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Irma Leticia Nikicicz
University of Texas at El Paso, imimo@hotmail.com

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LA MURALLA STORIES

IRMA LETICIA NIKICICZ

Master's Program in Creative Writing

APPROVED:

____
José de Piérola, Ph.D., Chair

____
Luis Arturo Ramos, Emeritus Professor

____
Michael Sollars, Ph.D.

____
Charles H. Ambler, Ph.D.
Dean of the Graduate School

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2019

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LA MURALLA STORIES

by

IRMA LETICIA NIKICICZ

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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Preface

Introduction

La Muralla Stories is a collection of short stories that features the lives of Tex-Mex characters in all their complexity. Set in Deep South Texas, the stories place the reader within the geographical context of the U.S.-Mexico border but also within the social context of a bicultural, binational consciousness, both of which come to be the work's binding idea. They present the fragmented worldviews of the Mexican-American people that live and have lived there for generations. My poetic approach relies on code-switching and the bilingual speech register commonly used there. My purpose in writing these stories is to present, in the words of Henry James, “a personal impression of life” (4), the sociolinguistic and bicultural situation of the frontera, a synthesis of contextual, political binaries, specific to borderland communities.

When I consider the literary tradition in which this work proposes to fit, and when I think of the binaries and fragmented perspectives presented in my stories, the work of contemporary authors like Jhumpa Lahiri, Junot Díaz, Sandra Cisneros, and Benjamín Alire Sáenz come to mind. For example, Lahiri’s story collection, *Interpreter of Maladies*, depicts characters who embody the struggle of being caught between generations, belief systems, and worlds—Eastern and Western culture, America and India, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity, tradition and the modern world. In a similar way, Díaz’s recurring character in *This is How You Lose Her* presents the complexities of being bicultural and the struggle between embracing or breaking with Hispanic-male stereotypes. Yunior, the Dominican-American, protagonist, is acutely aware of the various cultural identities in which he seems to float and the trouble of assimilating into the roles expected (or not

expected) of him. Esperanza, on the other hand, the Mexican-American protagonist of *The House on Mango Street* is also conscious of her mixed heritage and her identity as a female, coming-of-age, in a male-dominated culture. The experiences she endures and observes her friends in the same environment endure influence Esperanza to use writing as an escape from her hardships. Sáenz's *Everything Begins & Ends at the Kentucky Club* also presents characters in conflict with and within the El Paso-Juarez border. Characters like Maximiliano Gonzalez in "The Rule Maker," for example, are forced to grow up and, literally and metaphorically, cross over the boundaries that represent both stability and chaos in their lives.

Two Worlds

Mario Bósquez, author of *The Chalupa Rules: A Latino Guide to Gringolandia*, best explains the essence of Mexican-American duality with a symbol from the Mexican game of bingo. Of the 54 images that are part of the game Bósquez, like many other South Texans (present company included), knows as Chalupa, La Sirena is the only one that embodies that ambivalence to which I refer. He writes: "We marvel at how she is a creature of two elements: air and water. Perhaps we react to this [Chalupa] card in such a strong manner because we too are creatures of two worlds: Mexico and the United States (Bòsquez 279). Tex-Mex people, like La Sirena, know what it's like to float between two worlds. To a large extent, the hybridity is an advantage, but it's not without its struggles. The people also relate to this creature of two worlds, because they know what it means to be suspended between two worlds---the United States and Mexico, North and South, English and Spanish. It's a crisis of identity that resists being something that it's not, and yet it yearns to be something that it already is.

On the other hand, the assertion that all writing is a political act is not an idea I considered when I began this project. In fact, when I began this work, I didn't think about what I wanted to accomplish (or was accomplishing) by writing these stories. The politically exploited, divisive perspective on the topic of the border didn't interest me, because I've always perceived the border as an extension of my own identity, a part of me I am reluctant to dissect, much less to successfully identify to which side I belong.

The geography of The Valley, then, is relevant and an integral part of the stories' setting, specifically because of the concrete and abstract boundaries that mark the region. In terms of the naturally occurring landmarks, it is the place where the Rio Grande River ends and drains into the Gulf of Mexico. In terms of political structures, it is also a crossroads, a setting which represents the transition between two countries and, therefore, two value systems. But more than a line drawn between two countries, it's a fluid zone where, Mili, my protagonist in "Some Nights It's Scarier Inside," ponders, describing it as "the place where two countries bleed into each other, [and] you just know these things."

With that, I simply developed the stories by siphoning ideas from all I lived and all I knew, or by piecing together fragments of experiences I'd had, or even fictionalizing stories in the news that had impacted me as a kid. The fact that in one way or another they're connected to la frontera is not intentional. Nevertheless, a feature common to the stories' content, I later realized, is the characters' struggle with and within their environment.

I also noticed, furthermore, that the struggles depicted in the work originated from a desire to identify and understand my own preoccupations—my own "emotional residue," to use Gloria Anzaldúa's words in *Borderlands* (25). When I became aware of

that, I asked myself if any of those experiences really merited artistic representation—if they were of enough meaningful quality as to be written. Ultimately, I also asked myself if they were of enough, enduring political value so as to be read now and for generations to come with the same compelling effect. I hope the sections that follow will address those questions.

The Title's Significance

Muralla is the Spanish word for wall, and *La Muralla Stories* more or less translates to "The Wall Stories." We know that people are no strangers to walls. It is a universally understood concept. The Great Wall of China, or the Wailing Wall, or, even in most recent history, the Berlin Wall all serve as proof that walls function to oppress--to divide and exclude in the name of both empire and ideal. The title of the work, therefore, is significant because of its symbolism. In writing this collection of short stories in this place and time, I was guided by an ever-increasing exigence to discuss borders and walls, the physical and metaphorical, the visible and invisible structures that restrict freedom and movement and restrain us from connecting with ourselves and others.

During the process of writing I became aware of the border's effect on the characters. The stories reveal how the characters are influenced, both physically and psychologically, by the border and affected by its internal and external barriers, the various forms of structures that serve to confine their free will. Those effects are hindrances that aren't only inherited but find continuity through constant reinforcement, and continuity depends on conditioning. The narrator in Kafka's "The Great Wall of China," for example, shows us how the concept of the wall was internalized at a tender age and used to advance an empire and an ideal:

> Fifty years before the start of construction it was announced throughout the whole region of China which was to be enclosed within the wall...I still remember very well how as small children who could hardly walk we stood in our teacher's little garden and had to construct a sort of wall out of pebbles...and then [he] scolded us so much for the weakness of our construction. (Kafka).

One of the main effects I wanted the stories to elicit in the reader was precisely to make them reflect on that conditioning and to question its morality.

The Issue With the Tex-Mex Label

In order to continue discussing my stories, however, it is fundamental to define or, at least, describe a key word associated with the border, one loaded with meaning, that is intrinsic to the culture represented in *La Muralla Stories*: Tex-Mex. In the opening lines of "Notes on 'Camp,'" Susan Sontag writes, "Many things in the world have not been named; and many things, even if they have been named, have never been described." Sontag's well-known essay describes Camp, an artistic approach to film, music, and fashion that became popular in the 70s. Although "Notes on 'Camp'" has little to do with my work, those first lines resonated with me when I considered how little is still known and how little has been described about the people of the Texas-Mexico borderlands. I realized that in order for my readers to understand the culture depicted in my work, it is necessary to clarify misconceptions.

To begin, I researched the origin of the word only to become frustrated by the countless references I found online and in print to food. In its most widespread use, Tex-Mex is a name commonly given to the cuisine of the Texas-Mexico border. According to an exhaustive study on Tex-Mex as a social category, conducted by Dennis Ray Wheaton

and Glenn R. Carroll (two gringo scholars I'd never heard of before), it was the *Oxford English Dictionary* that cited the first-known use of the word in print in an August 11, 1963 *New York Times Magazine* food review (152). Since that time, its narrow connotation hasn't changed much, except that the use of the word has, to a certain extent, popularized the border. Still, the implication, not only in terms of the quality of the cuisine but also as it refers to the culture so named, is that it's a non-authentic version of Mexican—a watered-down, easier-on-the-gringo-sensibility form of the original. Tex-Mex food (or culture), however, is anything but Mexican. As such, the comparison is insulting to Mexicans and/or fans of all things Mexican, especially cuisine. But cuisine isn't all that's associated with the word.

What *is* known is that when it comes to Tex-Mex—the hyphenated word, people know it in generic terms or for its scant references to pop culture. The truth is that Tex-Mex is more than just a cuisine, and unlike Sontag's enumeration of Camp's attributes, no one, at least no one that I know, has detailed the sensibility (to use Sontag's word) that is Tex-Mex. People associate it with fajitas at their favorite Mexican restaurant, or they may associate it with legendary Tejano singer, Selena. They may have even heard of the "Texican rock band," Los Lonely Boys, and their hit song, "Heaven," but other cultural connections are rarely made.

The truth is that Tex-Mex is also more than just another music genre. But what does it really mean for something or someone—cuisine, art, music, or people, to be labeled "Tex-Mex?" For me, the word tells countless untold stories, stories associated with a specific geographical landscape, with people and diaspora, with history and the process of transculturation—a coalescing of cultures, with the native and the foreign, with

tradition and hybridity, with the past and the present, revolution and freedom, death and rebirth.

The Tex-Mex Identity

The issue of Tex-Mex identity is complicated, especially for someone unfamiliar with the cultural situation, so I'll provide the following example: In *Selena*, Gregory Nava's 1997 biographical film about the rise of the aforementioned tragic, Tejano star, her father, Abraham Quintanilla (played by Edward James Olmos), lectures his naïve musician-children over the complexities of being bicultural. "Being Mexican-American is tough," he tells Selena and A.B. "Anglos jump all over you if you don't speak English perfectly. Mexicans jump all over you if you don't speak Spanish perfectly. We got to be twice as perfect as anybody else." Although *Selena* may be an idealized depiction of a not-so-average Mexican-American family, sensationalized for entertainment, the film accurately expresses frustrations familiar to Tex-Mex, frontera communities. Furthermore, the film presents character yearning in response to conflicts with that identity, the longing and not being able to cross over real and implied boundaries and attain a complete sense of being.

Themes

La Muralla Stories recreates the vicissitudes of the lives of people with mixed cultural heritage, but it also explores the deeper meaning of those hardships. In *The Art of Fiction*, John Gardner argues for the importance of that exploration in its application to plot, stating that the function is to "dig out the fundamental meaning of events by organizing the imitation of reality around some primary question or theme suggested by

the character's concern" (176). In other words, it isn't enough to simply organize the events in a logical structure and maintain verisimilitude; good fiction must also incite the reader to question the deeper implications of a story. Following that design, the stories' plots in *La Muralla* are propelled by themes as varied as, incompatible marriages, the dysfunctional family unit, the collateral effects of drug addiction, immigration, domestic violence, sexual abuse, religion, superstition, machismo, and myth. I tried to maintain a consistent focus on the border (or borders), and obviously, where borders exist, structures that demarcate and reinforce them, both physical and social, also exist.

Incompatible Marriages

My work explores characters who question their environment, beliefs, and traditions and, at the same time, struggle for stability in the flexible, albeit complex setting of la frontera. In "Connie and the Hurricane," for instance, Connie and Toño, a young, newlywed couple who are expecting a baby, are in an incompatible marriage. She's the daughter of American-born, migrant-worker parents who value hard work. He's the son of an educated, middle-class family from Matamoros. In an act of rebellion, Connie and Toño eloped, even though both families were opposed to their relationship. Connie's pregnancy complicates matters for Toño, who yearns to continue his university studies and isn't ready to be a father. Toño's hang-ups lead him to drink and abandon Connie, who dreams of one day having her family accept Toño as her husband. Both characters struggle for stability in a setting where they're in constant conflict with themselves, with each other, their families, and even with a hurricane that threatens to destroy their little house, as they await the birth of their first child.

"Interpreter of Maladies," the story titled after Lahiri's collection, presents a lot of similarities to the issues of marriage and tradition that my characters face. Mrs. Das and Mr. Kapasi, are the two principal characters in conflict with themselves and the world around them. Mrs. Das, on one hand, is an Indian-American woman, vacationing with her husband and children in India, where her internal conflict surfaces. Her emotional, moral instability stems from her infidelity which she has managed to conceal from her husband. She is a character consumed by her terrible urge "to throw things away" (Lahiri 65), namely her family and possessions, quite possibly even the traditions imposed upon her by the culture, as implicit in the subtext. Mr. Kapasi, on the other hand, also married, and a traditional, Indian man is hired by the family as their private tour guide. He observes Mrs. Das, who he evaluates as "Indian," and becomes more and more attracted to her as the day wears on. Mrs. Das, however, is American, with her own worldview, and yet, somehow, Mr. Kapasi holds her to a different standard than his own when he discovers they're both in incompatible marriages.

Machisimo

Closely related to the structure of the family and marriages, machismo, is another topic I explore in some of the stories. Some of the situations I chose to depict are inspired by my own, personal experiences and/or memories of events that actually occurred. A story that comes to mind, one that uses a combination of personal anecdote with a fictionalization of an actual news event is "La Tienda Amigo." My purpose was not merely to tell Martha's story and provide information about the actual collapse of the Downtown Brownsville store, but rather to give life to that memory and place the reader within Martha's world and her struggles as a single mother.

Mexican-Americans are no strangers to concepts like machismo. It's an idea common to some of the other works of fiction I mentioned previously. Casares' *Brownsville Stories*, for one, includes characters, like in *La Muralla*, who encounter conflicts with the culture's mental landscape, with machismo. What I mean by this is that they realize oppressive ideas are imposed upon them, and they are forced to decide whether to comply with them silently or actively protest. In the first story of Casares' collection, for example, titled, "Mr. Z," a young boy named Diego experiences a coming of awareness of the macho mentality that surrounds him. Mr. Zamarripa, a local firework stand owner hires the 11-year-old boy to work in his stand selling fireworks during one New Year's Eve season. The job offer is settled between two men—the boy's father and Mr. Zamarripa. While Diego learns the position's duties, he becomes acquainted with the old man's mentality by observing his attitude towards women and those younger and weaker than him.

The Border Within

The situations presented in each piece reflect characters in conflict with themselves and their environments and how they confront each. The aspect of identity, consequently, plays a major role in the construction of their fragmented, collective consciousness—what I refer to as their internal border. Anzaldúa dissects the oppressive phenomenon of the border—the physical and mental frontera—*in Borderlands: The New Mestiza*. In her opening piece, "The Homeland, Aztlán," Anzaldúa states: "A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition"

(25). It is that emotional residue—the remnants of what history left behind, that unconsciously and consciously weighs down the characters.

Directly and indirectly, the border within determines their behavior, how they respond to adversity, how they celebrate, and how they perceive the world. The border baggage they carry within even influences their language. Some of the characters, for example, speak Spanish but aren't Mexican, like Angie in "Past the Checkpoint;" some speak English but aren't American, like John Jankowski in "Therapy." They all have similar ambitions but face different obstacles, and in their own way, each of the characters deal with hardships related to their state of incompleteness. They respond to their frustrations and achievements in unique ways and yearn for stability in their lives.

Purpose

There's no doubt that the border is a politically loaded subject and, especially in this polarizing partisan climate, an object of oppression. My purpose in writing *La Muralla* is to show how characters manifest their yearning in dialogue with that oppression but also with the larger political context. Each story, therefore, is merely a piece of the larger structure, and when they're all put together, they collectively form the mural that tells a story. The idea of walls, boundaries that are both physical and metaphorical, is a common idea in the work and the center that binds the stories. The environment I tried to create transmits a sense of space that, although influenced by two countries, cultures, and languages, is reluctant to embrace national boundaries, linguistic or cultural prescriptivism.

The Border of Politics and Love

It bears worth repeating that the border and its people are what I know and love, and more so than for political motivations, I write about them to better understand both. Referring to the issue of content and the purpose of one's writing, Hemingway once wrote, "Write about what you know and write truly and tell them all where they can place it…Books should be about the people you know, that you love and hate, not about the people you study about" (loc. 1157-58). Hemingway's assertion not only accurately expresses what I was trying to do in *La Muralla Stories*, but also what I look for when I decide what books to read.

To a certain extent, writing about what I know, love, and hate seemed easy. I lived in Brownsville for the first 18 years of my life, moved away, and then went back again a year later. I eventually left my hometown again when I moved to Houston, only to return to the border again, seven years later. This border, here, in El Paso. If there was any clear purpose at the start of my creative process, as contradictory and unrealistic as it may have been, it was to reject the dogma of writing as being political.

Simply put, I chose to write about the Rio Grande Valley (RGV), about Brownsville and Matamoros—the people and places I knew and loved (and still love), the rich culture and traditions I inherited, all of it, in spite of the many negative implications involved in faithfully representing it. I didn't want to exploit the issue of the border, like many politicians and, what Hemingway once described in an interview, the "so-called politically enlisted writers" (31), just to go along with the current political conversation. But the border seems to follow me everywhere I go.

The Border of Literacy

The RGV is made up of four counties, and it is known as one of the poorest regions, having one of the lowest literacy rates, in the country. Those circumstances limit the population from being active participants in recreating their own image. Why is that? Surely the people of South Texas are talented and capable of creativity. I'm also not saying that poverty is the only factor that influences how people develop their reading and writing practices. It's definitely a valid consideration, but there's also a connection between literacy and economics, a relationship further complicated by the aspect of the border.

The attitude with which people of the border approach literature is a reflection of a unique relationship and complication. You'd have to visit The Valley for a few days or live there to sense the general lack of appreciation for the literary arts. The fact that there's one Barnes & Noble store to serve all four counties is just one indication. In "Sponsors of Literacy," an article that discusses how literacy is shaped, Deborah Brandt, English professor and author, examines what she calls literacy sponsorship. Sponsors, she explains, are authority figures in people's memories of literacy learning, such as older relatives, teachers, or influential authors (Brandt 167). When I was still a child, for example, my literacy sponsors were my parents, abuelos, teachers, and a few of my favorite authors.

During my formative years, among family, I was exposed to newspapers, like *The Brownsville Herald* and *El Bravo*, religious books, like *La Santa Biblia* and *My Book of Bible Stories*, and even graphic Mexican comics, like *El Libro Vaquero* (which I technically wasn't supposed to see, since it was in my grandfather's bathroom). At school, of course, I had access to textbooks, magazines for children, like *Highlights*, and library

books from some of my favorite childhood authors, like E.B. White's *Charlotte's Web* or Judy Blume's *Are You There, God? It's Me, Margaret*, and one of my most prized possessions was a paperback dictionary one of my teachers gave me when I was in elementary. Access to encyclopedias or computers was very limited.

While the border and related socioeconomic aspects played a role in limiting my literacy sponsorship, there was also a lack of work--in poetry and fiction--produced by Hispanic authors with which I, as a child, could relate. Where was Sandra Cisneros when I needed her the most? Although that need has since improved, there is still a lack of Latinx representation in all genres of literature, especially in the domain of border fiction and especially by women of color.

The Border of Child Abuse

Alice Miller wrote a book titled, *The Drama of the Gifted Child*, where she explores the link between childhood trauma and adult mental illnesses. Miller identifies a mechanism of manipulation she calls "unconscious manipulation" (21) and how it works in disparate power dynamics, like the relation between a child and a parent. She argues that abused children, in order "to avoid losing the "love" of [their] parents" (20), frequently adapt to a parent's emotional needs by suppressing their own, true selves. The manipulation and its effects work unconsciously:

> Transparent, clear, and reliable, they are easy to manipulate as long as their true self (their emotional world) remains in the cellar of the glass house in which they have to live—sometimes until puberty or until they come to therapy, and very often until they have become parents themselves. (Miller 22)

"Therapy," " Schools Girls," and other stories in *La Muralla* present both the adult and child's perspective as a result of enduring that manipulation. Characters like Lori, the adult protagonist in "Therapy," and Mili, the child protagonist in "School Girls," are victims of abuse by parents who were also victims of abuse—a cycle that's difficult to break.

