the terror in my eyes.

"Why?" I hear myself say.

She keeps on washing.

“Oh, he mentioned something about a Stacy Evans, said she works at your school and will be at the meeting. I can’t imagine what it’s about.” She glances over her shoulder. “What do you think it is?”

I shake my head again. Shrug, to make it seem like I don’t care. Wait a few long seconds so it doesn’t look like I’m leaving in a panic. Then I take a step back and head into the living room, where I collapse into a heap at my father’s feet.

The tears begin to flow.

“What’s wrong?” he says quietly, but I can’t speak. There’s a lump the size of a basketball in my throat. We hear the clink of dishes from the kitchen, my mother unaware.

I look up, meet his eyes. I’m shaking.

“I told,” I say.

He cocks his head to the side, confused. “What?”

I shoot a quick glance toward the kitchen to let him know I can’t say much. And then, in a voice just barely above a whisper, I lie.

“They think—they thought... I was going to kill myself,” I say, tripping over my words. “They asked so many questions. I didn’t know what to say. I’m sorry. They’re going to tell her.”

I’m shaking even more. I watch helplessly as the terror that has come over me starts to seep its way into his eyes too. They get big, then red around the edges, and his skin turns pale. We sit in the glow of the tv set, Spanish voices chattering on the screen, my mother’s dishes still clinking in the kitchen.

Finally, he speaks.

“You have to tell her it’s not true,” he says, and his voice has a hushed urgency to it. “Tonight, before they talk to her.” His eyes are on mine, steady now, pleading. “It’s the only way. Tell her you lied to them. Tell her it didn’t happen.”

I shake my head.

“I can’t.”

“You have to.”

I want to die.

Instead I stand up, walk into my bedroom and close the door behind me. Try to shut out the world.

I’m angry at that Daniel person, with his too-soft voice. Angry at myself for giving my mother the message. Angry at Miss Evans and everybody else I have spoken to. They promised me nothing would happen to my dad if I didn’t press charges, and I was stupid enough to believe them.

Some time later, my mother knocks on my door. We gather the dirty laundry and stuff the bags into the back seat of her car, a Friday ritual. We drive to the laundromat, just the two of us, without saying much.

We fill the machines, sprinkle detergent, push levers. Then we take a seat, side by side, in the plastic chairs that face the window. Outside it’s dark. Flashes of light from passing cars. Green, yellow, red, and green again. Everything fuzzy. I want to keep sitting in silence until it’s time to leave, but I know I need to speak.

“I know why the school wants to talk to you,” I say.

She turns to face me.

“Why?”

I form the words in my head before I speak them.

“I have been sad since we moved here. I miss my friends. I’m lonely here.”

My mother nods but doesn’t speak.

“I told them about this at school,” I go on. “And I—”

I squeeze the fingers of my left hand with those of my right.

“I told them things... that aren’t true.”

My mother shifts in her seat. Licks her lips.

“Like what?” she says.

I look outside. The lights. The cars. The night. I want to jump up from my plastic chair and run and run and run away from the laundromat, away from everything. But here, inside, everything is still, like death. My body heavy, glued to the seat.

“I told them,” I say. “I told them—that my father... did things... to me.”

I swallow.

“But it isn’t true! It isn’t true!” And my voice is louder than it should be. “I made it up!” I cry. “I promise! I lied to them, it isn’t true!”

The tears are back to drown me, and still my mother only nods.

She doesn’t say “I see,” but if she were a real American mother on a real American tv show, that’s what she would say. She doesn’t say it only because this whole conversation is in Spanish, and in Spanish we only nod.

Then she puts her arms around me. Holds me close. But I know we’re both pretending.

That night, I expect a big fight. Shouting, screaming, slamming doors, but there is nothing.
We say our prayers and go to bed.

On Sunday, after church, we have plans to meet my parents' friends. Two sisters from Iran. My parents have been helping them learn English, get settled into America. We climb into the car and drive to the west side of Austin, to where we used to go back when we were exploring and looking for a place to live.

We pass the beautiful hills and valleys, but this time everything is quiet. We barely speak. We drive into a park and pull up to a picnic area beside a creek. The sisters are there, waiting. They smile when we arrive, stand up to greet us. We say our hellos. Put the food out on the table. Sandwiches, chips, drinks. Such ordinary things.

After we eat, my mother stays with them, talking at the table. My father spreads a blanket out on the floor just a few feet away and lies down face up. I lie down beside him.

We look up at the sky and listen to the screams of the cicadas all around.

All these years.

All these thoughts.

There are no birds in the blue that day, but after several minutes of lying there, both of us silent, I look over to the left. A few yards down from us, I see them.

Buzzards. Chulos. My father's favorite birds. There's a whole group of them, big and black with naked, wrinkly heads. Stretching out their wings as they leap from one spot to another, scavenging for leftovers.

This is how we spend our final day as a family.

Chapter 30

Monday morning begins like all the other summer days. I wake up to an empty house. Except today my mother's not at work.

I wonder what they are telling her, exactly. How much they will say.

All day I'm expecting for her to call or show up at the house, to ask me questions, to take me away, to hold me and cry and tell me she loves me, but when evening comes it's my father who shows up instead. He's quiet. Slow. Apagado.

"Did Mamá go to work today?" I ask.

"No," he says. Then he asks if I want to go to McDonald's.

"What about Mamá?"

He shakes his head.

"She's not coming."

We get into the car and he drives for a while, turning here and there, along roads I'm not familiar with. He doesn't speak. I don't ask questions. We pass a big church with a wooded lot extending all around it. I think about how peaceful it looks and wish that's where we went on Sundays, imagine what it would be like to walk around that lawn, enjoying the shade.

My father drives and drives, and finally we pull into the parking lot of a McDonald's. We go inside. Order food.

We sit across from each other at a booth and I can feel the tension in the air, like it's rising up from the pile of French fries between us.

Then I notice my father's eyes. Red, wet, swollen.

"Your mother is gone," he says.

Gone? I say inside my head. I don't understand the word.

“Where did she go?”

“To Garland. She left this morning.”

And then everything goes quiet. There’s nothing more to say. The French fries sit there, getting cold.

After a while, we get back in the car and drive home.

Say our prayers.

Go to bed.

For one whole week, I remain at home alone with my father. He doesn’t touch me at all, and in my mind that means it’s over. It’s like we’re living on the outside now, in the open, where there are no secrets. Over-exposed, like a picture with too much white. It stings a little, the harshness of this new place, but I figure we’ll get used to it. Silly of me to think the break will be this smooth.

On the inside, things are not as white. The hate I feel for my mother is growing stronger by the minute. Stretching its wings, solidifying. I feel it, cold and hard and ugly.

My father goes to work each day and I stay home, the woman of the house. I clean, make dinner, do the dishes. I can do this, I think. I already did her other chores. This is the easy part.

I’ve already resigned myself to a life of just the two of us when on Thursday my father asks me to sit down at the table with him to talk.

“Your mother’s coming back,” he says, “on Saturday.”

“For what?” I say, and my voice is a stone.

“She needs to pick up her things. And also—”

He stops, like he’s thinking about his words.

“She wants... to take you with her.”

Maybe that’s not the way he says it, exactly. Maybe that’s only what I hear. He states those two things separately and I put them together in my head, and suddenly I’m furious.

“Oh, she’s coming back to get her things?” I scream, jumping up to my feet. “And I’m just some belonging to her, like her shoes?” I storm off into my bedroom, slam the door and fall onto my bed, still yelling. “She’s the one who left us! I’m not going with her! She can’t make me go!”

But he follows me, pleading. Raps on the door, opens it. His voice all calm and quiet. Defeated.

“It’s a good idea,” he says, and I shake my head.

“It’s not a good idea,” I say. “I live here. I have school.”

“You can go to school there, too.”

“I don’t want to leave.”

He stays quiet for a long time, and then he clears his throat.

“We can’t stay here together.”

“Why not?” I ask again, but he only looks down at his shoes. His shoulders are lower than I remember.

“I think you should go to Garland.”

And though his voice is low and calm and soft, I know he isn’t asking for my opinion. I know this isn’t a choice for me to make.

On Saturday morning, I don't want to wake. I've packed a few items into a bag. Clothes. Journals. Books. Letters from Liz.

My father stuffs some boxes into the trunk of his car. My bag goes in the back seat. I go in the front.

We arrive at a nearby church. A white car sits in the parking lot, waiting. My mother is in the front. Her brother, an uncle of mine I don't know very well, is in the driver's seat.

My dad gets out and moves the boxes into the other car. Then he takes my bag. Finally, it's just me left.

He comes back into the car.

I wish I could tell you what we say. Wish I could remember the specifics. He promises to visit. Tells me to be good, to work hard in school. All the usual stuff parents say, but I'm not even listening. Everything is underwater again, drowning. I'm not even there.