The Border of Secrecy

Like the characters in *La Muralla Stories*, people who struggle to break free from their disadvantaged condition, I was further motivated to write the stories by a sense of urgency and, in large part, I must admit, out of a state of frustration. For not only is there is a lack of representation of this culture in fiction, but there is also a lack of transparency. Adding to that, there is a tendency to idealize life in the border, to hide its ugly side behind a wall of silence—an internal code—that prevents the people from disclosing and/or acknowledging their misery, dysfunction, or shortcomings from the outside world, as is the case in many cultures, not just for the people of the border.

In a place where family is everything, keeping issues within the family structure is a tradition that is passed on generation after generation. For example, for generations, many Hispanic families living in the RGV, like families in any other part of the world, have silently endured physical, mental and/or sexual abuse or social depravation associated with either alcoholism, drug addiction, mental disorders, or a combination of any of the three. Issues, like unresolved childhood trauma, stemming from sexual abuse, as depicted in "Therapy," are rarely discussed within the family unit, much less in public, either because of fear of being punished for bringing shame upon the family or because of

the fear of being stigmatized by outsiders. The victim goes through life never facing their hurt.

The refusal to face the manipulation or abuse is, what Miller describes, like hiding his or her own, true self in the cellar of a glass house (22). Although that specific side of the human condition isn't popularly depicted by other South Texas writers, like Oscar Casares in *Brownsville Stories*, it must be acknowledged that the family structure, is the ideal cover for all types of dysfunction, including sexual abuse. That type of hidden turmoil, nevertheless, is not exclusive to Hispanic cultures; it is a trauma that is universal to all cultures and socioeconomic backgrounds, as evidenced in Mona Simpson's short story, titled, "Lawns."

"Lawns" is a story is about an unnamed protagonist, a UC Berkley freshman girl who works in her dorm building's mail room as a mail sorter. Narrated in first-person voice, she confesses to us she has a habit of stealing mail and of lying, a manifestation, we later learn, of a deeper, hidden trauma. By the time she's done introducing us to her university world, including how she met her popular, rich boyfriend, Glenn, we know she's hiding a family secret. Her, own businessman-father, it turns out, has been raping her since she was nine. She's conflicted by her own silence for so many years, the shame she's had to endure, and in one revealing section, she reproaches her mother:

> She thinks she's got the answers. She's the one who's a lawyer, she's the one who went back to law school and stayed up late nights studying while she still made our lunch boxes. With gourmet cheese. She's proud of it, she tells you. She loves my dad, I guess. She thinks we're like this great family and she sits there at the dinner table bragging about us, to us. She xeroxed my grade card first quarter with my Chemistry A+ so she's got it in her office and she's got the copy up on the

> refrigerator at home. She's sitting there telling all her friends that and I'm thinking, you don't know it, but I'm not one of you. (Simpson 86)

The protagonist never blames her directly, only presents the attitude her mother uses in public and private to talk about their family. She describes her as, "Ms. anything-wrong-is-your-own-fault. Ms. if-anything-bad-happens-you're-a-fool" (Simpson 86). With a mother like that, who needs enemies? The controlled atmosphere created at home is one that reinforces secrecy and denial, enables the abuse, while encouraging the silence for so long.

Similarly, among Hispanic families, the topics of abuse—sexual, physical, or mental, are considered a taboo that each family unit is responsible for carrying. Since it is shameful and dishonorable to disclose these things, very little information trickles across the barrier of silence. Few are brave enough to speak in public about those issues, fewer still are those that, like Simpson, write about them. Those who do are ostracized or considered traitors or accused of helping to reinforce stereotypes. The reasons for that are varied. Lack of education, or superstition, or ignorance, or an ill-conceived notion of honor, or political-correctness are some of the most pervasive.

The Practice of Freedom in the Border

In "Night in the Brush," I attempt to engage with the idea of the practice of liberty and resistance. The story is somewhat like Simpson's "Lawns," because it's also about a female protagonist, tired of tolerating years of sexual abuse at the hands of her father. Central to the story, the question of where it began is posed, not only where the actual story began (or should begin), but also the origin of the victimization. In other words, where did the system, one that engendered and concealed the abuse, begin? The question

is not really meant to be answered, but rather to engage in that notion of a power structure(s) and the connected nature of such.

Obviously, the structure discussed in the story is that of the family. Within the family, which is a part of the larger, social structure, there exist sub-structures, systems of potential oppression which are impossible to break through unless radical (life and death) measures are taken. In this case, specifically, the sub-structure, albeit dysfunctional, is that of a father and daughter.

The idea for this story came to me years ago, when I first heard Aerosmith's song, "Janie's Got a Gun." The lyrics tell Janie's story:

> Janie's got a gun/ Her whole world's come undone/ From lookin' straight at the sun/ What did her daddy do?/ What did he put you through?/ They said when Janie was arrested they found him underneath a train/ But man, he had it comin'/ Now that Janie's got a gun she ain't never gonna be the same… (Aerosmith)

The song made me question the system and/or structure that allowed such an injustice—a father to [sexually] abuse his daughter. I was, of course, disturbed at the thought of a daughter killing her father, but much more disturbed at the thought of a father raping his daughter, and even still more disturbed when I considered how it had all begun. Janie's story, according to the song, says: "Tell me now it's untrue/What did her daddy do?/He jacked a little bitty baby/The man has got to be insane" (Aerosmith). Janie's abuse started when she was just a child, like it did for the central character in "Lawns," but Janie's father, as the song goes, was apparently under a spell, and nobody believed Janie, so she exercised her liberty in search of justice and her freedom. In doing so, however, she breaks out of one system, only to enter another one—the penal system, since we know by the lyrics that she's arrested.

Similarly, in "Night in the Brush," the unnamed protagonist is seventeen years old when she decides to end her father's abuse. She is at a point where in her mind, he is no longer her father, but a supernatural being—a demon. Because how could a father ever do something like that to his own daughter? In Aerosmith's song, after all, Janie's poor father was also the victim of a spell, right? In "Night in the Brush," on the other hand, the father is a "victim" of the spell of drug addiction, but the daughter decides to break the spell, after years of enduring his abuse. A deep, inner voice in her mind—the voice of survival encourages her. She realizes that she has no other choice, but to fight for her life. At that point, the story flashes back to a scene in her childhood. She remembers the power she once felt, years before, when recreationally shooting her father's gun, the same gun with which her life will be threatened years later.

The story is structured using analepses and narrated using interior monologue. The protagonist's consciousness is presented as she goes back and forth in the temporal axis in response to what she's narrating. Italics are used to represent her interior voice or conversations she recalls, while dialogue is presented conventionally using quotations. Ellipses are used to indicate temporal shifts.

Poetics

My work presents situations which are authentic and not exaggerated, so that the reader may connect with them through the appeal to pathos. Because of the mixture of emotions the stories may elicit, I was careful to avoid sentimentality or political correctness. The intention was not to bash the Mexican-American people of the RGV, but to present a culture which still, today remains largely misunderstood and rarely talked about.

Through the short story form, I wanted my audience to become familiar with the unfamiliar (if applicable) and, at the same time, to recognize something similar within themselves or their culture. Of the form and how it works, Gardner says, "the short story moves to an "epiphany," as Joyce said—in other words to a climactic moment of recognition or understanding on the part of the central character or, at least, the reader—achieving its effect by fully justifying, through authenticating background, its climactic event or moment" (183).

That sensibility propelled what I have previously described as a process of exploration of identity. I was driven by a sense of yearning to embrace my, own Tex-Mex heritage but at the same time by a sense of frustration as I struggled to understand the liminal space, both physical and mental, that is the Texas-Mexico border. The sentiments that struggle for identity evokes are echoed in various works. As a Texan with Mexican heritage, those frustrations are all too familiar. I'm American, but I'm also Mexican. Should I speak English or Spanish? How do I shake off being labeled a "pocha?"

Although it is my goal to produce distinguished writing of literary value, my work isn't written for professors or literary critics. It's written for a general audience and doesn't require either erudition of fiction techniques or of schools of literary criticism. I believe that texts are like people, and when two people meet for the first time, they must overcome the obstacle of unfamiliarity in order to connect, and when pretension is involved, it discourages further interest.

The writing has to be free to say what it wants to say, and I try to fulfill that by relying on simplicity, precision, and authenticity. James argues that ways in which [fiction] succeeds in being interesting are countless and "as various as the temperament of man, and they are successful in proportion as they reveal a particular mind, different

from others" (4). It is my hope that my work will be accessible to anyone who can read, regardless of their nationality, race, cultural background, or socioeconomic status. When my readers read my texts, I would like them to see a lasting reflection of themselves, and, in finding that reflection, that they feel a sense of relevance and validation.

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Connie and the Hurricane

It was still morning, that summer, when Connie looked at her wristwatch and peered out through a hole on the foiled window pane. Outside, the barrio looked grey and sleepy. She stared across the driveway at her overgrown garden and at Toño's Chevy parked outside. The curled, brown leaves swept over the car's hood then down toward the black-stained, cracked concrete, rose in upward spirals, as if in play, only to fall again onto the spots of caked motor oil and the fallen, rotting peaches. The wind shook her peach tree, caused its branches, heavy with the ripened fruit, to tremble—an ominous reminder of the approaching storm brewing in the Gulf of Mexico.

Somewhere down Bates Street, a neighbor hammered plywood over windows. The banging echoed off the walls of Connie's house. When she heard it, the sound prompted her to inspect her own windows from inside. She frowned. Most were covered with aluminum foil. Only some were partially boarded from the outside with 2x4s and moldy plywood pieces, remnants of previous hurricanes. Toño did his best, Connie supposed. But she could almost bet he was the only husband in the barrio who'd already stopped working. Pinche Toño. Newlyweds with zero preparation for a category 3 hurricane. "Where are you?" she whispered. Connie couldn't wait. She grabbed her purse and left the house.

In the barrio, people rarely evacuate during a hurricane. They stay with their houses. Few may have the means to buy fresh plywood for their doors and windows, so they use whatever old, wooden boards they have lying around their backyards or their sheds. Otherwise, they ask their neighbors or relatives to donate their leftovers. Some people duct-tape their glass panes or move the furniture so it covers the windows from

the inside. The more conscientious neighbors walk all around their tidy yards, collecting trash blown onto their property by the wind and securing anything they consider a potential projectile. Maybe they do it out of consideration for those who can't afford the boarded windows. Or maybe they just do it out of concern for their own property. It's hard to tell.

"Toño!" Connie walked into the quiet house. The floor creaked as she walked to the kitchen where the window above the sink let in the sparse light of the grey sky outside, the yellow walls dimmed to an olive color. She'd returned from buying kerosene for her oil lamps at the gas station on International Boulevard. It was her first hurricane alone—without her parents.

There'd be power outages for sure, she thought, and looked up at the top of the kitchen cabinet, climbed on a chair to reach the three greasy oil lamps. One by one, she set them down gently on the table.

Connie smiled when she remembered that her mother-in-law gave her the antique lamps when she and Toño first moved into the house. Mamá Lupita had prefaced the gift with a brief anecdote: "When I was still a señorita, studying at the university," she'd begun, "Mama Rosaura, my husband's mom, gave these to me. She said that one day, I'd need them for tough times. But I think that was her way of preparing me to accept her son's marriage proposal." She'd smiled and winked at Connie.

Their glass chimneys were black and dusty from previous hurricane seasons—the seasons before Connie owned them, and she'd never used them before, so she carefully inspected all the parts before filling their fonts with kerosene. Connie prepared the lamps, gently turning the metal knob back and forth on one of them to check if the wick was still good. She hardly noticed when Toño walked into the kitchen.

“What are you doing with those?" she heard him ask, more to ridicule her than to know. "Did you remember to buy cold watermelon?”

“I tried. The fruit stand ran out. And they’d already shut down the coolers." She looked at her lamps. "Where were you?"

“Beto picked me up. We tried to get sandbags."

She looked up at him and asked, "Dressed like that?"

"Like what? I always dress like this." He opened the fridge. "And the six-pack?”

“I didn’t have enough money. I had to fill these lamps.” She wiped the glass font with a cloth.

“You didn't need all that kerosene." Toño looked at the red gallon tin can next to the lamps.

“I’m not even sure this'll be enough!”

"We have flashlights, too." He rolled his eyes. "We don't need those.”

"What do you know?" Connie said under her breath and continued fidgeting with the lamps.

“And you knew I wanted a beer.”

“There’s a hurricane coming. You really think it's time to get drunk?”

“Cálmate. Who's getting drunk? Just thought I'd take it easy.”

“But you hardly worked. It’s barely noon. Are you going to finish boarding all the windows?” Connie signaled toward the windows with her hand.

“I did all I could with the boards I had. I’m tired.” Toño walked over to the couch and plopped down next to an unzipped duffle bag. Connie's gown, slippers, and a set of baby clothes spilled out of it. He didn't react.

“Tired of what?" Connie marched over to the bag and began collecting the clothes from the floor, smoothing out the baby onesie. That?" She pointed to the unboarded windows. "Look at this house! Look at us. We’re not prepared, Antonio. We'll be in trouble if the wind blows a little stronger. The windows will break!”

“Can you stop screaming, Consuelo?" Toño stood up and rubbed his forehead. "At least we have a house and my daddy didn't throw our asses out on the street." He paced the floor.

“Yes, I know, I know." Connie looked up, as if talking to a higher power in the ceiling. "He gave you this house, but your house needs a lot of repairs. Repairs you knew it needed and never took care of."

"How could I?" He acted surprised. "I was taking exams. What do you want? Me to fail?"

"Your studies can't help us. A hurricane's coming," she went on, stating the obvious, "and you think everything'll be just fine!”

“Stop bashing me, Connie.”

“If I didn’t bash you, nothing would get done. Mira!” Connie walked toward the foiled window and looked through the hole. “Look out there at them. All working hard. Their houses look ready. And they’re still out there! And you? You’re always satisfied with the least! Huevon!”

“Don't call me names, Connie?” He pointed at her.

“It’s the truth.”

“¿Sabes que? Ya valió. I’m leaving.”

“Where are you going?" She put her hands on her hips. "You can’t leave, Toño!”

“Why not? You’re always complaining. Nothing’s ever good enough for you. Later.” He turned around and started for the door.

“No te vayas, Toño." She followed him and grabbed his shoulder. "What if I need you to drive me to the hospital?”

He shrugged her off. “Call your mother. I'm lazy and my studies can't help us, remember?”

Connie saw Toño grab the keys from the nail on the wall. The door screen slammed behind him. She was sure he'd drive off in his Chevy. He'd be gone for hours.

“Pendejo!" she heard herself scream. "She’s not my husband!You are! She warned me about you. I should’ve listened to her.”

He turned around and walked up to the door screen. “It’s not my fault you got pregnant."

“Toño, look at me! I’m talking to you!” She spoke to him through the wire mesh screen, softening her trembling voice, hoping to persuade him to stay, but now he looked too angry to care.

“You can’t do anything right, can you, Connie?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” She frowned in disbelief, because she hadn't expected him to say that.

“You told me you were on the pill.”

“I was. I promise.” She began crying.

“I wanted to finish college.” Toño muttered and looked down at his feet.

“What?”

“Forget it. I'm getting beer. I'll be back.” He walked toward his Chevy.

Connie watched in disbelief as he sped away down the street. She grabbed one of the lamps and threw it at the door. The glass made a piercing cry as it shattered against the wooden frame. The lamp's kerosene splashed all over the wall and the door screen and pooled on the floor. She looked at the mess of broken pieces, the spilled fluid, like looking at the scene of a crime, and covered her mouth, gasping in disbelief at what she'd done. It was irrevocable, like she'd ended a life. She fell on her knees, holding her nine-month-old belly, tears dripping onto the floor, mixing with the pooled kerosene.

Connie sobbed on the kitchen floor, as if to punish herself. She longed to understand where she'd gone wrong. If only she'd listened to her parents. They'd warned her not to continue with Toño.

"He's a fresa mantenido from across! That pretty face will never come out from under his mami's skirt. What can he do? He's never worked a day in his life!" Her mother had never been impressed with Toño.

But Connie would always defend him. "He doesn't need to work. He studies."

The Argüellos were an educated, middle-class family from Matamoros. The kind that Connie's mom always cautioned her about. They would never accept her as their daughter-in-law.

"Even worse. Does he know you dropped out of school?" Her mother wouldn't give up. It's like she'd enjoyed making Connie feel like shit.

"I didn't drop out. You made me. And that doesn't matter to him, anyway."

"Don't be stupid," her father interjected. "Educated people look for other educated people to marry. Those people didn't spend generations maintaining their status, so one of them would end up with a farm worker's daughter."

"But he loves me, Papi!"

“If you go out with him again, Consuelo, don’t bother coming home.” Those were the last words her mother said the night she ran away with him.

Toño's family made no secret of how they felt about Connie. Her last name was Martinez, and who were the Martinez's? Migrant workers. Nobodies. They were critical of Toño and Connie's relationship from the very beginning. She knew they disapproved of her since the night Toño moved her, against their wishes, into his parent’s house with him, the same night her parents locked Connie out of their house.

“She’s an illiterate pocha! Just look at this note I found under Toño’s bed!" Toño's sister, Lourdes, was always snooping in her brother's room, trying to find something she could use to ridicule Connie. And she'd found it. It was a note Connie had written to Toño on a napkin shortly after they met.

She had just started her first waitressing job, at Brownsville Coffee Shop--a well-known restaurant downtown. Connie looked up from her table and saw a clean-cut group of guys, all wearing button down shirts and ironed pants, come in to the restaurant one morning. They had to be around her age. She overheard them talking in Spanish, laughing while they waited for a table. They were from Matamoros--students at Texas Southmost College, and had stopped for breakfast before going to class. Connie thought the one with curly hair and broad shoulders was the most handsome. There was no way she could wait on them, not with her choppy Spanish, and if she spoke English, they'd think she was being pretentious. To avoid the embarrassment, she begged her friend, Carmen--a lady who'd worked at the cafe since it opened, to take their order. Connie pretended to wait on the table right next to them--an elderly couple finishing their menudo, just so she'd walk in front of him until he noticed her. And he had. She caught him looking at her several times while his friends were busy eating and acknowledged him with a wink. He blew her

a kiss in response, careful that his friends didn't notice. Connie blushed and pretended to dust something off her apron. When their eyes met again, they locked. The whole restaurant disappeared. It was just the two of them, communicating through an invisible force, waves of electrons traveling across the bridge between them, ripples of electricity only they could feel. At least that's what Connie thought, until his friend smacked his arm and told him to eat his food. Their little affair had been interrupted. To forget her embarrassment, she refilled the elderly couple's coffees, even though they'd already left. Other customers, tired of staring at their menus, kept signaling her, and before she was done taking their orders, his group had stood up to leave the restaurant; she noticed in time to see him turn and smile at her before walking out. Connie followed him, staring past the glass doors at the sidewalk until he was gone. "Ay, muchacha," Carmen sighed as she began cleaning the table where they'd sat. She stuffed a napkin in the front pocket of Connie's apron. "He said to read it," she told Connie. The slanted, cursive writing on the unused napkin read:

Me llamo Antonio. Quiero saber que dicen esos ojos de caramelo.

After that, he never went back to the cafe with his friends. At first, he'd walk in alone, just sit and order a coffee, wait for Connie to hand him a note on a napkin. He'd read it right there, write back on the same one, and return during her next shift.

His napkins turned to letters that he'd write before coming in to the cafe, but napkins are all she'd give him in return. He did that until he began going to the cafe right before Connie's shift was over, just so he could talk to her outside of the restaurant.

At first, it was just let me walk you to the bus stop. He'd hold her hand while they walked and hug her before she boarded the bus. She loved feeling his hard dick on her hips.

Later, on the days he drove, she'd offer that he could take her home. They'd park a block away from her house to have French kissing and fingering sessions before saying goodbye.

Before long, it was warm and wet I-love-you-whispers in her ear while fucking her in the back seat of his car. Connie would lie to her parents about having to work longer shifts, including the late-night ones, and they never questioned, because they needed the money. Connie couldn't get enough of him.

Weeks after they'd been seeing each other, Connie met Beto, Toño's younger brother. He was the first person in the Argüello family to know of Connie. Beto was friendly, always smiling, and always respectful. Somehow, she trusted him, thought he accepted her, even though by then, she knew they were socially incompatible.

Once, she'd overheard Beto's friend talking to him about her, asking where Toño had found such a pochita. Beto laughed and said, "¿Quién sabe?" But Connie didn't reproach him. He was immature and, after all, not the most hurtful of Toño's family. She'd overheard other conversations, much more cutting than that, right inside Toño's house.
Like it happened the time she'd crossed the bridge from Brownsville to meet him at his house in Matamoros. When she arrived, the maid asked her to wait in the formal living room, while she ran upstairs to call Toño. Connie could hear Toño's family in another room talking. “Esta bien buena. Too bad she comes from a family of migrant workers.” It was one of his brothers talking. “¡No hables como pocho, hijo!" Connie heard the voice of his father criticize. "Deben buscarse alguien de una familia de nuestra misma clase," he told them. "¿Se va quedar a cenar esa muchacha? Pónla a trabajar en la cocina con tu madre para que aprenda. Que le ayude," she heard him say.

Eventually, Connie officially became his wife, and dealing with Toño's family, especially after they bought their second house in Brownsville, was just half of her struggle.

Her, own family had practically disowned her. Connie wasn't used to being isolated. She hated being estranged from her mother, even more so, because she was about to have a baby and really needed her. All she wanted was for her family to accept Toño and give them their blessing. Why couldn't her parents just accept that he was her husband? But it was hopeless. She knew that he was not welcome, not even for family gatherings. Not for weddings. Not for funerals. Toño had done the unforgivable---stolen Connie from her home. His family knew it, too, and that just made matters worse between them. It was a constant source of conflict for both of them.

But she was in love with him—in love with his face and body and with how he made her feel in bed, and she knew her family would've never given her permission to be with him. That's why she'd agreed to elope. Because of Toño, she'd lost her virginity and her family—the most valuable things in her life. And what had he lost?

Connie reflected on her circumstances as she lay crying on the floor, amidst the broken glass that surrounded her. Somehow, she blamed Toño's outbursts on both of their families. Why can't he just be thankful and happy, she thought to herself? To her, he was lazy, immature, and irresponsible and, in their short time together, hadn't succeeded in fulfilling her image of the ideal, hard-working man.

Connie felt isolated, and the only person she could really turn to was Mamá Lupita, Toño's own mother. Her mother-in-law was always willing to help her organize her house, or to teach her to cook, or to go shopping for groceries with her, but marriage advise was

out of question. It's not like you'd ever get divorced, anyway. So why bring it up? Strong women have to carry their cross to the grave.

After a long cry, she stood and took inventory of the damage. She swept up the broken glass and walked around the house, room by room, looking in cupboards and drawers, like she'd lost something she'd never find. The house was stuffy and hot. Most of the windows were covered either with plywood pieces or other boards or foil in preparation for the storm. Only the kitchen window pane, which Toño hadn't finished, had a duct tape X on it.

The duffle bag, now zippered, waited undisturbed on the couch in the next room. The sound of her black GE radio resonated throughout the small, two-bedroom house. It was broadcasting warnings for areas along the Lower Rio Grande Valley that were beginning to flood. The man on the radio announced that the storm's eye was close to making landfall north of Tampico, Mexico, but the force of its bands was already being felt in deep South Texas.

While the wind shook the ash trees in her backyard, Connie crawled into bed and began reading her Bible. Toño hadn't returned since noon and she thought he would be home any minute. When a loud crack outside made the power go out, she lit the two kerosene lamps so she could continue reading. There was nothing else to do now. The heavy rain slapped against the plywood that protected her windows. That was the last sound she heard before finally drifting to sleep.

A pain like a lightning bolt breaking her hips and a warm gush of water between her legs woke Connie. That's how she discovered he still hadn't returned. "Antonio! Antonio!" She cried and screamed out his name from her bed. But the number of lightning

flashes increased, became more intense, so she reached for the phone on the nightstand next to her bed.

It was Mamá Lupita who Connie called on the phone for help when she realized he wasn't coming back. Somehow, her suegra rushed over from her house on the other side of town to take Connie to the hospital.

“The patient’s name, Miss?” Connie heard the clerk ask Mamá Lupita.

“Consuelo Martinez Argüello," Mama Lupita responded, fanning Connie who was sitting on a stretcher.

Her knees, slightly bent, trembled. Each new moan caused her legs to spread apart in discomfort. “This will be her first baby.” Connie heard Mamá Lupita talking to the nurse.

“Where is he?” Connie cried outloud, looking through the windows in hopes of seeing headlights in the darkness. But the rain poured over the glass in torrents and only the intermittent flashes of lightning illuminated the darkness in surges.

“Ya, Mija. Don’t cry. I’ll be right here by your side,” Mama Lupita reassured Connie. She fanned her head with a magazine.

Connie lay on the stretcher as the nurses rolled it through the corridors, rushing her to the labor and delivery unit. They’d said she was ready to deliver her baby.

“You’re lucky the main road to the hospital wasn’t flooded." The nurse spoke to Mamá Lupita.

“The one that leads to the emergency room was,” Mama Lupita responded. “That’s why we came in through the main entrance. It took us almost half an hour just to circle around. That’s when she really started screaming.”

“I heard. They’re having to bring in stranded patients from other flooded areas in buses,” the nurse said.

Connie was finally rolled into a labor and delivery bay. She was the only patient there.

“I don’t know how you made it here just in time. I can already feel the head,” the nurse said to Mamá Lupita while she examined Connie with her gloved hand.

“Pobrecita," Mamá Lupita said. "She kept telling me that she needed to push, but I told her not to. They live across town in El Muro, you know. There was a lot of debris and fallen trees blocking the roads. It took us about an hour just to get here. The wind is so strong, I couldn’t even close my car doors when we got to the main entrance. I just left it there, in the entryway. I’ll have to go back to check on it later.”

“Why isn’t he here, Suegra? Our first baby, and he’s not even here,” Connie sobbed, looking at Mamá Lupita.

“Maybe his car got stuck in the water somewhere. But I’m here, Connie. You’re not alone, Mamasita.”

“Mrs. Consuelo, please try to think of your baby now,” the nurse advised Connie.

“It hurts! Ay, Dios!” Connie screamed and writhed with each new contraction.

“Ya, Mija, the doctor will be here any moment now,” Mama Lupita comforted her.

The doctor burst in without introducing himself. Somehow, Mamá Lupita new it was him.

“Ya vez! He’s here, Connie!”

“Nurse, I need size seven and a half surgical gloves, not eight,” he said with the palms of his hands in front of him. He wore a green surgical gown and cap and was ready to examine Connie’s progress.

"I know, sir. We're out of your size. I'm sorry," the nurse explained.

"Don't be sorry. What is this? A third world country? Order more!" he told her.

"Yes, Dr. Jones."

He began examining Connie when a thunderclap shook the entire hospital, causing the lights to flash.

"Now what?" Dr. Jones asked, looking up at the ceiling, as the lights flickered. His voice sounded frustrated. The entire hospital seemed to gasp in shock when all the power was lost.

"The generator should kick in, Sir. I'll look for the flashlight." One of the nurses spoke in the darkness.

"I'm not waiting on any generators. This baby is ready to be born!" Dr. Jones announced. "Do you hear me, young lady? You're ready to start pushing. Follow my directions. But don't start until I say," Connie heard him instruct.

"I can't stop! I need to push hard! I need to push now!"

"Okay. Here we go, now. Easy does it," Dr. Jones said.

"Me duele! It burns, it burns, it burns!"

"Give me a big push, Consuelo. It's going to burn even more now. You have very little water left."

"I can't do this! Oh, God. I can't do this! Ooouuuuch!" Connie's voice shrieked in the sterile darkness.

"Nurse, call the OR. Alert them of a possible STAT C-Section," Dr. Jones' voice dictated in the dark room.

"Yes, Sir."

“Don’t push so hard on the next contraction. Blow out small, quick breaths through your mouth. Like you're trying to blow out a lot of little candles. This is the hardest part,” Connie heard her nurse say.

“This is your last chance, Consuelo. If you can’t push this baby out, we’re wheeling you to the operating room. You’ve lost a lot of blood. I have no way of knowing how the baby’s doing,” the doctor declared.

“Ya mero, Mijita. You’re almost done, Connie.” Mamá Lupita’s compassionate voice assured Connie from somewhere near the head of the bed. “Please don’t give up. You can do this.”

“The head is out, Mommy,” Dr. Jones said, looking up as the lights began to flicker.

“Thank God the current is flowing,” the nurse rejoiced.

“Just another little push, young lady, and I’ll give you your little hurricane miracle,” Dr. Jones said. “Have you thought of a name yet?”

“Ou, ou, ouch! No, no, no.”

“Well, you’ll have to think of a pretty name,” he said while suctioning the baby’s nose and mouth, “because you have a beautiful baby girl!”

All in the newly illuminated room smiled at the sound of the baby’s vibrating, siren cry.

“Nurse, what’s the time?” Dr. Jones asked.

"12:01 am, sir."

"How about that? We made it to a new day."

The nurses gently placed the gurgling baby on Connie’s chest, while the doctor finished delivering the placenta. Connie looked at her baby, then out of the window.

Outside, the rain had stopped. The empty parking lot's light poles shook with every wind gust.

"Milagros Anastasia Argüello. That's what I'll name her," she said out loud, her sweat-soaked head turning toward the sound of a reluctant knock on the door.

School Girls

Mili walked to and from school every day with her little sister, Lola. They lived eight blocks away from Washington Elementary. She was in charge of keeping her safe, especially when their mother was at work and their father was sleeping.

Most of the time, their parents only had one working car, and it was never the same one. Once in a while, they'd have another really nice one that their father would bring home, out of no where, it seems. But they never kept the nicer ones for too long.

One time it was a Cadillac DeVille. It wasn't brand new, but it had soft carpet inside and blue leather seats you could move forward or backward or up or down with the buttons on the side. It even had a CB radio her father used to talk to other people when he took them cruising. But when the car was parked in the driveway, and he was passed out on the couch, Mili would sneak in without telling anyone, sit behind the wheel, just like her father would do, and scan through the channels, until she found someone to talk to on number 19:

BREAKER ONE NINE, BREAKER ONE NINE.

It took Mili a few days to learn the language of the radio. She'd sit silently and just listen to the voices. It felt almost like eavesdropping on a private conversation in someone's mind: Where they were going. What they were eating. If it was raining on the road. If Smokey was in the bush. It was hard to understand sometimes, but the more she listened, the more she'd learn. You could say anything, and she couldn't wait to let the voice of her mind speak. When she got the hang of it, the car was gone. She never got the chance to send her message through the airwaves.

Anyway, their other car, whatever one it was at the time, was almost always missing something or broken. Not broken like it wouldn't drive, but broken like something was damaged.

Like one year they had a junk car. That's what Mili called it. She didn't want to be seen in it. It was embarrassing, smashed in from the driver's side, with a broken light in the back. Either way, that was the car their mother took to work on weekdays, and since she left before the girls woke up, they had to walk to and from school.

Mili hated that junk-car more than anything, because it made her sad. It reminded her of a broken person, like her dad. Someone who doesn't work like they should but keeps going, even if they hadn't been fixed. But not only that. The windows, old and dingy, took a lot of strength to roll down, and with no AC to cool the inside, it was a torture driving in it.

On quiet Sunday mornings, on their way to church, Mili would put her chin on the door's open window and feel the moist air on her cheeks and hair. As her mother drove, she'd look into the well-kept homes along St. Charles Street. From inside of that musty, metal box her wondering eyes reeled from left to right as she imagined the scenes inside the houses, just like she was watching a movie. Mili just knew that those homes were so much better than hers. She knew that inside those homes fathers wouldn't break through doors and take things away to sell them. Inside, the house was clean and complete. You could just tell. Everything outside was in one piece, so it must be the same inside. She'd made up a little prayer for when they drove through there---her favorite section of the city:

Dear God

for the love of our family

find us a place where we can be

happy and safe for all eternity

At school, she'd written God a similar note. But that one always stayed folded inside her backpack.

During their walks home from school the junk-car was the last thing on her mind. The girls had an after-school routine that Mili had started.

First, they'd meet at the school gate right after the bell rang. They'd walk to H-E-B and buy a snack. Then, they'd go inside Texas Commerce Bank to drink cold water from the fountain. Finally, they'd stop at the concrete walls of a building to write on them with colored chalk Mili had stolen from the school.

At exactly 3 pm, the dismissal bell rang, and all the kids who were walkers--and a lot of them were, headed towards the school's side gate. That's where the girls always met.

"I'm going to buy a nutty wafer this time." Mili stood by the gate looking at Lola. She waived her food stamp in the air as Lola approached her.

"I want a nutty bar and an oatmeal crème cookie," Lola responded, "but I don't want to share my cookie with you, Mili."

"That's okay. You never want to share with me anyway."

Their heavy backpacks hung from their bony frames as they walked, almost ran, towards the first stop. Their rubber-soled shoes felt like slices of cheese melting over the burning concrete pavement. It was so hot, it made the girls walk quicker, breaking every time they found a cool patch of grass to stand on. Mili had secretly made a hole in her white shoes, tinged grey with dirt, where the canvas was glued onto the rubber. She thought that was a smart way to get their mom to buy her a brand new pair.

The buildings that lined the main streets in downtown Brownsville were occupied by an odd assortment of tenants. Mili knew the run-down, shoe repair shop where Mr. Olvera, the sage owner, stood behind his distressed counter to gladly accept new soles in need of repair. There were cafés and furniture stores and dark, smoky bars. Even with her eyes closed, she could always tell when they had walked past the ropa usada doors by the closet smell that lingered on that block. The Kress store sidewalk was always the busiest and sunniest, and the aqua blue letters on the building's boring façade greeted Mili on her way home. She loved to watch the lady at the layaway department send things through the pneumatic mail system. When she thought of that, she remembered the wrinkled note to God in her backpack "Let's go inside to see the tubes, Lola."

"Which tubes?"

"The ones inside Kress. Inside the pipes."

"Oh yeah! Those are neat, Mili! How does the money get inside the tube?" Lola wondered out loud, running behind Mili.

"It probably comes straight from Texas Commerce Bank. I've seen those same tubes there. Let's ask the lady. Come on!"

"Hola, Miss," Mili greeted, as they slowly made their way to the tall service counter where an unamused lady with reading glasses waited. The tag on her blouse read:

CHELO

Her long fingernails were painted red, her hands held together in a clasp. Mili's chimpanzee smile could soften the stoniest of faces.

"Si, niñas. May I help you?" the lady named Chelo acknowledged, looking down on the girls.

“Where do those tubes come from?” Mili asked following with her finger and pointing straight up to the ceiling.

“Where do you think they come from, mija?” Chelo repeated Mili's question, like she didn't understand.

“My sister told me they come straight from the bank.” Lola had a habit of interrupting.

“Well, one thing’s for sure—they don’t come from heaven.”

“Can I please hold your can, miss?” Mili asked.

“Only if you promise not to drop it.”

“Can I hold it, too?” Lola always copied Mili.

The lady named Chelo grabbed the tan-colored cylinder and handed it down to the girls.

“Wow!” Mili’s eyes opened like a blooming flower. “What do you put inside this can?

"Receipts. Layaway forms. Money. Pens, too. Hasn't your mami ever put something on layaway?"

Mili looked up to think and tapped on her chin. "Si, miss. I think she has."

"And when you open it, you get money, too!" Lola blurted.

Chelo looked at Lola, raising one black and pointy eyebrow.

"What else can go inside this can?” Mili continued.

“What would you like to see in it? Candy?” Chelo asked with squinted eyes.

“¡Sí ¡Sí! ¡Sí!” Lola jumped up and down in place.

Chelo stretched out her bony hand and took the can back from Mili. She wrote something on her pad, rolled it up, and inserted the note inside the cylinder. She pushed

it up into the metal pipe where it made a sound that reminded Mili of a vacuum cleaner. It was instantaneously sucked in. They waited without saying a word, and after a few minutes, the pipe's sucking sound started again. The can dropped down from the pipe and bumped the cradle's curved, metal bottom. Chelo handed it to Mili like a magician performing a trick. "Okay. Open it," she instructed, biting her orange-lipsticked lips.

Mili smiled, looking at Lola's face brighten up when she took the two shiny-red lollipops from inside. Lola put the lollipop in front of her eye and looked up at the light through it. "Look, Mili! It looks like one of those lights on top of police cars."

"Muchas gracias, Miss!" Mili's face beamed with satisfaction.

Mili had confirmed that those tubes could help her. She took off her backpack and set it down on the floor. She reached inside and pulled out a folded piece of paper that had been sealed with a staple.

"Do you think that you can send this in your magical can?" she asked.

Chelo wrinkled her eyes like she was looking at the sun when Mili handed her a stapled note.

"What is this, mija? A special request?"

"Yes, Miss. Very special."

"Do you think your wish will come true?" Chelo asked her, raising one brown-painted eyebrow above the rim of her glasses.

"I believe in miracles, Miss."

Before she could finish sliding the capsule's cover, the two girls raced away down the aisle.

Mili stopped to hide behind a column where a fire extinguisher hung. She peeked around it. Chelo's nosy hands were opening the worn-out note. Lola could never know

about it. It was her secret, like the secrets the voice in her mind never got a chance to say through the radio, like her prayer to God in the car every Sunday. Mili had memorized what she'd written:

Dear GOD

please keep Lola SAFE

please make papi stop hitting mami

please make papi stop using drugs

Outside, the downtown streets were baking in the sun. The girls waited at a street corner for the crosswalk light to change. Mili stood behind Lola, looking up at the red hand, warning them not to cross. She held Lola by her backpack straps to keep her from darting into traffic before the white, walking figure would flash.

“Can we hurry, Mili? I’m starving!” Lola squirmed like a worm on a hook.

After the girls finally bought their snacks and cooled off in the air-conditioned grocery store on Elizabeth Street, they continued walking home, devouring their cookies. They'd walked a few blocks, leaving behind the bustle of the downtown streets and sidewalks. Mili looked at Lola as she kicked a rock she'd been following for a block. She was annoyed. A man in white car was driving slowly. His car was so close to the sidewalk, like he was about to pull over and talk to them.

“Lola, whatever you do, don’t look at that man. Just keep walking.” Mili cautioned Lola and looked straight ahead of her. She could see him out of the corner of her eye.

Lola turned to look at him like she'd been instructed to do so. “Who is he, Mili?”

“Lola, I don’t know. A kidnapper probably.” Mili spoke to her between pursed lips. She tried not to pay attention to the slow-moving car.

“I’m scared. Can we walk back and go inside the bank?”

“No, Lola. Just keep walking,” she ordered her. “I wish there was a policeman around,” Mili said under her breath.

“¡Hola, Chulas! School girls, right?" Mili heard the man ask. He was trying to get them to respond. "Can you help me? I’m lost,” he called out to them, leaning over the passenger seat.

Still, Mili wouldn't turn to face him but could see his white car. He had a mustache and wore a white shirt.

“Lola, don’t answer,” Mili instructed. She put one arm around Lola's shoulders and continued walking like they were glued together. Lola's body was stiff, her sweaty head hot against Mili's chest. The man was so close he could reach out and grab them any second.

Lola's face looked up at Mili. “Just answer, Mili," she whined. "Say no.”

But Mili kept quiet until she felt brave enough to face the car.