It's not me who opens the door, who takes steps along the concrete toward the white car. It's not me who gets into the back seat next to my aunt. That me isn't me.

But you know which one is me? The one who screams, "Wait!" just as the car begins to move. The one who yells, "Stop! I forgot to tell him something."

The me that is me flings open that back door and runs—no, flies across that parking lot, back to his car. That me that is me flings her arms into his open window and around his neck. That me that is me tells him that she loves him. That she will always love him. Begs him to go to church—to the beautiful one they drove by the previous week, the one with land and trees and shade.

"Talk to the priest there," she pleads. "Talk to him and ask him to help you."

Her father nods.

“Promise me!” she commands, and he nods again, through tears.

And then the me that is me makes her way back to the white car. Gets in. Closes the door and disappears.

On our way back up Interstate 35, my uncle stops at a Denny’s. It’s my first time inside. I had always been curious about the playful font, the silly name, but now it’s just another building, plaster and bricks. Walls.

My mother asks me what I’d like to eat, but I’m not speaking. She orders me a soup I leave untouched on the table.

Around me, voices, noise. Everything outside my body dull and faded, ghosts of a world I used to know. And me on the inside, dead.

PART FIVE

Chapter 31

Back at the Shorehaven house, Mamita Clementina and Tío Toñito are the same as I remember, except they don't look at me the way they used to. Don't talk to me the same way, either. No more walks around the neighborhood. No more caramels. Like suddenly I'm an Other and they don't know how to handle me.

"Things are going to be different here," my mother says when we were alone in the old remodeled garage. "I'm not going to be as strict. You can go out with your cousins whenever you'd like. Make friends. I want you to be happy."

Her Everything's Going to Be Okay speech. Things are Different Now. Welcome to Normal.

This is what Normal looks like when you're 17 and broken:

I got a job at Grandy's fixing plates of food for strangers, pressing buttons on a machine, making change. Went out with Liz every chance I got. Ran for miles and miles on sidewalks and trails, played basketball, raided Daisy's closet when she wasn't home. Went to the movies for the first time in my life. Started spending my Saturday nights at a dance club in downtown Dallas. Tried a cigarette, had my first cocktail, and a second, and a third.

I began my senior year, made new friends like my mother wanted, and also a couple of enemies by association. Joined the cross country team. Skipped every class that wasn't English at least once every couple of weeks. Served detentions without complaint. Made Bs and Cs and Fs

and didn't care. Stayed up late in my room at night, lying on the floor drawing, writing, reading, waiting until one, two in the morning to turn my light off, and that only after my mother came in sleepy-eyed and tight-lipped to snap at me for ruining my eyes. Waited until she was snoring again to turn it right back on.

I went on my first date. Had my first kiss. Made him drive me home two weeks later after he took my shirt off and put his hungry mouth all over my chest. Met other boys. Went on other dates. Joined the track team. Started wearing tighter clothes, shorter shorts. Took an art class. Joined the church youth group. Went to prom.

I should have been happy, right? I should have been fine. The thing was finally over, and that should have been enough to set me free. Here I was now, a whole new person in a whole new world. A fresh start. A loving home. A best friend. Safety. Tío Toñito even got a dog.

But sometimes when you take the knife out, that's when you start to die. And me, in this new world? I was dying.

Underneath the Normal, there was pain and anger, confusion, hatred. Turmoil. A fucking war. A pile of broken pieces and no idea what to do with them.

And she, right there, my mother. The enemy.

Let me see if I can break this down for you, for me. I blamed her. Still. All along, maybe. Her dominance, her power, her overbearing fist. The pop-pop-pop of unraveling stitches. Her demand for perfection. Her need to pour everything into these rigid, unforgiving molds. Everything a rose, her love of pure, unblemished White. Her Taurus aggression forcing all the players to move at her command.

I hated her.

She was my mother and I hated her. Blamed her for the destruction of my family, for taking him away from us by taking us away. Sometimes we'd be in the car, she distracted in the passenger seat, looking out the window. Me behind the wheel, looking for a pole to ram the car into so that it would look like an accident.

Yes.

Yes. I'm telling you this. You're hearing me right.

I wanted her to die.

She who gave me life. Who rubbed the dirt from my arms and legs in a creek in Colombia. Who curled my hair, who taught me to make pretty doilies out of thread.

Too much, too much.