“Oh no!" she shouted. "He’s getting out of his car! Run, Lola! Run!” Mili screamed. The two girls ran and ran down the sidewalk like jackrabbits escaping from a coyote. Mili ran ahead of Lola only as far as her arm, gripping a tight fist of Lola's blouse, could extend behind her. The entrance of their neighborhood was only two blocks ahead of them. It was so far! Out of breath, Mili let go of Lola. "Stop. Here. Lola." She looked back and all around them. The man's car was nowhere in sight. Lola's shoelaces were untied, so Mili stooped down to tie them.

“Look, Mili. He’s leaving.” Lola pointed down the street.

“Don’t point, stupid!" Mili swatted Lola's hand down. "Do you want him to turn back?”

Mili finally got a good look at the white, rusted station wagon the man was driving. Its wheels screeched as it turned out of an alley a few blocks away.

“Sorry, Mili.” Lola had a frown and wanted to cry.

“I'm sorry for snapping. Don't cry. Let’s just hurry home, Lola.”

Their barrio, La Muralla, was well-known because of the row of distribution warehouses. It was an expanse of cement and glass walls at the entrance of the barrio. The buildings were tall and covered the streets and houses that lay beyond them. There was only one way in and out of La Muralla: a pot-hole damaged street between two of the buildings' graffiti-sprayed walls. Broken glass bottles littered the cracked sidewalk on either side of the street. No one, except the people who lived there, crossed the railroad tracks into the unfamiliar territory beyond.

Mili entered the terrain she knew well with Lola. Their house was only three blocks away now, but her stomach turned sour after they passed the valley of walls. The streets were empty, like a ghost town, the air almost still.

Mili led the way to the corner of their street. Police cars with flashing lights were parked in front of their house.

“Why did you stop, Mili?” Lola bumped into Mili's backpack. She had a habit of looking for the little, yellow flowers that grow between the sidewalk cracks.

“Police?" Mili asked out loud. "What are they doing there?”

Somewhere in the distance, the wailing of sirens, was becoming louder as they approached the house. Beads of sweat on Mili’s forehead grew heavier with every step she took, and she discovered right then that she could ignore her palpitating heart.

“What’s happening, Mili?”

“I don’t know. Hurry, Lola.”

Mili felt like she was a piece of metal being pulled by the force of a magnet. A few steps later, they stood in front of the chain link steel gate that led to her house. The junk car was in the driveway.

Lola's sweaty hands gripped Mili's arm. She walked, Lola glued to her arm, toward the front porch door. A police officer, with a notepad and pen in his front pocket stood tall on their front lawn, while speaking into a two-way radio.

The girls ran up the steps into their house. Mili saw three other police officers and their mother crouched over their dad on the floor. A limp forearm had three needles sticking out of it, but she knew it was him because of the cobra tattoo further up his arm. Lola gasped and covered her ears with the palms of her hands. She ran to the corner and became invisible.

“Antonio! Toño! Wake up. What did you take?” Mami shook one of his hands.

There was no response, so she patted his pale cheeks to try to rouse him. His lips were nearly blue.

“Sir, wake up.” The policeman's voice was deep and loud. “Can you hear me? What drugs are you on?”

He stretched his eyelids up and pointed a flashlight at his eyes.

“Pinpoint pupils.” He looked up at his partner who stood over them.

Mami wouldn't stop crying.

“Ma’am, calm down. The paramedics just arrived,” another policeman announced.

“What drugs has he been using, Ma’am?” The other office continued interrogating.

“I don’t know, but he’s been using them a lot. Check the spoon on the floor. I always see him take it into the bathroom."

Mili ran to the bathroom and looked all over the floor. There was a burnt spoon with a bent handle next to the toilette.

"Do you know where he gets his heroin?" Mili heard one of them ask in the other room.

"No, Officer. I came home from work, after my neighbor called me. She told me that some men had parked in front of the house and were taking our TV set and a bike."

"Do you have any idea who the men were?"

"No, sir. I wasn't here to see them. When I got here, nobody was around. The house was quiet, until I heard him fall down in the bathroom."

The paramedics finally arrived. They laid Mili and Lola's father on the stretcher and rolled him out of the house. Mili watched as Mami followed them, grabbing her purse from the car while they loaded him onto the ambulance. She walked over to Mili and Lola, who sat on the porch trembling and crying.

"Ya, mija. Don't cry. I'm going to the hospital with Papi. Take Lola inside and watch her until I come back," she said to Mili. She hugged and kissed both girls, before climbing into the ambulance that sped off as soon as the doors closed.

Mili ran to the middle of the street and watched the lights of the ambulance until it turned the corner and was out of sight.

"Young Lady," she heard someone say and tap her shoulder. "Do you have someone to stay with?"

Mili's soggy, brown eyes turned to look up at the policeman. He was a tall and slender man with a pale face that reminded her of a slice of sandwich bread. The name-tag on his light blue shirt pocket read: M. REYES.

"Yes," she said to him, "with my sister, Lola."

Some Nights It's Scarier Inside

I'm going to tell you what my room looks like, but you have to promise not to laugh. Actually, it's not really my room. Our house only has two bedrooms, so I have to share it with my seven-year-old sister. Se llama Paulina, but we call her Pau. Mami y Papi sleep in the other one, down the hall from us. And the only room between our bedrooms is the bathroom. We all share it. And when I take a shower, and Papi needs to pee, I don't say anything. I wait for him to finish. When I'm done, I just wrap a towel around me and run to my room like my feet were made of springs. I stand there dripping and look at my brown body on the spotted ropero mirror. There's a crack on it that makes my legs look like they belong to someone else. I look at the reflection for a long time. And always get yelled at for leaving a big charco on the wooden floor. No one knows all the things that happen in my house. Some things just can't be told.

After you read this you'll probably feel better about your own room. Or even feel better about where you live. Or about your family. You'll think, My life isn't so bad, after all. Not that I'm complaining about mine. I'm just embarrassed, because you probably don't have bedroom windows with torn screens, stitched shut with fishing line so the zancudos don't come in. Or live in a beat-up house with a hole on the side that looks like it was stabbed and now its ribcage is showing. I bet you invite your friends over to hang out without worrying about cucarachas flying across the room. Not me, though. I'd die if my friends saw where I live. My school friends I mean. The vecinos don't count, even though they're my friends, too.

I bet if you saw it inside you'd want to leave. Our house is scary, I said to Pau once. Why, Ana? she asked. Pau didn't know what I meant by scary. Not scary like during

Halloween in the neighborhoods where the ricos live. Those houses don't make me feel scared. Actually, I like to go trick-a-treating in the mansions on Palm Boulevard, even though I'm already thirteen. I've seen the front of some of them full of fake spiders and cobwebs in make believe graveyards. One even had one of those demonios made of cement above the front door. A gargoyle. That's what I told my mom it was, but when I described it she said, Que gargoyle, era un demonio! The door was all covered in a plastic picture of a cloudy sky with a moon and bats flying on it. Those decorations must cost a lot of money. What a waste.

From the outside, my house looks like any other wood-frame house in the barrio. But mine's different because it's broken. Everything's incomplete. I mean, things work, but not the way they should. Like the faucet in the shower. It works, but the handle for the hot water is missing. We need pinzas to open it, and sometimes I burn myself when I turn the pinzas too much. And the sofa in our sala smells like mothballs. Every time you sit on its worn cushions, it makes your body sink into it. You shrink and feel like you're carrying something heavy on your back that you can't see. And the walls are greasy and so bare that you hear an echo coming from them. I wish we could escape these walls. But it's not just that. If you stayed around long enough you'd see its shadows and hear it breathing. This old house. It feels like it's alive. In a sad way. You just can't tell why. I wonder what it's seen in all its years of being alive. The years before I was born. I wonder what these wooden floors know. What the corners would say if they could talk. All I'm saying is that it's the kind of house where you feel safer when you leave.

During summer, it gets so hot inside. Even at night. Once, when I was younger, I heard Mami talking to our vecina about the canícula. What's the canícula? I asked her. She told me those were the hottest days of the year. That's what makes it so hot in

Brownsville, she said. But I'm used to it. I get ready for it, too. As soon as school lets out for summer, I move the furniture around in our room. Pau and I slide the bed all the way to the other side of the room so it's right by the open windows. We even use wooden crates, the kind that mangoes come in, to make the bed higher, so it's right at the level of the windows. I like it that way, because I can fall asleep facing the outside, playing with the holes on the screen and not feel scared. At least we get some breeze that way. Even if it's only a poor person's breeze. Maybe it's not the safest way to keep cool. I mean because it's the frontera, and mojaditos always walk by my house, especially at night.

Our house is only two football fields away from the river. The Rio Grande. We walk by there all the time and see the people swim across from the other side. From Matamoros. The other city I love, because my abuela y abuelo live there. On Saturday mornings, we always walk over to visit them, and when we walk back across the puente at dusk, some new people are there trying to cross over, too. As soon as they reach la orilla del rio, they change into dry clothes and run. Sometimes they run behind us, like they're following us. But we just keep walking until we get home. It may sound scary, but not for me. I know they're out there, right outside my house. Anyone can come in through my windows. Any viejo, like Mami says. She thinks someone might watch us at night from the bushes outside. But the only one always watching us is papi. His head peeks into our room at night when everyone's asleep. And sometimes I can't sleep, because I never know when he's right outside the bedroom. I'd rather take my chances with the viejo outside and sleep close to the window.

At night the world changes. It's so quiet that I listen to everything around me. Especially myself. I think of things I ignore during the day. And it scares me. I hear Papi's footsteps in the hallway and think he'll come into the room. So I lie there in bed and make

up nice stories so I can fall asleep. Like when the brisa makes the curtains move back and forth on my face. I tell myself they're hands with magical powers. That they're trying to comfort me so I can sleep, just like a mother's hands. That they love me. In a good way. When they move in to touch my face it means they're putting nice dreams into my head. When they move away from me, it means they're sweeping out all the invisible bad things around me and carrying them out through the screen. That's why the screen is all torn and slashed. Because it's like a vacuum that sucks trash. There's so much of it. That's why it's damaged, I tell myself. My made-up stories usually work. Unless something else happens. Unless the noise I hear comes from some other place, like the hallway.

I remember one night, about two years ago, I heard sounds of muffled voices coming from somewhere in the barrio outside. They sounded like they were coming from the levee nearby. Where the callejón light's glow didn't reach. Where it was darker, but I couldn't say for sure. It was deep in the night. I think I had been sleeping for a while. And it must have been deep, because the voices sounded like they had melted, like waves of tired energy that had traveled across a river of space and reached my ears like they were drowning, fighting to hold on to anything that might save them. Each new wave seemed shorter, more violent, made my breath quicken, I'm sure. I was restless in my bed. Or I was still dreaming, but I slowly came up from the deep until my eyes opened to a sliver, like I was born again. The orange-yellow hue of the callejón light beamed on me, on my thin, white sheets.

Some nights it's scarier inside. Like when I have pesadillas. It happens when I start thinking too much. It feels like I'm in a labyrinth. Un laberinto. Like when Mami yells, Que laberinto se traen? when me and Lola fight. Except this is different because it's in my head and makes me feel like I have no control. It scares me to think that I'll get lost and

find a monster waiting in the center, like it happened to that guy named Theseus in the story Mrs. Santa Ana read in class. I guess that's what nightmares are. Laberintos. You go inside, turning each new corner, until you reach a place where you can't turn your eyes away. Because everything that scares and confuses you is there. And the walls won't let you escape. Everyone's labyrinth is different, I'm sure. I wonder if a monster waits for me in the center of mine. Waits to see what I'll do. It scares me to think about what he looks like. Then my mind says to me, Don't think about it, you can make it stop, just don't think about it too much. I avoid the monster, or I die. But I always live to see another day. That's how it is some nights.

Outside the muffled voices were closer. They sounded clearer. I had sunk back into the deep, but I could still hear them. My eyes were like two marbles. I could feel them moving in every direction behind my eyelids. I was fighting to escape from the prison where the snarling, red-eyed demon forced himself on me. He'd made my body freeze so I couldn't stop him. I couldn't scream or move. But my mind saw it all clearly. It was the only part of me that could fight. A force from another dimension that spoke in silence. In a language that only the demon could hear. In the name of Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ! Go away, it clamored. I felt my lips purse and my nose wrinkle in defiance. I had telepathically commanded my enemy to leave me alone. But that wasn't enough. I wanted to come back up from the deep. To be born again.

I sprang up in bed like a puppet, coughing like I'd been drowning. I looked for Pau toward the foot of the bed. She was there. Sleeping. Galaxies of salty beads glistened on her forehead and nose and upper lip, her breathing was easy. Not like mine. My sweaty head had soaked my pillow. I flipped it before resting my head again to look out my

window. A disoriented June beetle crawled like a turtle across the obstacles on the ragged screen, as if its goal was to reach the height of the light. I flicked if off.

My room was alive with the sounds and smells I loved of Matamoros. They arrived like welcomed guests through my opened window, hung around the bedroom with their color, like papel picado at a fiesta, decorating the invisible dimension of my room. I couldn't see these things, of course. But they were there. As clear as day. Cars that slowly made their way through la cola del puente, just across the Rio Grande, blared their impatient horns in my room. And the aroma of busy corner taco stands feeding their nocturnal clientele had crossed the border undetected, embedded itself in my space. I looked out to admire the fabric of that night. I was wide awake.

My eyes widened at the scene outside my window, when a mass of figures began to appear, pushing forward on the caliche road outside my window. They walked into the light's beam, came from out of the fringes beyond, like they'd been birthed by the night. I followed the onward moving mass with my eyes, tried to tell them apart, count each one, but they seemed glued together, too many to count. Eight. Nine. Ten? No. There were more. Maybe more than 15 mojaditos—one only slightly ahead of the group. All looked straight ahead into the black unknown, avoided the periphery—the house on one side, the brush on the other, like they were horses with blinders. Like during the Charro Days celebrations, when I'd seen the migras' horses, parading down Elizabeth Street with blinders by their eyes. Anteojeras, my abuelo called them. Why? What are anteojeras, I asked? So they don't get spooked, I'd learned. But when the horses worked down by the rio, they never had them. Weren't they spooked then? The mojaditos, with their invisible blinders, walked briskly and nervously quiet in the temporary refuge of the dim-lit callejón.

"Pau? Are you awake?" I whispered, tapping her with my foot. "Pau!"

"What, Ana? Is it la migra?" she mumbled, from the other end of the bed.

"No. There's so many of them! Mira, Pau!" I whispered back.

Not one of them carried a bag, or backpack, or purse, like others had before. At least none that I could see. Had they been robbed? Their clothes looked tired, clung to their dark chests, or stretched across backs, pants sagged on hips, or dragged at the heels over the dusty road, chanclas flopped on feet, some were bright white tennis shoes, others bare on the caliche. I saw at least two kids. Those who walked next to them were women. I could tell by their curvy silhouette, their pony-tailed hair. But mostly there were men. It was the most in one crossing I'd ever seen. Just for those few, fleeting footsteps night revealed all, like timid ghosts suddenly visible in an infrared thermal scanner. They were so close I could almost feel their fear, even if I couldn't see all the faces as they passed in front of my window. I wondered where they came from. Where they were going. Minutes after they disappeared into the darkness of the callejón, far beyond the sight of my window, a cat and her kittens, as silver as the moon, emerged from the cover of the brush. They'd been hiding in wait while the mojaditos passed, now trotted off and escaped in the opposite direction.

I was eleven years old that night, but I knew more things than most other eleven-year-olds. I knew, for instance, the difference between a coyote—the animal, and a coyote—the person that smuggles poor people across the border. When you live in la frontera, steps from the clothes-littered river's edge, from naked people on inner tubes floating across the river, and migra mounted on horseback, from the bridges that connect two worlds, and pedestrians that walk back and forth, and customs' officers, toll booths, pesos, street vendors--the place where two countries bleed into each other, you just know

these things. But some things I didn't know. So I wondered a lot. And that night I wondered if the hurricane fence by my window or my house's broken siding could really separate my world from the world of those people. I closed my eyes. I imagined I was one of them, and fell asleep thinking about that.

When I opened my eyes again, the border patrol's green Ford Bronco was parked right outside my window, in the middle of the caliche road. The headlights beamed in the direction of where the group had walked, but they were gone. The two migra, waist deep in the tall brush that shouldered the callejón, swept their flashlights from side to side. They studied the dewy grass, guided by each flattened tuft, in search of something or someone and didn't stop until they entered the cave-like opening created by a neglected weeping willow across my house. A secret hideout for the barrio kids by day. A place of refuge for the mojaditos by night. Inside, the slender branches cascaded downward, forming a domed ceiling, like in a church. And the trunk, the very center of the hollow space, was the tree's sacred altar. That's where they hid from bandidos who threatened to rob or kill them. But even that sanctuary couldn't always protect them. I knew whoever had sought asylum inside its space would have to surrender. The migra would get their prize.

"¡Inmigración! ¡Salga de ahí!" I heard the two, green-uniforms shout.

A lone traveler emerged from the hollow shelter of the tree's fallen branches, his dark head hung as if in shame. Maybe he was relieved. Each officer held the man by his armpits and led him to the Bronco's hood for frisking. The wetback silently complied. In one hand he held a wrinkled, white plastic bag with what looked like wet clothes. I watched the familiar scene in silence from behind a sliver I'd opened in the curtains. He had probably stopped to change his wet clothes under the tree, I told myself. He got lost.

Maybe he'd broken away from the group on purpose, like so many others had before. Maybe he wanted to go his own way, I thought as I held the curtain down and watched.

When a sudden draft made the edges of the curtains lift, I dropped my head back onto the pillow and squeezed my eyes shut. I was afraid la migra would see me. Afraid of what they might do if they knew I was watching. After a few seconds, I slowly opened my eyes to a squint, and between the curtains' movement, I saw the stranger being loaded into the back of the Bronco. The caliche's dust lifted in the middle of the callejón as it sped off. It was 5 AM. I knew because I looked toward the hallway and saw the kitchen light on where Mami was preparing breakfast, something she did at the same time every day. The smell of her cooking made me hungry, but I was too lazy to get out of bed. I hated that she had to work and leave all day. Why couldn't Papi work? Then I remembered that Bible School would be starting in a few days, and that made me happy.

Piano Lessons

Her name was Kaori Hatta, a Japanese lady Mom hired to be my piano teacher the summer before seventh grade. I never thought I would like her, but one day I changed my mind.

We lived in Houston at the time, and I hated the idea from the start. I didn't like staying home with only Mom during summer, especially on the weekends. That's when she'd get ideas of all kids of stuff to do. Dad would go fishing in Galveston, and me and Mom would stay home.

Piano lessons? They'd never crossed my mind. What I'd really wanted was to learn how to fish or join the swim league, spend the hellish summer outside, splashing around in a urine-clouded pool with other kids, even if it meant not sleeping in, or getting browner than I was already, or having smelly chlorine hair all day, or stabbing my finger with a fishhook.

When Mom told me, I protested, "But why, Mom? I'd rather try out for the swim team. Or even go fishing with Dad."

She ignored me, of course. Because what do kids know? They don't know what they want. Adults know what's best for them.

"She'll be here tomorrow." She smiled and raised her eyebrows, clapping mini-claps, fast, like I'd done something she was so proud of. "Finally, the piano won't just sit there and collect dust!"

I rolled my eyes and walked toward my bedroom, through the living room—a room we never used. Always empty. Designated only to receive guests, in the rare case that we even had guests. Also the room where the piano rested, like a coffin in a mortuary waits for the bereaved, where it was always quiet and somber.

I approached it with the same uneasiness I'd approached my great-grandmother's body at her viewing a year earlier, with curiosity, and I couldn't help but to look at it, to notice all the details down to the gold hardware that held it together. It's black case, like a mirror, shone in front of me. I saw the reflection of a mischievous girl, arms crossed in front of her chest, her long hair held together by a messy ponytail. I lifted the fallboard to expose the keys. KAWAI. The stenciled gold letters were almost too elegant for me to look at.

Above it, on the top, sat a metronome, something that was far more interesting to me. It was old and heavy, just the type of thing my mom liked to buy whenever she went antique shopping. It was a pyramid-like object, black and shiny, heavy and wooden, with a golden winder, like a ballerina music box I had in my bedroom. If I didn't know any better, I would think it was a scale of some sort with Italian words, numbers, and lines on its face. But, of course, I knew what it was. Mom had taught me all about it as soon as she'd brought it home the day she came back from the antique store. "You have to know these things. Everything has a name, just like the parts of a piano." I had listened, even though I pretended I didn't care and was really annoyed. It's like she believed knowing things, like piano parts or metronome parts, would make you a more sophisticated person. Anyway, it reminded me of a pyramid, like I'd once read of in a book about the ancient Mayan city of Tikal, and no one knew that, sometimes, I'd sit in front of the piano, wind up the metronome, and listen to its tick-tocking, like a heart beating, mesmerized by the movement of the pendulum.

To me, the piano was just another piece of useless furniture in that useless room, another adornment Dad bought to satisfy Mom's caprice of having things and knowing things. If she loved knowing things so much, why didn't she take piano lessons?

Then, the day came.

I knew it was her car when I looked out the window at the cul-de-sac below. It was a white Mercedes Benz. She parked directly in front of our two-story house. I stood by the window, biting my nails and peeking through a sliver between the curtains, until I saw her step out of her car.

Fearing I might be seen, I backed away from the window.

After a few seconds, I regained my courage and resumed my spying. She wore patent leather nude pumps, almost the color of her skin, and a navy, knee-length dress, fitted just enough to show her slender figure. A pink paisley-printed scarf, knotted to one side, hung from her neck, and her pale, heart-shaped face was encircled by a crown of short, black hair. It was divided by a precise part right down the center of her head. She looked like a flight attendant. The only difference was that the flight attendant wore a little round hat above her perfectly round bun.

The lady bounced to the other side of her car, like she had rubber balls for feet, and opened the passenger door. She reached in for something I couldn’t see, and before I knew it, she had thrown a grey cloth over her head and body and covered almost all her face with a huge pair of sunglasses. It was very strange to me.

Then, in a similar, hurried way, she bounced to our front door like she couldn't wait anymore. It kind of reminded me of what Mom does when she comes home from the grocery store, when she runs hysterically toward the door, dancing in place with grocery bags hanging from her wrists, cutting off her circulation, while she struggles to put the key in the hole. “I’m about to have an accident in my pants!” She dances and screams but never lets go of the damn bags.

Anyway, the lady didn't have grocery bags or keys in her hands, instead she held a black bag that looked like a suitcase with one hand, while the other hand held together the grey cape over her chest.

The doorbell rang.

I decided I'd wait until I heard conversation in the entry way below before going downstairs to meet her.

"She's very musical, like me," I heard Mom say, as I started walking down the stairs.

"That's very nice," the lady said, bowing. "Will this be her first..."

"Oh," Mom interrupted, "here she is!"

"Hello," I said and shook the lady's hand.

"Well, I'll let you get to know each other, Ms. Hatta," Mom said.

"Just Kaori is fine," she told Mom with a smile of crooked teeth that were almost as grey as the cloth she had used for a cape. Her voice was soft in speaking to Mom, but not soft enough for her r's, which sounded like l's, to go unnoticed. Kaoli, it sounded like to me when she said her name. "Okay, Ms. Kaori," Mom giggled. "I'll be in the next room if you need me."

The first lesson only lasted 30 minutes. It was mostly Kaori talking about my bad posture and my wrists resting "sroppiry," as she described, on the keys. I disliked her using the word sloppy to refer to me in any way. I was determined to straighten my posture and lift my wrists to avoid any more criticism. Before she left, Kaori gave me a sheet of music which I had to practice for one hour every day and a little booklet with my name on it. In it, she placed a sticker with a pink flower right next to the date and told me the pink flower meant I "did good."

Week after week went by, and I protested more and more. “Please don’t make me take piano lessons anymore,” I would beg of Mom. “I don’t like Kaori. She’s mean,” I would say. Mom would just brush off my complaints, saying, “Oh, it’s just her culture. Plus, it’s good for you. You’ll be a stronger girl for it.”

When my nagging continued, she would say, “You know, when I was eleven, like you, I always dreamed of playing the piano. But you know, my family was very poor. We'd go fishing for fun. That's what my parents taught me. Grandma and Grandpa couldn’t afford a piano, much less lessons! And I would’ve been good, too. Real good. I was very musically inclined, you know. I just never had the chance.”

Hearing her say that to me was worse than suffering through a lesson. Everything she said made me feel really sad about Mom. She was clever like that.

I didn’t want to disappoint her or make her feel like I didn’t appreciate "the chance" I'd been given, but I kept hearing Kaori’s voice in my head play over and over again. “You can’t play this?” When she asked questions like that her tone was always full of ridicule. “In my country, little kids younger than you, four-year-olds, can play Chopin with their eyes closed.”

After several lessons of listening to her criticism, her condescension no longer made me feel ashamed, it made me angry. I reached a point where I dreaded the piano lesson. And forget about practicing. I couldn’t even look at the piano in between lessons. I hated it, and I hated her. I wished I could superglue the fallboard shut, so it'd never open again. I decided that the next lesson would be the last, and I knew just what to do.

The night before my lesson, I set everything up while Mom and Dad went for their evening walk around the greenbelt. When I finished, I sat in front of the piano, looking

up at the metronome. I saw my reflection on the piano's black surface. There was no sign of anything.

When Kaori arrived, I sat as straight as I could, put the sheet music in front of me, and began to play the notes, as instructed.

She stood behind me, like a soldier, watching my fingers as I played. Four measures into the piece she stopped me and said, “You didn’t practice.”

I watched closely while Kaori reached over to turn the metronome's winder. I was glad that it was heavy and that she didn't have to pick it up.

The pendulum began swinging.

I knew what she would make me do. She'd pull out the book she had said was for “babies” and make me play scales to the speed of the metronome, for the next 30 minutes, without stopping, like she'd done before.

There was no way she was going to make me hate the metronome. I already hated the piano. The stupid, little notebook. The stickers on it. I even hated her rose-scented perfume. But I refused to hate the metronome.

When she turned to get the practice book out of her bag, I pulled hard on the fishing line I had secretly tied to the metronome that sat ticking on top of the piano.

It fell with an explosive heaviness, striking my right hand and fingers, carelessly resting on the keys. The impact of its fall on the keys and my agonizing, sudden wail shocked our ears, both mine and Kaori’s. The crash made a dissonant boom, so loud and unexpected that it made Kaori raise both arms in shock, the sheets of music flying through the air and falling like feathers to the ground.

Mom wasn’t home that day, so Kaori panicked and called the ambulance.

Kaori was so worried about my swollen hand. She never even investigated the metronome or how it had fallen.

She wrapped me in her grey cloak to stop me from shivering. I remember her holding me in her arms, rocking me back and forth while we waited for the paramedics. I cried into her chest. It smelled like roses. The intensity of the pain finally caused me to faint, and that was the last time I saw her. It was also the day I decided I liked Kaori.

Lechuzas

Doña Licha, the old widow that once lived on my street, is the one who first told me about lechuzas that come out at night. I guess it was supposed to scare me so I'd go home early, but I didn't believe it. I must have been eight when she told the story, and couldn't care less what the old lady had to say. I just wanted to play. I wasn't listening very carefully, either, because the only thing that stood out was the part about how a bruja transforms into an owl and flies over someone to curse them. Un embrujo. That part, if you believe in those things, is enough to scare anyone, I guess, but it didn’t stop us barrio kids from playing in the street past dark.

There was Rosa, Javi, Neto, and me. We’d all play a las escondidas in front of Doña Licha's house. We'd hide between parked cars, exchange salty kisses while we waited to be found. Or we'd go inside the tall laureles that lined her fence. We'd enter our bushy sanctuary, the shaded hollows where we'd disappear to the world. Not a thing could ever escape that compact space, not our secrets, not even our light.

The old widow spent her evenings watering her plants and mostly looking out at the barrio from inside her perch, an old farmhouse raised on piers. I guess she had nothing better to do than to sit and watch the neighbors come and go or sweep the sidewalk in front of their houses. She'd been a widow a long time and lived in her big house all alone.

"Doña Licha's house is so pretty. I wish I had a house like that." Rosa would muse whenever we stopped to look at it. "I wonder how many rooms it has?" Nobody really knew, because no one had ever been inside. All we knew is that she was all alone. Her husband had died a long time ago.

Rumor had it that she'd found him in bed with a puta when they were newly married. So, she'd killed him, buried the body in the yard, and built a porch over it, but Neto, who looked like he had a bone coming out of his neck and was a grade ahead of us in school, said that wasn't true. That his mom said Licha's husband was killed in Matamoros when a pesera ran him over. She had his body cremated and stuffed the ashes in a coffee tin, buried them under the crawl space of her house. I believed it. But Javi and Rosa who were primos, both said it wasn't his ashes she'd buried under the house but money. Lots of it. They'd heard it from their families, who'd heard it from Licha's old neighbors when they first moved in, so I believed that, too. Why wouldn't I? Doña Licha was older than the barrio itself, and anything was possible. My family never liked to talk about her. It was forbidden to ask about Doña Licha and what was buried under her house. Who knows why? She lived right next door to my great-grandmother, and all I knew is that they'd known each other since they were muchachas. People hold untold stories behind their eyes, reflections of worlds where they existed in other times. Especially old people, like her. What I'm trying to say is that she looked like someone who might have done any of those things.

Since Rosa and Javi were cousins, their families lived together in one of the shacks at the end of our street where they were always burning trash. We called that part of the block Las Casitas, because there were ten little, dilapidated houses on a piece of land owned by some gavachos nobody knew.

Rosa's door almost always had a notice glued to it. It was a warning when they hadn't paid their rent. That's why she didn't want me to go over there. It was embarrassing for her, I guess. Either way, I wasn't allowed to hang out there, but I still liked going to Las Casitas even if it was just to call Rosa and Javi.

I'd climb on my dad's old ten-speed and follow the gutter to the end of the block, where there was always cumbias playing from some radio inside one of the casitas. Some of the people living there were from across, and most of them were all very friendly. They did everything outside, too. Like they'd hang their clothes to dry on a lazo, even shared outdoor shower stalls and two toilettes that were always getting clogged. It was pretty crowded between the casitas and always smelled like burnt tortillas and caca, so Rosa and Javi never wanted to play there.

Neto didn't live in Las Casitas and didn't really care where we played. His house was two blocks away, on the other side of the levee. We all knew his dad was in jail. All the barrio palomilla had heard about him. They suspected him of killing his sister's boyfriend, but the story was that he'd done it in self defense. Neto never talked about it, and we knew not to ask him. There was just him and his mom, but she worked evenings, cleaning doctor's offices, so he never wanted to be home alone. He was always riding his bike all around the barrio, and when it was time to go home, nobody had to tell him. He just knew.

I lived at the other end of the block, across the street from Mama Grande's house and catty corner from Doña Licha's. Our house bordered the fenced-off parking lot of The Rio Motel. During summer, some of the older barrio kids would climb the fence, jump over, and go swimming in the motel's pool, or they'd steal ice from the ice-maker. The Rio was the kind of motel where guests rarely stayed all night and police would get called out there at least once a month. I know, because we'd seen it all from our living room window. I guess that's why my parents never liked me playing where they couldn't see me. Rosa, Javi, and Neto knew, so they all just hung around in the street in front of the old widow's house. She'd never had children, so I think it irritated her.

The old lady was sneaky. She'd sit and pretend not to watch us kids from her covered porch, just so we'd get comfortable--forget she was there, and then she could catch us doing mañas, like the time she caught Neto showing me his wee-wee. When it was dark outside, she'd never even turn the light on inside her house, just so we wouldn't see her. But I never fell for it. I always knew the old woman was there, even though I could never see her through the porch’s windows. Those windows. They were a pair of tall circles--taller than Doña Licha, covered with a thick screen darker than the color of night. Black holes. They looked like spying, black eyes that saw everything. Threatened to suck you in if you looked long enough. But I never stared for too long. I wanted her to think I wasn't watching her. Me hacía la loquita. I would wait until I saw the orange glow of her cigarette when she took a drag. The light was my signal. That's how I could tell she was really there.

I was one of those seeing-is-believing kind of kids. I guess that's why I didn't believe in all that hocus-pocus about lechuzas, that is, until the summer I turned ten. I mean, the barrio is a world where anything is possible. It's like a portal to the multiverse, where all types of crazy shit happens. You'd know this, if you lived there. And you see it, if you just stop to look, you actually see it. Like in my ten years, I'd seen mojaditos running away from la pinche migra at all hours of the night, and marijuanos talking to God on street corners, travestis taller than my dad offering blowjobs in callejones, la virgencita growing out of a tree-trunk-altar.

Hell, I'd even seen palomas negras--black moths--the size of my dad's two hands, perched above the front doors of houses. Believe me. Once, it happened to us and the ugly thing wouldn't leave, so my father had to burn it with a torch. Weeks later, the same thing happened to our vecinos. They were a middle-aged couple who lived with their elderly

mother and their single, pregnant daughter. The paloma was glued to the clapboard like wallpaper and was so big you could see it from the street. It was scary. Word of it spread like wildfire through the barrio. Our neighbors had even called Licha over for help. Everyone had followed the old lady to the sidewalk in front of their house and gathered around to see what she'd say. "Someone in this house is going to die," I remember she told the family. Everyone gasped. "You have to burn it while you say a prayer to San Miguel," she advised. Maybe it was just coincidence when their daughter gave birth to a stillborn baby. Who knows?

But I had never seen the creature that Doña Licha, in all her wisdom, had warned about. I had forgotten all about it, too. I guess I should have been looking up more.

When it happened, it was around dusk on a Friday. Me and Rosa went into my great-grandma's old gallinero. We were looking for an empty mayonnaise jar to catch the lightning bugs floating in the twilight air. “Your welita’s going to catch us. I bet she's inside watching us.” Rosa was afraid that my grandma, I call her Wela, would find out we were rummaging through Mama Grande’s old shed. Mama Grande's what I call my great-grandma.

Anyway, the old shed had once been a chicken coop. I guess in her younger years, back in the days when the rail line that ran by her house still existed, Mama Grande made a living by selling her eggs. She would use the passenger train to transport them. At least that's what I had heard. But the day we were inside the gallinero, there was no trace of chickens. It looked more like a shed full of junk. “Ay, Rosa,” I said, standing and staring at everything, “my wela hardly comes here anymore. The house has been empty since Mama Grande left. She's with diosito now.”

Being inside the cuartito made me remember when they took Mama Grande to the nursing home. The whole barrio came out to the street to watch the orderlies help load her into an ambulance van. After that, her house started to change. Wela began emptying all her kitchen cupboards. It took several days, but she and my mom put all her dishes, and everything else no one wanted, into Hygeia milk crates. "Saca todo, mija. Ya no sirve." Wela would tell Mami what to keep and what to dump out. They worked for days, cleaning the house inside, while some señores worked outside, transforming the space into a shed. I'd sit on the backdoor steps and watch them. Sometimes, when Javi and Neto were playing with other boys, Rosa would come and keep me company. I think she knew I was sad.

"Who's going to live there, Mili?"

"No one. It's not a house."

"It looks like one to me."

"No, it doesn't, Rosa. It's too small."

"It's bigger than mine."

Day by day, I sat inside the house, glued to the window that faced the shed, watching Wela and Mami carry the plastic crates into the rickety shack. They'd lined them, like train cars, on the dirt floor, along the rusted aluminum walls the workers had hammered in place of the chicken wire.

When they took her away, I thought it would be temporary, thought Mama Grande would come back. But she never did. She lived in the nursing home for only six months before she died. By that time, her house was dead, too. No one hardly visited anymore. Not even Wela. There was no one to see, I guess. My family had shoved what was once Mama Grande's--everything no one used anymore, into the old cuartito. She was gone,

and her past was packed and moved out of the house forever, forgotten in the shed that had once been her chicken coop. I had mixed feelings about it. Somehow, I felt that Mama Grande was mad at the family--at all of us, including me, for not wanting to keep what she had left behind. But I was just a kid, and what I thought didn't matter, so I just kept quiet.

The truth is that Mama Grande's cuartito did look very much like Rosa's house, except a little bigger. In the daytime, it wasn't dark at all in there. I'd been inside with Mami a few of the times when she'd taken more boxes Wela had given her to put there. Light rays speckled with particles entered through holes in the roof and other spaces in the walls and made it so you could see everything stored inside, even if you didn't pull on the chain to turn the lightbulb on. There was nothing really interesting to see. Just a bunch of things like rusted parts from a Singer sewing machine, an old molino, a cracked porcelain tub filled with clothes on hangars, a wooden fan with missing blades, a dusty loveseat with its straw guts spilling out of a hole, and all the crates lined on the floor. Stuff like that. Everything was full of dust and cobwebs.

But during dusk and at night, it was dark inside the cuartito. And that was a different story. I never had the guts to venture in there alone after the sun went down, but sometimes I would peek inside through a crack between the door jamb and the metal wall. One day I discovered there was something new inside. It was something tall and covered with a cloth. I wanted to see it, but there was no way I was going inside by myself.

When me and Rosa finally went in the day we were looking for the jar, all I really wanted to see was the thing behind the sheet. It was already dark inside. So, I walked over to the chain to turn the light on. I expected to suddenly see everything clearly, but when I yanked on the chain, it was still dark. Click, click, click. Dark. The foco was shattered.

I remember thinking my eyes were broken too, because they began melting everything in front of me, began to see the unseen so that open or closed, I could still sense everything around me. It was a strange feeling, like I was in a different realm where everything had disappeared, even Rosa. That's the best way I can describe it. And I was moved by a force that wasn't my own. I know this, because without the light, I would have run out of there.

I felt my hands pull the sheet off the thing in front of me, not so much out of curiosity, but out of a feeling of duty, like it was something I was meant to do. It was a mirror. A reflection of a whole other world. And just like that, the mirror didn't matter anymore but everything inside it. I looked in--at the reflection before me. Mama Grande's things became bultos, unspecified masses of dark matter that looked like someone was there, shadows crouching then rising in the corners or moving like quicksilver behind me. I could feel them, too--their presence all around me, like light emanating from a candle's flame, photons flowing through the space. I felt scared, thought my mind was playing tricks on me. At least that's what I wanted to believe. But I was stubborn and wanted to investigate, to remain in that realm, to see who or what was there. Not Rosa. She just wanted to get out of there, so she pulled me out, back to the place where she was.

"This place is haunted!" she whispered, like she didn't want anyone to hear her She brushed her face and ams off, like she was full of spiders or something. "¡Apúrate, Mili! What are you staring at?"

My eyes finally adjusted to the darkness. I saw the collection of glass jars in one of the milk crates right below where I was standing.

"¿Qué hacen ahí?" someone outside hollered.

It sounded like Doña Licha's screeching voice. Her house was next door to Mama Grande's, and she'd been in her yarda, watering the plants, like she did every other evening. I should have known she was there, but we never even noticed her. I guess she'd been watching us the whole time, like she was guarding the place. But I was too busy worrying about what was inside the shed to care about what always scared me on the other side of the fence. When I heard her voice, I ripped the first jar I saw from the crate, felt a shock through my hand, like I wasn't supposed to take it. I shrieked but didn't let go of the jar, and me and Rosa ran out of there fast, like we'd seen the devil. I slammed the rickety wooden door behind us. I slammed it hard so the past wouldn't escape, follow me out into the night, and punish me for taking Mama Grande's jar. But I didn't wait to latch the metal hasp. All I heard was the clang behind me and didn't turn around until me and Rosa were far enough away from the cuartito. Only then was I brave enough to look over her shoulder at the door we'd left open.

"Rosa! You forgot to close the latch, scaredy-cat!" I said to her, nearly out of breath.