I know she loved me. I know it today and I knew it back then. Knew it all along, will always know, but still...

Sometimes she comes to me in my dreams. Never judging anymore, never controlling, only loving. Asks for my forgiveness. And me?

I fucking give it to her.

I put my arms around her and hold her like a child.

I give her now what I couldn't then. My love.

I try to understand.

How difficult it must be for one who needs control to have none. For one who doesn't make mistakes to make the biggest one. For one who loves her child to turn away.

Then I wake up, full of, full of *love*, and I cry. Happy tears, maybe. Tears of love and forgiveness and something there isn't a word for. Something like relief, like overcoming, like arriving at your destination. Like knowing you were never really gone.

When we first moved back to Garland, my mother fell into Depression. Wore black. Her eyes red-rimmed. Her head bowed down. This isn't all about me, you see. Her world broke too.

They say it takes three points to form a plane, stability. Without our third point, my mother and I floundered, floating through open, empty space, she reaching toward me, me pulling away. The line between us quickly fading.

“I want us to be friends,” she’d sometimes say, and inside my head, I’d laugh a fuck-you laugh.

Still, she didn’t quit. I’ll give her that. In her quest to help me find my Happy, she took me down to an office building in the middle of Garland. Led me up the elevators to the fourth floor, into the office of some gray-haired therapist with a flower-print couch. She came inside with me, sat on a chair to the side. Listened. Watched.

The gray-haired man meant well, I’m sure. Got paid by somebody to mean well, but his words passed right through me, floating through the air, breaking up into molecules, mixing in with the nothingness. All except one. The moment the word “monster” escaped from his lips and floated up into my ear canal, I jumped straight up from that couch. Stormed out of his office and down the elevator and into the sunlight.

Crossed the street and ran and ran. Passed that giant white stone angel that used to comfort me as a child, its wings folded, its eyes white and unseeing. Kept running and running and crying and running until I made it all the way to good old Good Shepherd Catholic School. Entered through the same doors I had entered on my first day of school and asked for the new and improved Mr. Pinilla at the front office. My father’s brother. He appeared and put his hand on the shoulder of his crying, snot-faced, crazy mess of a niece, and then proceeded to drive me to his house, where I stayed with his wife until my mother came to get me.

That was the end of counseling for a very long time.

Chapter 32

And what of him, you ask?

I'll tell you.

Two weeks after the separation, he came to visit me in Garland. Picked me up from the Shorehaven house, drove me to a park so we could talk. Just chat, nothing important. But then we decided to walk across the street to a gas station for snacks. As we crossed the busy intersection, he held out his hand and I took it. A father looking out for his little girl.

And then, halfway to the other side, with cars coming at us, he turned my hand in his, bent his index finger, ran the tip across my palm.

I jerked my hand away and looked at him with “What the fuck?” all on my face. And his stupid eyes said “Maybe?”

That was the last day I saw him out in the world. A few days later, I was in my room when the phone rang. My mother answered. Spoke for a little bit, then called me over.

“M’ijita,” I heard him say. His voice a puddle. Distant, muddy.

“Pipa!”

“I wanted to tell you myself,” he said. Quiet, somber. You know, like when something big is coming but you don’t want to let it out.

“What?” I asked, not wanting to know.

“I’m... I’ve been—”

And then a pause. One of those in-between ones, like when you stub your toe but just before you feel the pain. No time to do anything except to brace yourself for what you know is coming.

“—arrested.”

I screamed. No fancy metaphors here, no five-dollar adjectives. I screamed and threw the phone down to the floor. Screamed and screamed and screamed and cried and cried and then I screamed some more.

The world of broken laws and prison and sentences and bail and court and lawyers was all a foreign land to me.

Here is what my mother told me:

When the family found out (from her) about what happened with my dad, Tía Leona asked some questions of her daughter. Found out some stuff. Went crazy. Pressed charges.

My father’s arrest was not for me, but for Camila.

Between tears and sobs I asked my mother if we could try to get the family to all pitch in and raise the money to get my father out of jail. Tío Toñito stood nearby and only watched. My mother looked down at her feet. Later I screamed and cried to Liz and Daisy, begged them to please not say anything bad about my father to anyone if they happened to ask. They also only watched me. Everybody around me mute, looking on like I was some kind of explosive about to go off. Everybody gentle, not wanting to upset me, but not giving in to me either. Just watching, silent. Observing.

And me alone again. With my words and my pencils and my chewed-up nails.