"I'm not the scaredy-cat. You ran out of there first, Mili. Miedosa."

We were about to start fighting, but out of the corner of my eye, I could see the old lady's figure moving through the tulipanes and shrubs, approaching the braided wire-fence that separated both yards. I wanted to warn Rosa--to tap her shoulder, but I was too scared to talk or move. Doña Licha was dressed in her long, white bata, holding the water-hose in one hand, floating towards us, to where Rosa and I were standing frozen, looking back at the cuartito's opened door. Like we'd done something wrong, unlocked the gate to another realm, liberated a creature, and expected to see something or someone walk out of there. I knew I had to go close the door, to protect Mama Grande's things. Or maybe to

protect us from what was inside. I can't really tell. Whatever it was had to stay inside. And I would have done it if it hadn't been for what we saw coming out of the shed's puerta.

It looked like nothing I'd ever seen, as it emerged out of the darkness: A pale, heart-shaped face with two bottomless, black holes for eyes, two wings, white as the moon, cutting through the air. The creature darted towards us and rose above our heads, made my neck bend back, so I saw it from under its speckled body. It was big, too, about as big as Bibi, my Dalmatian. Its back looked hunched, reminded me of an old woman, and its wings looked like two, feather-draped arms, flapping delicately, silently, gliding across the sky like a comet. It rose higher and higher against the backdrop of the Fresno treetops, dendritic giants that towered black over us all in the twilight.

"¡Maldita seas!" Doña Licha shouted. I thought she was cursing us, but then I noticed she was looking up at the creature.

It was a lechuza.

Everything happened so fast, but I remember Licha spraying it with water as it flew toward our heads. That's when I dropped the jar I was holding. Seven years of mala suerte, like a broken mirror. It shattered to pieces on a stepping stone, the noise making me and Rosa cover our ears. "¡Corran, niñas, corran!" I heard the old woman scream. When the lechuza crossed over the fence and flew toward her house, she chased after it with the hose, like it was a weapon, as if the water was holy. But the plumed creature flew higher and higher, where the spray of the mangera couldn't reach, until it perched its pale body on the highest tip of Doña Licha's roof. There, it made a screeching sound like it was angry, like I'd never heard any creature make before. I don't know why, but hearing the lechuza scared me even more than seeing it, so I ran straight home, my heart thumping in my chest like it wanted to run away. I never even looked back to see if Rosa was still there.

Some things just can't be explained. Like later that night, after my shower, when I was drying my body off. I noticed my right hand, red and swollen, like a water balloon. It felt hot when I touched it, like a sunburn, and there was a brown dot in my skin, the size of a dirt speck, right below the knuckle of my middle finger. I looked at it, sure that I'd been cursed by the lechuza. La mala suerte. Why else would my hand look like that? The horror of it made my body shiver all over, like a leaf in the wind. I wrapped myself in the towel and jumped into bed, without even dressing, without even shutting the light off. I wondered what would happen to me, how long the curse would last. I didn't even dare to tell my mom. All I could think of that night was the mirror in the cuartito, how I'd felt looking into it. I thought of Mama Grande and Doña Licha and the two, black holes on the lechuza's heart-shaped face. My teeth began to chatter, and just before I fell asleep, I remembered how I'd left Rosa standing under the trees. How could I leave Rosa?

The night was strange. I couldn't tell if I was dreaming, but I thought I heard my mother's voice. The smell of rubbing alcohol. Hands all over my body. Heavy blankets burying me. Sweat. Shivers. My teeth knocking on a stick of glass jabbed under my tongue. Mercury rising. A full head of sweaty hair or was it still wet from the shower? A spoonful of sugar and crushed aspirin on my lips. En el nombre sea de Dios.

When morning came, every muscle in my body was sore. My hand was still swollen, but the brown speck was gone. I rolled out of bed and looked out at the barrio through my window. Smoke was rising from Las Casitas, the smell of burning trash in the air. A couple of kids were already playing hopscotch down the street, and my mom and Doña Licha were standing, fists on their hips, talking on the sidewalk in front of Mama Grande's house. I could only see their lips moving. I wanted to go look for Rosa, but I felt too weak to go out. The bedsheets still felt damp when I crawled back into my bed and dozed off.

The slam of the front door screen woke me up a while later.

"Mili!" I heard my mom call as she walked into my room, "how do you feel?" She touched my forehead with the back of her hand.

"Fine." I rubbed my eyes. "Mami, do you be..."

"You're lucky more didn't sting you." She interrupted what I was saying

"More what?"

"Wasps."

"What wasps?" I was confused.

"The one's in the cuartito, mija. Doña Licha just told me you and Rosa..."

"Do you believe in lechuzas?" I didn't let her finish.

"Mili, you know we don't believe in brujeria."

"But Doña Licha said..." I started to say.

"I don't care what Doña Licha said." My mom sounded irritated. "Come stand over here. I'm going to give you a limpia." She held an egg in her hand.

The egg would cleanse me of all the bad. I remember that's what she said. It was hard not to look at her and want to giggle. She had never crossed me with an egg before. When she was done waving it all around me, whispering all those prayers, I somehow felt better. But she made me swallow a spoonful of crushed aspirin with sugar, anyway.

It was almost lunch time when I finally stepped out of the house in my pajamas and flip flops. Outside, the barrio smelled like someone's mom was making sopa de fideos. I stood on the porch to watch Javi and Neto who'd been playing in the middle of the street, throwing football passes at each other. One of the passes went long and Neto jumped up to catch it, but it went over his hands and landed in our yard. I jumped off the porch onto the grass, still wet from being watered, picked up the grassy football and handed it to Neto

over the fence. Even though his skin was brown, his cheeks were pink, the peach fuzz above his lips wet and dark. "What's wrong? Did you get stung, too?" he asked. I looked at Javi, who was clapping his hands in the street, ready to catch the ball.

"Where's Rosa?" I asked.

"Javi said she's at home in bed."

"Why? What's wrong with her?"

"Weren't you with her?" Neto sounded confused.

"Yesterday I was. Not today."

"I don't know. He just said she was stung by wasps. Six of them. One even got her eye."

"I didn't see any." I looked down at my hand, still pink and fat.

"Come out tonight. Let's play hide and seek," Neto said and ran back to the street.

I sat on my front door steps, hugging my knees, watching them pass the ball, but I was really thinking of Rosa, imagining how fat her eye must be. I watched as a Chevy Caprice came rolling down the street toward Neto and Javi. They moved to the sidewalk to let it pass, but it didn't. The car stopped right in front of Licha's house and honked. I stood up and saw it was her nephew, the one who picked her up and drove her to run errands every Saturday. The old widow stepped out of her house in a purple dress, her black purse hung from her wrist while she turned the key to lock her door. The tinted glasses she wore made her eyes look even darker than they were. She walked around to the passenger side, and the last thing I saw was her pointy pumps lift off the street. Rosa never came out to play. The curse must have been stronger for her, I thought.

That night I fell asleep even with the music coming from somewhere down the block. It sounded like a party going on somewhere.

I woke up to a mixture of panicked voices coming through my window. "¡Estiren la mangera!" I heard someone say. I jumped out of bed to look outside. Something was on fire down the block. Flames higher than the neighbor's rooftops rose above the sky, somewhere over in Las Casitas.

I ran out to the porch. My mom was standing in the middle of the street with other neighbors. The smell of smoke rose into my nose. Firetrucks blocked the street. Lights flashed red and white all over the barrio houses and trees. Rosa. Rosa, I thought. "Rosa!" I screamed and ran to mom. "Where's Rosa?" I cried.

"Mili!" My mother put her arms around my head. "She's fine. She's going to be fine. They took her and Doña Licha."

"Is her house on fire?" I covered my eyes. I didn't want to see. "Please tell me it's not. Please! Please! Please!"

"It's not. It's not. I promise. Ya no. They put it out." My mother spoke fast. "Only a tree is on fire now. I promise."

"What do you mean they took her and Licha?" I cried, almost afraid to know the answer.

"Licha saw the fire first and called the fire department as soon as it started. She helped the family get out while they waited for the firetrucks. Everyone got out, but Rosa and Doña Licha breathed some of the smoke. Es todo. They're going to be fine, mija. I saw them. Don't worry. They're going to be fine." She wouldn't let go of me.

La Tienda Amigo

It took Martha some time—9 depressing months—until she finally decided that she couldn't wait for her husband any more. She was too young, and he was serving a life sentence in prison for trafficking cocaine. Why should she suffer, too? She hadn't committed any crime.

The only thing she was guilty of was tolerating his abuse in exchange for the stacks of money. But when they caught him, the feds had seized their house and their cars. Martha had lost almost everything. All she had managed to keep was 25 thousand dollars in cash in a safe at her mom's house and a small duplex they had somehow bought in their daughter's name. That's where she lived with her girls.

Martha was 37-years-old when she finally divorced him. She'd been working downtown in the layaway department of La Tienda Amigo.

Her build was lean and compact. She was a single mom with small tits, a rounded, little pouch for a belly, and strong, straight legs. You could say she was an attractive woman, with her light-brown, shoulder-length hair, eyes that looked like two coins of honey, a prominent nose, and slender lips that she could easily make bigger with the help of red lipstick.

She was a good employee, too. Always on time. Always smiling. You couldn't miss her. She was the first thing you saw when you looked toward the store's rear wall. The raised, service window, like a painting hung high on a wall, framed Martha for all to see. A sign above her read:

LAYAWAYS/PAGOS.

As soon as you entered the crowded store, she was there, high above it all, always sitting behind her elevated counter, where she had full view of the store floor, processing applications.

Customers loved her. Employees loved her. They knew her by name and knew her schedule. Martha, you always look pretty, they would say, or Martha, I brought you a taco, in case you forgot your lunch. Martha, I'm late on a payment and I'm afraid I'll lose my things, some customers would whisper when they approached her counter at the rear of the store. Will I lose the school clothes I set aside for my kids, a lady had once asked? But they knew that they wouldn't; they knew Martha had a good heart and would take their payments, even when they were late, and she wasn't supposed to. What they didn't know is that at home, she was Martha Lopez, single mother of two, little girls, Julie, 11, and Maribel, 6.

Before she made the decision to divorce him, her mother would constantly nag Martha. "I told you not to marry that good-for-nothing," she'd fume. "He's a drunk. He beats you. He doesn't like to work. That man is exactly where he deserves to be." She almost enjoyed saying it, too.

When she finally accepted that she could never be with him again, she started a new life as a single mom and worked tirelessly to make ends meet.

Ever since the divorce had been finalized, Steve, the married store manager had been more lively and talkative with her. "Hi, Martha." He would wink at her. "Any plans for the weekend?" He would smile a sleazy smile at her from one of the aisles, especially when she wore dresses, nothing like when he first hired her, before he knew her husband was in prison.

Back then, she was more reserved, and he didn't dare flirt with her. She preferred it that way.

But the 52-year-old sandbag in a tie was not the prospect she was hoping for. Especially not now that she was single. Not because of his age or his looks. With the right income, anything can be overlooked, but a married man with children, on a $25,000 yearly salary, is not what she had in mind when she puckered her lips in front of the mirror to apply her lipstick every morning.

On a Thursday, the mid-day sky above Elizabeth Street was mostly grey. Drops of drizzle had started to fall on the sidewalk and on Martha's shoes as she walked. She looked at her reflection in the store-front windows as she rushed past them on her way to work, listening to the echo of her clopping heels on the concrete. The sound bounced off the walls, and awnings, and cars parked in front of the buildings.

By the time she reached the front entrance of La Tienda Amigo, heavy dark clouds had moved over the downtown area. Shit, I'm late for work, she thought.

Lucky for her, Steve was out for lunch when she clocked in. A stack of pink contracts waited for Martha on her desk, as if to speak to her on Steve's behalf: You're late, and we know it, they said to her.

She began working as fast as she could, processing each one like a machine, sending the tickets through the pneumatic tube to the storehouse upstairs, where the bins were kept with each customer's merchandise.

Five pairs of boys' jeans. Three San Marcos blankets. Two pairs of girls' jelly sandals, one in clear glitter color and one in pink. A set of pots and pans. Two GE oscillating, standing fans. A three-piece curtain set. A black ladies' coat. Blouses. Pillows. Dish sets. Crockpots. Dolls. Poison chalk for roaches. Mouse traps.

She looked up and noticed the store began crowding, so much that she couldn't even look out onto the street. She picked up the phone and called the front cash register. "What's going on?" she asked. "Is it raining?"

A thunderclap caused the store lights to flicker before going out.

Screams.

And then darkness.

Martha saw flashes of lights and thought she stood up from her desk, at least her body felt like it had. I paid for the life insurance policy last month, she said to herself. The girls will be out of school in a few minutes. I think tonight I'll make chicken with rice. That's their favorite. The light bill. That's why. I didn't pay it.

Then, the lights went out.

Martha's eyes blinked softly, until she could fully open one. In the silence and darkness, under the weight of concrete slabs, a warm bead of blood ran across her forehead and dripped, like a coin tossed into a fountain, onto a growing, black pool by her open eye. She could hardly breath, but the smell was unmistakable.

Here I am, Steve, she thought laughing, now you can take me out this weekend. Now you can do whatever you want with me. Look up my skirt. My legs are wide open. Take one with you. Brush yourself on my back. I can't move anyway. I can't refuse. I bet you won't try to kiss me. I'll spit my teeth out at you. Teeth and concrete. Urine. I shitted my panties.

The life insurance will pay for my girls.

The life insurance will pay for the light.

Life insurance will pay.

Life insurance.

Life.

A firefighter's sweaty face looked down at her. Above him it was night. He wore a helmet with a flashlight attached to it. The last thing she saw was the light go out.

The Job Interview

The night my father died, my parents were trying to settle their differences. They'd been fighting about money a lot and needed time alone to talk, so they left me and Valentina, my younger sister, at my Tia Gracie and Tio Pete's big house. We planned to spend the night there with the rest of our primos, but when the phone rang just after midnight, the sleepover ended.

Not that I was sleeping. None of us were. Well, maybe only los primos chiquitos. It was a carne asada, a kind of family party but not really. When Mexican families get together it's always like a party, even if it's just a cookout.

After hours of grilling for the family, the charcoal in my Tio Pete's grill had already turned to ashes. I'm sure everyone was tired and our stomachs full from eating Tia Gracie's food. My hair was even stiff and reeked of chlorine from the hours Vale and I spent playing chicken fights with our other teenaged cousins, in Tia Gracie's pool. But no one would go to sleep.

My tias were outside, talking en el patio, smoking their Benson & Hedges and drinking Topo Chico and bucanas with my tios, looking out at the resaca, listening to Linda Ronstadt sing "¡Y Ándale!" Me and my primos were in the kitchen inside playing chalupa, and I just needed La Estrella to win that round.

Then the phone rang. It rang and rang, like it knew we were there, but no one bothered to answer it. The music, the singing, our voices, and the laughter were too loud for anyone to hear, I guess.

"¡La bandera!" My prima, Laura, was in charge of shouting out the names on the cards.

We just kept playing, but my card was never called. The phone rang again and then stopped.

"¡El catrin!" Another card I didn't have.

"¡Ese es joto!" Marcos, one of my primos, made fun of the dandy.

We all burst into laughter.

"¡El cazo!""Que me haces es poco." Vale continued with the dicho that we all knew came after that card was called.

Everyone rolled their eyes.

"¡La sierna!"

The primos erupted in excitement, blushing when the card of the topless mermaid was thrown on the deck. They took the card and began fighting for turns to look at it. "Stop!" Laura scolded them. "I'm gonna tell Tia Gracie!"

Between the cards being called out, I heard one of my tias scream like she was singing along to the song and crying at the same time, but we weren't worried cause we all knew that when the grown-ups drank bucanas, they'd get all happy. (Except for my mother. She never drank, but it didn't matter, cause she wasn't there that night.) Anyway, they'd get so happy that, sometimes, they'd start singing like they were mariachis serenading the night.

But then the sound of my Tia Gracie crying out loud filled my ears. I could tell it was her, because her voice was deep, and she was definitely crying not singing.

All the primos stopped their relajo and looked at each other across the table strewn with beans, a pile of quarters in the center, cartas de chalupa, and opened Coke cans. ¿Y ahora? we seemed to ask each other in silence. What happened? So we all ran to the

window to peek through the curtains, because sometimes, for one reason or another, the adults would fight, too.

Linda Ronstadt was still on but the singing had stopped. I saw Tia Gracie holding the cordless phone in her hand, crying out loud, falling, fainting into Tio Pete's arms, my two other tias hugged each other, and their husbands, my other tios, stood with their arms crossed over their chest, looking down at the Saltillo tile.

"¿Qué pasaría?" Fer, my primo from Monterrey, wondered aloud, looking at the scene through the window.

Everyone who's ever received a late-night phone call, when they should be asleep, knows that it's never good news.

When the adults all came inside, they looked at me and Vale. Tia Gracie didn't know how to tell us that my parents had been in a car accident, so Tio Pete, her husband, did. He pulled us aside, told us, and then said we had to go the hospital right away.

Valeria cried and asked so many questions that I can't even remember. I don't know why I didn't cry, and I also wanted to ask so many things, but I didn't say anything. My cousins all hugged and comforted both of us, even if only one of us was crying. "Everything will be fine." They all kept telling us both, coming up to me and Vale to hug us, one by one. "We're here for you. Don't worry, primitas."

Anyway, the sleepover ended, because after that phone call, everyone left Tia Gracie's house, including Tia Gracie.

From there, Tio Pete drove us all, everyone he could squeeze into his suburban, to the hospital. Tia Gracie was too drunk to drive.

My mother was being treated in the ER is what Tio Pete told us, all. That's all he knew, so we all sat in the waiting area, while he went to look for a nurse or a doctor. I

remember shivering and biting my nails until a nurse, accompanied by Tio Pete, finally approached us.

The nurse began interviewing me and Vale.

"Are you the relative of Ana Maria Benavides?"

"Yes, I'm her daughter."

"What's your name?" The nurse asked writing as I spoke.

"I'm Corde, and she's Vale." I pointed at my sister. My teeth began to chatter.

"Corde?" She'd obviously never heard that name before. "How do you spell that?"

"No. I'm sorry." I responded, looking at the notepad the nurse was holding. "I'm Cordelia Benavides. My sister's name is Valeria. Benavides, too."

"How old are you? Both of you?" She pointed at us with her pen.

"I'm 15," Valeria said.

The she looked at me.

"I'm 17."

"Follow me this way, please." She led us to a door with a placard on it that read:

BEREAVEMENT ROOM.

In there, we later learned that my mother was having her head stitched and needed a CT-Scan, but that if everything was normal, she'd be going home the next day. My father wasn't a patient, because he was already dead.

After that, I don't remember much, except that everything felt chaotic. Like everything was shattered in pieces. I felt helpless. Just the three of us were left--me, mom, and Vale. That was almost a year ago.

Today's Monday, the first of May. The call I had been waiting for finally came in, and I thought this day would never come. I mean, because I've been looking for a job for weeks, now.

The lady on the phone said to me, "Please be here at 9:30 am." So I woke up extra early to do my hair and makeup and iron my dress one more time before leaving.

I step out of my mom's faded-red Volkswagen Rabbit. The parking lot of the Pirate's Cove seafood restaurant is empty, like my stomach.

I rush toward the entrance, looking all around. There are two other cars parked by the side of the building, so I guess it is open. 9:33 am on my wrist watch. A cross-body purse the size of a wallet hangs across my chest, bounces around on my waist as I approach the entry, where I rush past the double doors.

Inside, the foyer is dark and cool and Jimmy Buffet's Piña Colada song plays from the speakers. For a moment, I stand in front of the hostess podium looking down at my short, navy blue dress and white flats. Maybe it's too short.

The restaurant walls are decorated with nets and anchors and plastic amberjacks. The nets remind me of my dad, when he used to take us fishing as kids. His nets were actually useful. The ones on the wall just hang there.