Weeks later, my mother and I drove down to Austin. Stepped through the chain link fence that reached up to the sky. Checked our purses at a window. Rode a little bus out to another building with an open room. Took our seat at a table by the wall to wait.

He came in looking pale, dressed in orange. Eyes sunken in, a bruise on his temple. I ran to him, embraced him, and tried with everything I had to hold back the tears my mother said would rip him up inside.

We sat back down to talk. Nothing much to really say. He smelled of smoke and I noticed a greenish-gray discoloration between his index and middle finger. Our hour ended before it began, and we said our goodbyes under the guard's watchful eye. Then back on the bus to collect our purses, and once again on the road heading north. More silence. And all the stopped-up tears released.

The following month, another trip, and so on. Again and again, back and forth and up and down along I-35, the steady pulse beating just beneath the melody of my new life.

Chapter 33

Therapy doesn't work if you don't want it. Neither does love, for that matter. Once, late at night, after writing a goodbye letter to my father, I decided to dial an 800 number. A suicide hotline.

The voice on the other end seemed nice enough, a girl. Trying to pump me up with confidence, positivity. But then I mentioned to her about my dad and she turned on me. Spoke against him, with disgust. Called me a victim, which pissed me off.

I told her she sucked at her job. Said I was going to kill myself because of her, and she kind of chuckled (or maybe I imagined it?), said if I killed myself it would not be because of her. It would be my own decision.

And I slammed the phone down, angry at her logic.

Here's what people don't understand. When the person who hurt you is the person you most love, you're not willing to listen to reason. You refuse to hear the truth. You will defend him to the death.

It's stupid, I know. Makes no sense whatsoever. Everyone on the outside thinks you're insane, thinks your brain is mush, thinks you're completely idiotic, and you are, you know? You are completely idiotic and you don't care. Because you aren't you. You're trapped in there, between hate and love and life and death.

You are fucking *alone*, do you understand? Like you're a saucer on a table and somebody messed up on the trick of snatching off the tablecloth, and everything went crashing to the ground except for, somehow, you. But you're a fucking *saucer*, okay? A nada. You have no idea what happened, why you were spared, why you're still alive.

You shouldn't even *be* alive.

Your life is upside down. On the ground. In pieces.

You want to stop with the page turning already, but somehow you go on. Then one day you get a letter in the mail. Red and blue and white and red again and again around the edge. It's from Colombia and you smile when your mother hands it to you because it has your name on it and foreign stamps in the corner and you think it's from a person who loves you, you know? From family. You think it will say that they are with you, that you are remembered and loved and they are very sorry for everything you're going through.

You go to your room and rip it open, hungry for kindness, thirsty for love. You take the paper from its shell and your eyes grow wide, trying to get it all in one frame. But then you frown and shake your head, your brain all jumbled up because instead of love the letter's spewing hate.

"...the things you did with your father ...such filth! ...the shame you have brought to your family ...how could you? ...cochina ...are you happy now?" and on and on and on, but by then you aren't seeing. You're blind with rage, betrayed by red and blue and white and red, the letter on the floor, you flying to the bathroom screaming, your mother left, confused, to clean the mess.

"M'ijita... m'ijita?" Feeling guilty because she's the one who handed it to you, but it's not what she expected either and now her heart bleeds for you too, but it doesn't matter because the deed is fucking done, mission accomplished, and the words of that letter like slashes in your heart, on your flesh, the scars, the lines, the pain. Forever and ever, Amen.

And you're supposed to trust again?

And you're supposed to heal?

A fucking therapist in some plush little office on the fourth floor of some old building is no match for this kind of pain. Has no clue. You're fighting by yourself. You against the world.

You and only you and nothing else.

My real therapy is a pair of blue Asics, laces tight, soles pounding against the ground, two breaths in, two breaths out, arms pumping. Racing around the track, gaining speed, the clock tick-tocking in my head.

My real therapy is a number two pencil, blunt-tipped. Lines of graphite smooth against my paper. Shadows. Faces. Flowing hair.

My real therapy is words. Reading them. Writing them. Wearing them in my hair like flowers, like ribbons, like water pouring out of me when I'm alone.

And I am always,

always

alone.

Any time I'm with the ones outside of me, I know it's just for show. Even Liz, who loves me and would give her life for me. Even my mother, who wears remorse on her face like powder. They knock and knock but I don't let them in. My wall built tall and strong, the bricks sealed tight. No one comes inside.

But then, one day, así de la nada, a boy appears.

Chapter 34

By the time Gabriel showed up in my life, I was taking courses at the community college. Still at home because the thought of leaving terrified me.

I remembered him from high school, remembered seeing him in the commons, remembered sticking out my tongue at him because he was Daisy's friend and seemed funny, though I'd never actually met him.

But he was there, waiting for me when I started my new job in the pharmacy at Eckerd's Drug Store. There with his white smock and his dark skin and his black eyes, and one day I heard him laugh and then he turned away from me and hopped from one foot to the other, this goofy, playful, silly kid bouncing around on aisle 4, and my heart gave a tug and somewhere deep inside, a part of me knew that I would end up loving him.

I watched as he came closer, that little dance that lovers do, and I didn't back away. I let him come, let him come, and I moved a little closer, too. And then one night, we found ourselves standing next to each other on a bridge by White Rock Lake, under the moon and the trees and the wind, our arms close, so close, almost touching, and I gave that boy my heart.

My mother hated him. His dark skin. His Mexican and Panamanian blood. The whole bit about my freedom, about her being the cool mom? Yeah, that all went out the window the moment she laid eyes on him.

She started policing me, trying to enforce a curfew, staying up in her nightgown, glaring at me when I came home at eleven, twelve, all giddy. Tried to lecture me, but I only stepped right

past her. Tried to keep me from using the house phone to talk to him, but I just walked down the street to the nearest payphone. Tried to keep me from seeing him, but it was too late. We spent our Saturdays together, our Fridays after work. Talking, laughing, playing, joking. I couldn't get enough of him.

And then, there was this:

Sex, to me, was a big fat no, and I told him so.

"I mean, you can have it if you want," I said, shrugging. "Just not with me. If you need it, get it. You don't even have to tell me. I'll understand."

He looked at me like I was crazy, like he was offended, and when I told him about my father, he cried. Gave me space. Gave me time. Kept his hands and mouth where they belonged and let me take the reins.

So we got closer.

One by one, I set the bricks aside for him. Then it was two and three at a time, sometimes more, until finally one day he was there, with me. Or me with him. Inside mixed with outside. One.

I'm not saying he saved me, okay? Lots of people had a hand in pulling me up out of my past. But this particular boy at this particular time in my life—well, let's just say that I had been positioning myself into the spot from which I would eventually take flight, and he? He just gave me the courage to jump.

Three months into our relationship, my mother couldn't take it. The late nights, the phone calls, the dreamy looks all over my face. She could smell him on me and it drove her insane.

"You're out there whoring around with him at all hours!" she screamed one night. "¡Puteando! You think I don't know?"

I didn't deny it. She charged at me and I let her come. Drew it out of her, even. Dared her to come at me even harder, and when she did, I took the Ace out of my hand and set it down face up.

"I can leave, if you want." My voice all calm and confident.

And I watched the light go out of her eyes. Defeat. Relief. Exhaustion.

"Está bien," she said. "Leave."

So I did. Bright and early the next morning, I left. Joined another family. Another mother, another father, and the boy who would one day become my husband.

Chapter 35

The day I left home was the beginning of my life outside in the World. New obstacles, new pains, new joys. So many lessons to learn.

I stopped by the Shorehaven house every week or so to say hello to my mother. Called her every now and then. Started loving her again, but from afar.

My father had been transferred to a prison just north of Houston. Once every couple of months, my mother and I would make the drive down together. Always the same questions, the same answers. Time passing, passing. The gaps between our visits growing a little wider. My letters to him a little less frequent.

One day he asked me to write a letter on his behalf, something like a recommendation.

“Tell the officer how much you need me with you,” he said. “It might help to get me out sooner.”

“Okay,” I said. “I will.”

But I didn't.

The next few times when he asked if I had sent the letter, I told him I'd forgotten, or that I was working on it, but the truth was that I didn't want to write it. An even bigger truth was that I didn't need him. The biggest truth of all was that I was glad he was locked up in there, where I didn't have to worry about his hands, his mouth, the bit of flesh protruding from his pants. I didn't want him out.

And time passing, passing, erasing, healing. And me growing older, wiser. Beginning to understand. Beginning to forget.

Until one day I stopped visiting.

Stopped writing letters.

Just

f a d e d

i n t o

without so much as a goodbye.