A thin, Asian man in a white shirt and tie appears suddenly from behind a door and walks toward me. He is smiling. "Hello, there! You must be Core-dee-lee-uh." He says my name in syllables, looking down at piece of paper in his hands.

"Hi, yes." I touch my hair which is pinned back into a bun. "You can call me Corde."

He stretches out his hand and says, "Okay, then. Hi, Cordee. I'm Kevin. You can call me boss." He chuckles.

Whatever that means, I say in my head, but I shake hands and smile at back at him. I wonder if Dad felt as nervous as I do on the last job interview he had before he died.

“Just kidding.” Kevin smiles. “Please, follow me into the bar this way.”

We walk in the direction of a windowed partition that isolates the bar area from the hostess’ foyer. Wooden-framed pictures of fishing boats at sea and men standing on docks in white rubber boots and buckets full of crabs hang on the wall. The sunburned men are proud of their catch and smile at me as I walk past.

The picture of a bucket full of crabs makes me stop. I stare at it for a while. When he worked on a shrimp boat, my dad used to bring home a lot of seafood for Mom, Vale, and me. Crabs. Red snapper. Shrimp. Calamares, too. Once, when the capitan took the boat all the way to Florida, Dad brought back seahorses and starfish and big conchas that I held up to my ear. "If you're really quiet, you can hear the sound of the sea." I remember the sound of his voice. It lives in my head.

The crabs in the picture are light brown with dark speckles, their claws opened, as if in defense, and all are piled chaotically, nearly spilling out of a white, plastic bucket. Some look like they're trying to escape their doom.

I turn away and see Kevin looking at me from where he's standing, in front of a table with a manila folder on it. He pulls out a seat and calls me, "Cordee," he moves his hand to him, “you coming?”

Startled, I rush toward him.

“Please, sit down.” He signals with his hand.

“Thank you.”

“Would you like a drink?” He pulls out a pen from under his shirt.

“No, sir. Thank you.”

“Oh, come on." He snickers. "No need to call me sir. It’s Kevin, remember?”

“Yes. I’m sorry.” I acknowledge but hesitate, before saying, “Kevin.”

He pulls out a paper from the folder, looks at it, before asking, “Have you worked in a restaurant before, Cordee?”

“No, si... I mean, no, Kevin.”

“Okay. How old are you?”

“18.”

“But you *have* worked before, right?”

“Yes. I have.” I don't even think before I reply. I wasn't expecting that question, and I begin remembering where I've worked.

“Well, tell me, tell me.” He repeats and moves his hand in a circular motion, looking directly at me. “Don’t be shy.”

“I worked in a department store, once. At the mall. As a cashier.”

“For how long?”

“Two months.”

“Two months? Why so short?” He waits to hear the answer.

So, I tell him. “It was only temporary."

He writes on the paper. Probably a note to remind him that I'm not experienced enough.

“For the holidays, you mean?”

“Yes.”

“Okay.” He acknowledges my answer and writes again on his paper. “Did you like it?”

“Yes."

I hold my purse and play with the car keys under the table. Dad always corrected Vale and me when our hands were under the table, especially when we had dinner at our abuelos' house. I remember that and place my wrists at the table's edge.

“What did you like about it? Did you like your co-workers? Did you like your boss or supervisor? What was your schedule like? How many hours per week did you work?” Kevin wants to know all at once. Are all interviews with him this hard? His look has changed. He's no longer smiling and instead looks down on his paper, writing while he waits for my answers.

I really need this job, so I tell him everything he wants to know, without getting lost in the past. I focus and begin having a conversation with Kevin.

When the interview is over, we smile at each other, like at first, in the restaurant’s foyer.

“I’ll see you on Friday, okay?” Then he reminds me, “Don’t forget the uniform. It’s very important, okay?”

“Yes, see you Friday.”

I shake Kevin’s hand with both of my hands and walk out of Pirate’s Cove looking like I just won the lottery.

When I walk into the house, the screen door slams behind me. It's quiet inside. The only sound I hear is the ticking clock on the wall. For months, Mom and Vale and me have been careful to turn all the lights off, not leave anything plugged in if we aren't using it. Since Daddy died there isn't enough money to pay the bills. The sound of needing someone or something is silence, and it forces you to listen to what you do have.

It's almost noon. I hang my purse from a hook behind the door and walk past the hallway to Mom's bedroom. I look inside and see her sitting on a recliner by the window, looking through a stack of mail.

“Mami! Guess what?” I walk to her and kiss her cheek.

“Corde. Como te fue, mija?”

“Good, Mami.” I say and kneel in front of her like I used to when I was younger, while she braided my hair. Back then, I used to put my arms around her waist to hug her and rested my head on her lap. But now I just kneel and look at her while we talk. “I'm so happy. The manager said I can start on Friday,” I let her know.

“¡Qué bueno, mija!” She kisses my head in celebration.

I stand up and walk to the closet we share, where my clothes, all squeezed tight like sardines in a tin, now hang in place of Dad's. Hanger after hanger, I look through the rags. “All I need is a white, long-sleeve blouse. And a pair of black pants. And a tie.” I say this out loud, as if to summon the items I need.

“Ay, mija." My mother sighs behind me. "I'm sure we still have one of Papi's ties, but I don't think you have a white blouse and black pants.”

I rub my forehead, because I can't remember the last time I wore a white blouse and black pants. I don't think I ever did.

“You think we can get them, Ma?”

She shakes her head, looking down. “Not now, Corde. I'm still waiting for the check from the insurance company, mija.”

She puts the stack of mail down and says, “Why don't you call your Tia Graciela?”

“Tia Gracie?” Her suggestion makes me feel uncomfortable.

"I know I haven't talked to her since the funeral, but she *is* your father's sister. She's family. She's your Tia, Corde."

"But it's so embarrassing to ask her." I regret to complain. "She's going to say that we always call her only when we need something, just because she has money. Like the time Papi asked to borrow her car because ours was broke. She told him he only calls her to ask for something. He never got over it."

"No es cierto. She didn't say that, Corde. That's between them. And we're going to pay her back as soon as I get the check."

I turn to look at her as if to ask, Do I really have to? "Me da pena."

"No, mija. Don't be embarrassed. Call her." She insists. "It's not much you're asking for. She's got money. She can afford it."

She's right about Tia Gracie having the money, but it still doesn't change that I feel embarrassed. Just the thought of it makes me cringe. Not that I don't love Tia Gracie. I do, but I don't want to be someone like my dad to her, always relying on her help every time I have a problem, especially with money. Our family is so big and she's always helping. She can't help everyone.

I wait until 6 pm, for my mom to be in the kitchen making dinner. Vale is outside playing with the vecina in the street, so I know she'll be out there until Mom calls her to eat.

I lock myself in the bedroom, walk over to the nightstand where the phone sits, next to a messy stack of religious leaflets and La Santa Biblia. Our mattress is lumpy and squeaks like it's in pain when I sit down on it. I begin dialing Tia Gracie's number. 5-4-4, but I hesitate and slam the receiver.

A slight breeze comes in through the window next to the nightstand, but the next door neighbor is on the other side of the screen watering her plants, just feet from where I'm sitting. Why are neighbors so nosy? A piece of a wooden broom handle holds the window open so it doesn't slide shut, because our house can get so hot, especially without a fan.

I stand up, dislodge the stick, and lower the window, before picking up the receiver again and dialing Tia Gracie's number. It only rings twice, and she answers.

"Hi, Tia." I smile like she's standing in front of me. "It's me, Corde."

My cheeks feel flushed as I hang up the phone. I stand up from the squeaky bed and raise the window open, like it had been, with the same stick that held it before. Outside, the lady is still there, watering her flowerpots in the setting sun.

Mom and Vale are eating when I walk into the kitchen.

"Quieres comer, mija?" Mom smiles. "I made your favorite. Tortillitas and refried beans."

"No, gracias, Mami. I'm not hungry." I touch my belly, like I'm in pain. "Oh, and Tia Gracie said she doesn't have money to loan me for the uniform."

Past the Checkpoint

My father died in the summer of 1995 when I was 18. That's the same year I decided I wanted to leave Brownsville.

My mother made minimum wage working part-time at a sewing factory and couldn't keep up with all the bills, so she put our house up for sale. We'd lived in the barrio close to downtown as far as I can remember, but after my father's accident at work, she decided to move us into my grandparents' house. It was only a ten minute drive to her job. "Why did you have to move us in here?" I complained, at first. We had so many other relatives. Tios and tias and primos. Why couldn't we just live with one of them? "They have their own families," she'd explained, "and we wouldn't fit."

My welos lived alone, out in the rancho, the outskirts of Brownsville, near a shelter for homeless people who had just crossed the Rio Grande. Their house was set back into a stretch of land, just off a caliche road where you could always tell when a car was approaching by the cloud of dust it made from half a mile away. I didn't feel all cozy and familiar with the house Mom said my welo had built *con sus propias manos,* only knew it was sprawled on some acres, land big enough for them to keep chickens, peacocks, and some barnyard animals. There was even an outhouse they still used in front of the corral and, behind a shed, a small cornfield that my wela tended.

When he was alive, my mother would nag my father about how he rarely drove us to the rancho to see her parents. *Nunca me llevas a la casa de papi,* she'd say. Then, when he did, she nagged about how we never stayed for more than an hour. *Visita de doctor*, she would say.

My father had his reasons. Before the plumbing for an indoor toilette was installed, using the outhouse had been his main objection. When the indoor bathroom was built, he

came up with new arguments. *Está bien lejos, and the gas is too expensive*, or *Nombre, it's too hot y no tienen AC*, or *That father of yours siempre me quiere poner a jalar*, and since he already worked 12 hour days under the sun at a shipyard out by the channel, Dad avoided going there at all cost, even if it meant starting a fight. Like when he'd say, *They're used to it, but I can't stand the smell of shit*. Boy, would that piss my mother off.

I'd never imagined myself living in the rancho. I guess it's 'cause I never wanted to. You know how when you go someplace new and really like it you immediately start imagining yourself living there? Not me. Not with the rancho. What I really wanted more than anything was to live somewhere else. In another country even. I fantasized about speaking another language. Being kissed by a French guy. Living in Italy, next to the Coliseum--wherever that was. I'd only read about it in the *National Geographic*. Typical thoughts of an 18-year-old. Okay, maybe not so typical for a Tex-Mex Valley girl who'd just lost her father. Don't get me wrong, I was sad about my dad, but somehow, I also felt free, like it was the start of a new life. If I didn't think of where I was actually living, I could imagine many different possibilities, but after the first few days at my welos', my new reality began to trap me, again. And since, to my grandparents, I was a full-grown woman, *hecha y derecha*, as they liked to emphasize, I was expected to work just like them.

My job, while living there, was to tend to the chickens, make sure they always had fresh water and feed, lock their coop when it got dark. Every morning, at seven, I would take the previous day's food scraps that my wela collected, sprinkle them on the patio, and fill two metal pans, green and slimy, with water from the hose. Around noon I had to go back out again, this time to sprinkle feed from a brown paper sack my welo kept in the shed. Sometimes, I would collect their eggs, too. I hated having to go out there with all

those flies buzzing around me, the air warm with the mixed smell of shit from the outhouse, chicken droppings, manure from the pens.

More than once, I was attacked by this one orange rooster that hated me more than anything. *Cuidado con El Chapulín*, my welo would joke, his gold-tooth grin barely allowing his eyes to open. The Grasshopper--El Chapulín. That's what he called the damned rooster, after a character in a popular, Mexican sit-com. When I discovered how fast and high my feathered enemy could jump, my chicken-tending routine mainly focused on making it out of the patio without losing an eye.

It wasn't long after hearing roosters crow every morning at dawn that I secretly began looking in *The Brownsville Herald* for a job. A real job. A paying one. Somewhere. Anywhere. Even in a different city north of The Valley. Houston. Austin.

Anywhere but Brownsville.

There was nothing for an 18-year-old girl to do in that house. I'd hide in the closet next to the wall phone to make a call. The cord was long enough. My grandparents never actually said it, but I felt like using their damned phone was prohibited. But Thursdays were their church days. I'd wait until they were gone to call Cindy, one of my cousins. She was the one I was closest to on my dad's side of the family, except she lived all the way across town. I'd call her just to get a vicarious thrill, listening to her talk all about her boyfriend and going to bailes, about how she'd registered at the university. I'd secretly wish that she'd invite me to come live with her and my tios instead, but she never offered.

At night, the dream of us leaving the rancho kept me awake. I thought, *if we sell our house, me and Mom can buy a place of our own*. I wanted to save money and go to college, too. I hated living there. The house could get so quiet and dark. Nothing like our place in the barrio. I mean, I never needed a night light in my old bedroom. There was

always plenty of light from the street lamps. It would sneak in through our windows even when the curtains were closed. But in the rancho, there weren't any street lamps. Hell, there weren't even any real streets. And the properties, demarcated by barbed wire fences and fields in between, were so far apart that you could forget about ever asking the vecinos for a cup of sugar if you ran out. I hardly saw any people, much less neighbors.

Well, except for this one girl in blue jeans who lived on the other side of my welo's fence, across from where the chickens roosted.

When I first saw her, I wondered who she was. She was always outdoors, at least it seemed so to me. Every time I had to go outside to feed the chickens she was there, always standing, scratching her head, or cutting grass in her yard with a machete. *Tomboy*, I thought. The grass was so tall that, during the day, I could only see the back of her head--a long, black ponytail burning under the sun. But on sleepless nights when I could hear Mom crying through the wall in the next bedroom, I would get out of bed just to look out the window at the little house across the fence, to see if I could see her. I discovered that the kitchen light where she lived would stay on--sometimes all night.

A few nights after that, I got a good look at her for the first time. I had been sitting in my bedroom in the dark, like sitting in space, looking at the breezy night through the window that faced her window, my portal to another world. I imagined that the swaying blades of grass were peacocks dancing under the moon, my chin resting on my wrists while I waited to see something, until she finally walked across the dingy, yellow room. She moved deliberately, this girl, pulled something out of a cupboard, walked toward the window, and sat in front of it, holding a silver mirror in her hand. She was very dark and scrawny, like a little girl, and her hair resembled the mane of my welo's black pony. I watched as she held the round-shaped mirror--the same size as her face, up to her and

looked into it for what felt like forever. I grew impatient. I wanted to see her face, wanted to see what she saw. *Que tanto ves*, I thought.

While I waited, something must have caught her attention, because she slowly lowered it and peeked out from behind it, suddenly. Her eyes, wild and bright, seemed to smile, like she could see me, as if in play. *I caught you*, she seemed to say to me. I looked back at her, almost in disbelief, before falling to my knees and shrinking to just below the height of the window. That night, after crawling back into bed, I decided that we would be friends.

The next morning, I opened my eyes, looked at the clock on the wall, it was almost 8. I had slept in, and in the rancho, well, let's just say that it's unheard of. The sound of someone hollering woke me up, so I ran out to the screened door, saw that it was was my welo. He was outside, by the patio, banging on the chickens' empty water pans, screaming towards the sky like a pinche lunatico, "El que no trabaja, no come!" That primitive, old fuck. What if I didn't want to work? I still had the right to eat.

I ran out in my flip flops, tripping over my bata, but I had forgotten the bag of leftovers for the chickens. So, I ran back into the kitchen for them. My wela was there, kneading some dough, her hair wrapped in a handkerchief. "And you?" She spoke to me in Spanish. "Why aren't you dressed?" She looked angry. "You're indecent!" She glared at me. I looked down at what I was wearing, because I didn't understand how it was indecent to walk around in my nightgown at home in front of my grandma. Well, okay, it wasn't really my home, but it wasn't like I was naked. I found the bag of scraps, turned to leave without saying a word.

Outside, the chickens had crowded in the center of the patio, were pecking at the dirt. My welo had finally decided to feed them himself. More out of spite than duty, I still

dumped what was in the bag, mostly chewed up corn cobs, all over the feathered flock. I went around to the side of the house where the water spigot was. I swear I wanted to spray them all with water, but the handle was so hard, it wouldn't turn, like it also wanted to punish me for sleeping in. I stopped to look at my squashed palms, branded pink by the force I'd made.

"He already gave them water." I heard a voice in Spanish say. I turned and looked toward the other side of the fence. It was the girl from the window. She was wearing a pair of blue jeans, a t-shirt, and tennis shoes, like always, bent over a tuft of crabgrass, didn't bother to look up at me, only kept hacking at the grass.

"And how do you know?" I rubbed my wet palm. I was pissed off.

"Because I've been out here since 6." She seemed to brag as she stood up and raised her eyebrows, "macheting the grass for these people."

"What people?" I looked toward the little shack where I'd seen her at night.

"What people?" She repeated my question, her hand on her hip. "The ones who live over there." She pointed with her wrinkled nose toward the big house at the entrance of the property. She wouldn't stop scratching her head.

"Who are you? What's your name?" I finally asked her.

"Terry."

My eyes widened.

"Terry?" I repeated.

"Yes. Terry. Why?"

"But, where are you from?" I imagined that she might have been brought there from the shelter down the road. It was run by some priests, and it was very common for the locals to hire people staying there.

"I live here." Tere looked down on the grass where she stood. "What about you? Where are YOU from?" Her tone was snappy.

She was trying to be condescending, but I didn't let it provoke me.

"From here." I looked at her hand scratching her head.

"And when did you arrive?"

"I just moved in." I suspected she thought I was from across.

"What's your name?" She emphasized the you.

"Angie."

"So, who's Angelica?" The interrogation continued.

"What?"

"I always hear them yelling, Angelica this, and Angelica that."

"That's me." I was surprised to know that she'd heard all that.

"So, you're name's not really Angie, then."

"And what about you? Terry's not your real name."

"Yes, it is, because my name's Teresa." She liked to argue.

"Then Tere would be your nickname, not Terry." It satisfied me to inform her.

"And yours would be Angela, not Angie."

She just wouldn't give up.

I looked her straight in the eyes and said, "No, it doesn't work like that. I'm from here. From this side." I pointing to the ground where I stood, like I had more right to it than she did.

"So?" The look on her face seemed to challenge me.

I didn't know what to say, so I said the first thing pissed-off-me could think of.

"So, that's just the way it is with names, for people who are from HERE."

It didn't make sense but seemed like the only thing left to say.

That's the way our first conversation went. It was nothing personal. I was just pissed at my welos, that I had to get used to living in a rancho. I had a lot to learn. It wasn't fair. She seemed much better adjusted than I was, and I secretly admired her resilience. Day after day, Tere and I met at random times to talk through the fence. She on her side, I on mine. I never slept in after that. I'd quickly take care of the chickens, then run over to the narrow alleyway between both properties, talk about nothing for hours. That's where we'd always meet, because it was a forgotten little space that no one seemed to care about.

I got to know Tere, poco a poco. I know she didn't trust me at first, was afraid I'd turn her in. It took about two months for her to finally admit that she was from Mexico somewhere, something I already knew. She never said from where exactly, either, never provided too many details. It was like she enjoyed being mysterious, having me wonder about her, wanted me to ask questions just so she would have the satisfaction of not giving me an answer. She'd never admit to anything either. Like when I suggested she may have lice and offered to give her the bottle of Nix I saw under the bathroom sink. *I don't need it. I don't have lice*, I remember she said in that proud voice of hers right before she told me to pass it to her through the fence. Or when I told her I thought we were the same age, all she could say was, *It could be*. I eventually found out she was just a year older than me and had left her home when she was very young. (She was still young at the time, but that's how she said it.) Her parents had paid a coyote to smuggle her across the border. They'd arrange for her to go live with some tios who were working somewhere in Houston. Instead she ended up working in a house--the house next door. "I've been with them since April. It's not so bad working for them."

"But they make you live there, all alone." I looked toward the little house.

"It doesn't bother me. I get to see people all the time. Guys, especially. Like when a boat comes in, my boss take me to the port. I help the guys unload, and they're real nice to me. They give me fish and shrimp and all the left-over groceries."