Chapter 36

I hear their song every summer. The rhythmic scream, the steady beat. Keeping time. I step out of my house in the morning and find their empty shells clinging to the walls, the trees, the tires of my car. Sometimes I catch a glimpse of one there, still soft, still waiting, not quite ready to take off. Green skin wet, with folded paper wings, about to start its final phase.

Once, I found one on the sidewalk, struggling. I heard its buzz, an angry crackle, looked over and found it upside down on the concrete. Ants already at attention, making their way around it, preparing for a feast. I approached slowly, watched it struggle once again, trying to take flight, unable to right itself. The sun already rising, already hot against my skin. The creature stopped its buzzing, waiting, resting, gathering its strength. Or maybe giving up. But then, I took a stick from the ground and came closer. Extended my hand. Gave it one good push, and *jzas!* At once, it was up in the air, buzzing, crackling, free. Its flight a gentle curve, a rising star, on its way to its intended destination.

It isn't true that they explode. The empty shells are just what's left behind of who they used to be, their past, their origin. But now, above the darkness, they soar, propelled by a sense of duty, the desire to pass along their legacy, their song, a brand-new life.

Chapter 37

In 1998, at the age of 24, I accomplished three significant things. I began my teaching career. I married Gabriel. And I went back into the fourth floor of that office building in the middle of Garland. Of my own accord.

The new therapist was Mike. A short man with a thin face and wire-rimmed glasses. Quiet hands. His office had a solid-colored couch, abstract paintings on the wall, and two large windows.

“What brings you here today?” he asked when we first met.

“I’m afraid,” I said.

“Of what?”

“That I’ll turn out like my father.”

And then, between tears, I told him everything, including my biggest fear. I had read somewhere that most abusers were also victims of child abuse themselves, and in my mind that meant that at some point I would turn, like a werewolf or a zombie. Like I’d been infected and the thing was alive inside of me, all coiled up, just waiting to spring out.

But Mike assured me that I had it all wrong.

“Most abusers were abused as children,” he explained. “But that doesn’t mean that most abused children grow up to be abusers.”

I didn’t believe him, of course. It took him months to convince me, to get me to understand and really believe that the thing was gone for good. That it was safe for me to have children.

And in the meantime, as a side effect, he helped me iron out all my scars.

Not an easy thing to do, let me tell you.

Therapy, when you do it right—and I say this all the time—is like cleaning out a closet you’ve been stuffing full of junk for years. The first step is choosing to do it. Being fully

committed, you know? Rolling up your sleeves and opening that door and taking a deep breath and just getting to it. That's number one.

Number two is emptying that motherfucker out. Following through. Getting dirty. Letting every single thing you threw in there see the light of day, man. And that? That freaking hurts. No way around it, no magical shortcut. You can't pay someone to do it for you. And the longer you put it off, the worse it gets, because closets like that don't go away, ever.

One day, after I'd been going to counseling for so long that I felt comfortable rolling my eyes at Mike, he told me he had a homework assignment for me.

"I want you to write him a letter."

"What for?"

"Because it will help."

Eye roll. "I don't think so."

"It's not for him," he said. "It's for you. You can throw it away after you write it."

Shrug. "No, thank you."

And he left me alone for a week, two weeks. When he brought it up again, I told him I wasn't ready and he let me slide another month. But then, one day, he didn't take no for an answer.

"Write it," he said. "Bring it with you the next time you come in." And he meant it.

So what did I write? Man, I wish I had it to share with you. I'd try to recreate it, but it'd be wrong. I'm a different person now from who I was back then. So far past that bridge. Shoot, I'm on a whole other body of water now.

But let's just say it started off with "Dear Pipa." And maybe an "I love you" followed by an "I miss you." And then, I don't know, your typical "Thank you for everything you've done for me" bullshit, and not a bit of irony.

But maybe in the second paragraph the tone changed just a bit. Maybe there was a dash of "it's been pretty hard," and some "I wish things had been different." And maybe, tucked away right there into the other sentences, maybe a little "I wish you hadn't" mixed with a "did you know you almost killed me?" followed by a whole lot of "How could you?"

When I showed up that following week with the note folded up in my hand and tried to hand it to Mike, he just shook his head.

"Read it," he said, and I frowned.

"No."

"Read it," he repeated.

Another eye roll.

"Pretend he's sitting right here in this chair. Pretend I'm him."

"I don't want to."

But he was set on making me play his stupid game. So I looked at him, this scrawny man, the wire-rimmed glasses, the quiet hands. My father sitting there in front of me. Legs crossed. Watching me.

So I started. Slowly at first, timidly, feeling silly. But then the words took hold, became real. And I felt his presence there, inside that body. Felt his fear, his shame, his remorse. And inside of me, I felt something else. Power. Strength. A rage I didn't know existed. My voice grew colder, deeper. Steady.

And then I was speaking to him, to *him*. Wanting to jump up from my couch and hurl my body at him, full-force, to knock him out of his chair and out that window, down, down, down to the ground. *¡Plas!* Dead.

I don't know if Mike ever realized how close he came to dying that night. Maybe he went through episodes like that every week with other people like me. People shouting at him, taking out all their pent-up aggression on that little man. But I guess it worked, his game, because a couple of weeks after that letter-reading session, Mike smiled at me and told me I didn't have to come back anymore if I didn't want to.

"You mean, I'm cured?" I said, smiling back.

"Yes," he said. "You're cured."

Our final joke.

Chapter 38

Outside, the rain falls hard. The girls have been asleep for hours, lulled by the gentle rocking of the bus.

“You’re Catholic,” Salomón says.

I frown and shake my head. “Not anymore.”

“But earlier. When we were leaving—you made the sign of the cross.”

“Habit,” I say.

“You don’t believe in God?”

I shrug. “It’s more like an energy. Like... I don’t know, like electricity. Not some old guy in a robe.”

He nods. “So what motivates you, then? What keeps you going?”

I look past him at the girls. “Hope,” I say. “Gratitude.”

He nods again and we stay quiet for a while. Then I speak again. “What about you?”

“I’m an atheist,” he says, without hesitation, and then I look at him like he’s insane and burst into laughter.

“You weren’t expecting that?” he says.

I shake my head. “Not really.”

“Because I’m old?”

“Because you’re Panamanian.”

He smiles. “It’s possible I’m the only one.”

And then we both laugh a comfortable laugh, the kind you share with people you’ve known for years.

We've spoken of jobs and hobbies, travels, fears. We've laughed at the differences between his Spanish and mine. He's told me about his wife, his kids, his childhood.

I've told him about my father.

The wheels keep rolling as we speak of love and loss and death and life and taking risks and losing your way and finding it again. Finally, the rain gives way to a clear night sky and the bus arrives at the city of David. I dig my phone out of my purse and see that its battery has died.

"Would you mind," I ask, "if I use your phone to make a call?"

And he hands it over, no questions asked.

Then I'm waking my daughters and collecting our things, fumbling in the dimly lit cabin when I hear his voice behind me.

"It was nice to meet you."

"Likewise," I reply, taking his hand, and I mean it.

The next afternoon, I'm returning from a day trip to the beach with the girls and their cousins when their great aunt tells me someone named Salomón called during the day.

"He wanted to make sure you made it to us safely," she says, and my heart grows warm.

We're leaving again in the morning to visit my daughters' great-grandparents an hour away, but in that moment I'm suddenly overcome by a sense of urgency. I step out to the front patio with my pad of paper, my charcoal pencils, and a borrowed magazine opened to a photograph of a beautiful girl in profile.

I brush my pencils against the page for an hour. Lines and curves and shadows. When I'm finished, I hand the drawing to my daughters' great aunt and ask her to call him back the following day, to arrange a way to give it to him, as a thank you.

She looks at me like I'm crazy.

"Who is this man?" she asks, and her voice is playful, teasing.

"Just an old man I met on the bus," I say. "A friend."

And when I come back, a week later, she smiles and tells me Salomón drove all the way out to her job. Took the drawing with him and left, in its place, a beaded bracelet for me.

That's the last I hear of Salomón.

My friend.

Another you.

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Vita

Luz Hernández is a Colombian-American writer with a Bachelor of Arts in Literary Studies from the University of Texas at Dallas (1998) and a Master of Arts in Aesthetic Studies from the University of Texas at Dallas (2007). She writes under her maiden name, Luz Pinilla. Her work has been published or is forthcoming in *Common Ties* (2007), *The Translation Review* (2007), *34th Parallel Magazine* (2017), *The Acentos Review* (2017), *Straight Forward Poetry* (2018), *Lunch Ticket* (2019), and *Badlands* (2020). She was also featured in an interview with *VoyageDallas.com* (2018).

Ms. Hernández has worked as a bilingual and general education teacher for grades 4-10 in the Dallas Independent School District and the Garland Independent School District for over twenty years. She currently teaches elementary art.

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