Tere was smart, and certainly not someone I'd imagine working like that. She was too young to be doing the work of a machine--cutting grass out in the sun all day and with a machete of all tools! There was no way she was related to those people, either. I'd never seen any of them, but I'd known from my welo that the land next door was owned by some bolillos, shrimp boat owners who lived just off the caliche road in the main house--a big, stucco house behind the brick wall. On their property, there was also a red, metal building, like a hangar except with a boat inside, and, far behind it, two smaller houses that looked more like storage sheds. Tere lived in one of them in exchange for her work and said that a married couple who also worked for the owners lived in the other one. She hated that couple, and said she hardly talked to them, because the wife, a round, middle-aged *vieja*, always bulged her eyes at Tere and scared her. The *pinche vieja*would hit the back of her husband's head if he so much as tried to say *Buenos Días* to Tere. "That poor devil," Tere said, "Why would I look at someone like him? If I wanted something like that, I would've stayed home."

Three months of living in the rancho and my cousin, Cindy, finally decides to invite me to a baile with her. I was so excited to go, and even though I always told Tere everything about me--even that I was planning on leaving Brownsville, I couldn't bring myself to tell her when I talked to her the day before the dance. It was a Halloween baile at the local convention center where a rising Tejano band was going to play. Cindy had broken up with her boyfriend and had one extra ticket. I couldn't stop feeling guilty for

Tere. She worked so hard without pay and never did anything fun, at least not that I could tell. I'd wished she could come with me, I really did, but I didn't have money to pay for her, and, even though I was willing to ask my cousin if we could bring her along, if I'd had the money, willing to sneak her out through an opening we'd both made in the fence, I didn't want to get her in trouble with the bolillos, or even worse, get her deported. *What would she wear, anyway? How would I help her fix her hair? What if she never used the Nix? Her eyebrows need tweezing. What if there's migra there and she gets caught?* I kept thinking all these things, especially about the migra. It wasn't uncommon for cops or even border patrol agents to be on duty during convention center events.

So, the day of the baile, my mom and I went shopping for a dress. "$20 is your limit." She lifted a folder bill to my face. We found a short, black one at Yoli's, a downtown store where women from Matamoros shop. It was on sale for only $8, so I had enough money to also buy me a pair of low heels at the Payless shoe store a few doors down.
When we came home from our shopping trip, it was already 5 pm, and I hadn't seen Tere since the morning when she'd told me, "When you leave Brownsville, I want to go with you." I was distracted, thinking about the baile, knew that I had to hurry, so all I'd said was, "Si, nos vamos."

I threw the bags with the dress and shoes on my bed and started toward the back door, but Mom held me back by my arm, saying, "I told him we wouldn't be on time before we left." My welo had already fed and watered the chickens, she told me.

It had been a while since I made up my face and curled my hair, so it took me almost two hours to get ready. I kept looking in the wall mirror, checking for any runs in my pantyhose, rubbing the lipstick off my teeth. I looked at myself a long time, at my oval

eyes, like two pecans, my lips, the color of a ripe plum, my nose, rising like a sand dune from my face. I liked who I saw in the mirror. *Wow. I'm pretty*, I remember thinking. Around 7, I noticed it was already dark, and I started looking out the front door toward the caliche road. *She couldn't have forgotten*, I thought. "Where do you think you're going, muchacha?" I suddenly heard my wela ask. "The chickens need to be put away." I turned and stared at her as she waddled into the living room toward me. "What?" She almost challenged me to respond. "Do you want the coyotes to eat them?" Just as I mustered up the courage to answer, I saw the headlights of a car approaching the road to our house.

"But I'm leaving, Wela." It was a mistake to respond, and I paid the price. My cheek felt like I'd been hit across the face with a stone when her hand struck me.

"Don't Wela me. You're not going anywhere until the chickens are in the coop. And wipe the color off those lips. You look like a puta."

I remember touching my burning cheek in disbelief and inside me saying, *I'll never speak to you again*. I knew better than to talk back to her, but she'd never hurt me before that. My mom had told me stories about how violent her mother could get when she was angry, and now I had my own to tell.

Outside, it was too dark to tell where I was stepping when I walked across the patio in my new shoes, and my tears, mixed with mascara, made it harder to see. I tiptoed past the corral towards the chicken coop, careful not to sink my heels in a mud puddle or, even worst, in a pile of dung. Thankfully, the chickens were already on their roosts. My eyes had adjusted to the darkness, and I could see their faces in the silence that connected us, their perfectly round eyes, wide and glistening, as if to acknowledge mine. Creatures have

a universal language, you know, an unspoken way of understanding human suffering. Even El Chapulin remained docile, looking at me as I locked the hatch and turned to leave.

I stopped by the fence and saw that Tere's light was off, so I knew she wasn't there. The bolillos had probably taken her to the port to work unloading one of their shrimp boats, to welcome the horny fishermen who'd been out to sea for weeks. I wanted to see her before I left. It felt like I should apologize to her for leaving, but I heard a honk and ran around the house, toward the front driveway. I didn't bother going back inside to those backward people--that godforsaken place, to look for Mom and tell her I was leaving.

By the time I returned from the dance, all the lights in the house looked like they were off, at least as far as I could tell from the road. It wasn't Cindy who drove me back. He'd spoken his name into my ear while we were dancing, his breath moist with the smell of alcohol, but the cumbias had been too loud for me to hear. So, I'd just nodded and smiled, like I'd actually heard him. I know it sounds bad, but somehow, among the smoke and the lights, the crowd of cowboy hats, mini skirts, and heels, I'd lost my cousin. Her ex-boyfriend, who'd also gone to the dance, found us as soon as we sat at a table, walked off with Cindy to the other side of the hall. A little past midnight, I knew we had to leave, but she was nowhere to be found. I had no other choice but to accept my dancing partner's offer to take me home. He'd been so nice to me all evening, pouring me Buchanan's, pulling out my chair every time we'd take a break between cumbias. He was a good dancer. I liked the way he smelled.

When I close my eyes, I don't remember what he'd said during the ride home, only the last part of what happened:

We pull up to the dirt road leading to my grandparent's house, he turns off the headlights, we start making out. He reaches over for my hand, places it on his chest, the way he'd done during the baile, except now he moves it down toward his pants. I feel the unmistakeable grip of a gun at his waist, like the way Dad's gun felt, so I withdraw it, like I'd touched a hot surface. "No te preocupes." The whispers feel like smoke floating into my ear canal, penetrating my brain with a weakening fog. "I'm not going to hurt you, baby." He pulls it out, places it on the dashboard, where I can see it. I stare at it in silence, and before I can say a word, he opens the door with this excitement--a strange energy, goes around to the passenger side, where I'm sitting. He opens it, takes my hand, pulls me out onto the gravel road with him. Suddenly, he feels much taller than at the dance, this stranger, his kisses fast, more aggressive now, his hands under my dress, like I was his, like he had every right. When I feel him pull my pantyhose down, I push him away, make him angry, so he grabs me by the chin, glares right into my eyes, then forces his salty tongue into my mouth. Before I can say anything, he turns me around, bends me over the hood, puts himself inside me in the open air. My face turned sideways, my cheek rubbing against the shiny metal surface. The gun on the dash. His boots crackling on the gravel, and the heat of the idle engine radiating over my spread ankles.

It was quick, and when it was over, I was sorry I never heard myself say *NO*. I guess regret is a product of inertia.

Nearly six months after I met her, Tere and I became like sisters. I'd tell her everything, even told her about the night of the baile. She wanted to know everything, so I told her. Who I danced with. What I wore. Everything except what the guy with the Camaro did to me. "I also want to go to a baile, like you." She smiled.

The hole in the fence was now open wider. Tere and I'd take turns sneaking over to each other's side, our coming and going parting a path through the tall grass leading to the doorsteps of her little house. On my side, there was no grass, so no path was visible. Welo'd once seen her sitting in the patio with me while he worked in the corral. He said, "As long as your work is done, you can be outside all you want. But I forbid you from bringing anyone into my house. You hear me?" He lifted his index finger as he spoke to me in front of Tere. She just smiled, pursed her lips, blinked her eyes at him. She didn't seem to mind that he was strict.

But that didn't stop her from always wanting to come inside my room, either, especially when everyone was at church for hours. She'd look through my memory box at pictures of my ex-boyfriends, and in my closet, try on my clothes, stared at the posters on my wall. But being at her place was more interesting for me, even though it was muggy and dark in the little house. Tere could make really tasty bologna sandwiches, and she always braided my hair without me even asking.

Don't get me wrong, sometimes she'd get on my nerves, too, especially when we talked about how I was going to take her past the checkpoint, to Houston. Mom, who'd finally sold our house in the barrio, put money in my savings account *for me to use for college,* she'd said. A house of our own would have to wait. So, I'd used some of it to buy two one-way, plane tickets, one of them in Cindy's name for Tere. We'd planned it all, the light blush on her cheeks and peach-colored lipgloss, her hair, half up with a barrette, what she was going to wear--a denim vest over a white t-shirt, pink leggings under a floral print skirt and white, Keds-like shoes, rehearsed how she was going to respond as Cindy to any questions, just in case she was stopped at the airport, her date of birth, where she was born, everything, over and over and over again. But Tere just couldn't say it right. I

knew I was going to jail. It either sounded like she was asking a question when she answered or she spoke with a very thick accent when we pretended I was a border patrol agent.

"U.S. citizen?" I'd ask in English.

"Jes?" Her response was a question.

"No! Not jes, Tere!" I'd yell at her in Spanish. "How many times do I have to tell you? You want me to get arrested?"

She would cover her mouth to stop herself from laughing.

So, after nine months of living in the rancho I was ready to start my new life. I was going to Houston to live with one of my tias. She promised me a job at a shoe store in The Galleria where she was a manager. Mom knew that I had also planned to enroll part-time in the community college, so she was very supportive and promised that she'd request a transfer to the sister factory in Houston so we could be together. She had no idea of my plans to take Tere with me. Why worry her? It's not like Tere was going to live with me anyway. Her relatives would be waiting to take her home with them as soon as she'd arrive. Our bags were ready, packed full of the clothes we'd wear in our new lives in Houston. We'd leave the very next morning.

My stomach churned when the taxi dropped me off at the curb in front of the airport. It was very windy and the tops of the palm trees were swaying. Tere had told me that one of her shrimper boyfriends would give her a ride and that she'd wait for me if she got there before me. But I looked all around when I walked through the glass doors and didn't see any sign of her.

Inside, there was a big fountain in front of the escalators leading to another level. Some kids with their parents tossed coins into it, people in suits crossed in front of me

with their luggage as I walked, a voice over the intercom announced the arrival of a flight, a gift shop to my right was selling t-shirts with multi-colored palms and the words, South Padre Island, TX, printed on them. Then, I saw her to my left, smiling, sitting in a coffee shop, waving at me, she was surrounded by a sea of green, border patrol agents, eating their breakfast, some in booths, others at the counter. They stared at me as I approached her with a half-smile on my face. "Hi, Cindy." I greeted her in English and kissed her cheek. "Let's go check in."

We walked together toward the ticket counter and she laughed and talked to me in Spanish, but I'm not listening. I look all around, feel my wet armpits through my shirt. Upstairs is our gate. The people are all around us. Old white ladies, one with orange lipstick on her mouth, sitting in the waiting area. Migra. A young mother with a crying baby in the stroller. Police. Five rosy-cheeked cadets from the local military academy in their blues, standing in a circle, laughing. We stand, Tere and I, in the line to board, the tickets in our hands. A migra walks toward us, taps a man behind Tere on the shoulder. The clean-shaven man is wearing a baseball cap, gets pulled out of the line by the migra, he hands him his ticket. The line keeps moving toward the tunnel. Tere and I go through it, enter the plane that will take us to Houston.

Therapy

Lori had been married to John for almost six years. They were a couple who turned heads in a gossipy border town like Brownsville, where it was almost impossible to keep a secret and most people looked like they could be related. Like when they were out at the grocery store, or at the pulga, or the park with their daughter, nosy people would stop and stare at the brown chick with the gringo.

Lori had long and dark hair, like a horse's tail, sad, honey-brown eyes, and her skin was the color of the cork board in their kitchen, obviously Hispanic--one of them. Either from this side or from Mexico, but raza nonetheless.

Her real name was Maria Lorena Lopez, but everyone had always called her Lori, and after she married John, she changed her name to his and became Lori Jankowski. She'd met John when she was 24, while studying at the university, finishing her master's degree in English. He was a Visiting Assistant Professor of Biology and had just moved to Brownsville from Lansing, Michigan, after accepting a temporary contract.

When she first saw him, they both had been standing in line for a coffee at the student union. He was a head taller than her, and Lori, who'd stood behind him, kept looking up at his blonde-haired head. She'd pretended to read the coffee menu above his head so she could peek around him to get a glance of his face. When John, bored of waiting in line, had finally turned around and looked down at her smiling face, he joked, "I don't even like coffee." She just chuckled in response, but it was what he said after that jolted her coy composure. "You look like a Brazilian model." Those were fighting words.

"Why Brazilian." She couldn't help wrinkling her eyebrows. This gringo, she thought. "Why not Mexican?"

John, who was new to The Valley and to Texas, in general, had eventually told her that he'd just returned from a sabbatical in Rio de Janeiro. "I'm still seeing brown skin all around me, like I'm still in Brazil." That was his way of apologizing for his blurted out words.

His accent was attractive to her--unlike any she'd ever heard, the conversation interesting, so she'd sat with him while they drank their coffees. "Where is your accent from?" She wanted to know more about him.

"Where do you think? Take a guess."

"I don't know. Russia?"

"Why Russia? Why not Poland?" He teased her.

"I'm sorry. *Are* you from Poland?" He looked like he could be from either country.

"Yes. Why? Are you sorry that I'm not from Russia, instead?" He smiled. His blue eyes spoke to her mouth.

"No." Lori blushed. "I meant I'm sorry for getting it wrong."

On their first date, they drove out to South Padre Island for dinner.

On the way there, Lori told him about herself, how she was the third of four sisters, the only one still living at home with her mom. No, no father. Just them and their mother. She'd learned that John, who had an older brother in Chicago, had recently immigrated from Poland, following in his brother's footsteps. His other family still lived in Poland. Widowed mother. Aunts. Uncles. Cousins.

She was impressed by how well he spoke English, even with his thick accent. He'd lived in England where he conducted research for two years. "Brits, are snobs. You have to speak proper English, and my English wasn't proper enough for them." John had laughed at himself. "Do you speak Spanish?"

She almost couldn't believe he'd asked that question. "Of course! Everyone speaks Spanish around here. Haven't you noticed?"

That first night, Lori's laugh caused the people in the restaurant to stare at them even more, like they were annoyed that she was enjoying herself with the wrong guy. Getting too close. But Lori ignored them. It didn't matter that he was an outsider--not just any gringo, unlike the few she'd met before, but an actual foreigner.

"I want to talk like that, too." John signaled to the side with his eyebrows. It turns out, they'd both been eavesdropping on a conversation in the booth next to them.

"That's Tex-Mex. Or Spanglish. Depending where you're from. It's not something everyone praises. Most people who aren't from here think it's inferior." She rolled her eyes and played with the straw in her glass.

"Really? Why?"

"Think about your British experience. What is language if it isn't a marker of class and identity? How you talk and what you talk about. Mexicans call us pochos when they hear us speak. They think we're incomplete. Uneducated. And when we speak in Spanish around Americans, they call us wetbacks. They see a bunch of poor, brown people and assume we swam across the river yesterday. We must be dysfunctional, right? A Mexican-American in their own shithole-border-town is just another beaner. A Mexican-American in a city like Houston is there to clean houses or mow lawns." Lori looked at John and sipped her drink.

They continued talking about Brownsville and people and language. John made her explain what the word pocho meant. He disagreed that pochos lacked anything.

She couldn't really understand how someone like John, an outsider--a European, could feel so comfortable in a place where people spoke using two languages, both of

which were foreign to him, if only by birth, switching from one to the other whenever they wanted.

Later, during the 25-minute drive back to Brownsville, Lori had agreed to teach him Spanish.

They dated for only three months, and after Lori graduated from the university, John asked her to move in with him in the one-bedroom condo he rented.

Her mother, who opposed her decision to shack up with John, said Lori was stupid for moving in with a man of a different culture. "No seas pendeja." Her mother never sugar-coated anything. "Those people are cold. They have different values. You think he'll ever see you like himself? You're ten years younger than that man, and he just wants to use you. If he really loved you, he would be a real man and marry you!" Lori listened silently but it didn't mean she agreed with her mother's logic.

Maybe her mother had her own reasons for believing what she did. Still, Lori cared about John and was fed up with all the consejos. What did she know about him? Lori was an adult and didn't want advice about her romantic life. The last thing she wanted was for him to be mistreated by her mother or any of her numerous family members who were always more than happy to scare away anyone she liked, especially her sisters who teased her about being an old maid. So she stayed away a lot and was perfectly happy spending time with just him.

Six months after living together, she found out she was pregnant. The news of the pregnancy came as a happy surprise to John who was already 34 and eager to become a father. Lori knew that his own dad had died when John was only 13, and that fatherhood was an especially sensitive topic for him.

Up to that point, she'd told him all there was to know about her, except she'd never mentioned her own father, and John never probed her about it. He was discreet that way, respected her privacy.

Lori's pregnancy was rough on her. She stayed away from her family a lot, and it made her feel isolated, especially when John traveled out of town for conferences.

By the time the baby was born, they'd moved into a house in another town north of Brownsville. Lori wished her mother would visit and help her, like she'd done with her other sisters, but she was always busy. Still, Lori would call her any time she felt lonely.

"Mom, I finally learned to breastfeed." It had been three months since the baby was born, but Lori was still proud to share the news with her mother during their phone call.

"You're a good mom, Lorena. I breastfed all four of you, too." Lori already knew that, but her mother would say it every time one of them had a baby.

"You should come see the baby. She's so big!"

"Are you kidding? It's too far, mija. Why'd you move away?"

"Ma, no exageres. It's only 30 minutes away from Brownsville."

"Si, pero you know I have my prayer group at church. I can't drop everything to drive all the way there. They need me."

There was always an excuse.

"Your daughter needs you, too, Ma."

"Pues si, mijita, but you also need God in your life."

That did not still well with Lori. "And how do you know God isn't in my life?" Just because she was her mother didn't give her the right to hurt her. "My relationship with God is private. You shouldn't judge me, Mom."

"I'm not judging you, Lori. But you're not even married in the church. How are you going to raise your daughter?"

Lori couldn't believe what she was hearing. "That's no one's business but my own." She started to cry. She was furious. "I don't use church to satisfy appearances. No soy hipócrita. You know what? Don't worry about visiting me." Her mother was still talking when Lori slammed the receiver on the cradle.

She would regret ending the phone call on those terms, but in reality, her words were mild. What she really wanted to say is, Estoy muerta para ti.

When her daughter, Sofia, turned five, Lori began having nightmares. They started without warning.

Sofia was now in kindergarten, and Lori's life had changed a bit. For one, she had more free time and wanted to recover her figure, so she began a new routine. The years of not getting good sleep, going to parks, of doctor's checkups, preparing meals, watching *Sesame Street*, and waiting with Sofia for John to come home had exhausted her and made her 20 pounds heavier.

Lori felt restless. She wanted to cut her hair. Go to a coffee shop and work on her laptop as long as she wanted. Or smoke a cigarette. Get a manicure. Throw all the clothes in her closet away. Take a trip all by herself. Wipe the slate clean.

She found herself thinking back to her childhood a lot. It was always there, like another whaling baby needing to be comforted. The accumulation of years of neglecting herself weighed heavily on her adult life, on her role as a wife and a mother. She didn't want to live angry. Or think of her mom and her family with anger, even though they'd hurt her. The truth is she loved them and yearned to be closer to them.

There was another thing she'd been hiding from John. The thought of teaching at the university had been on her mind since she'd stopped breastfeeding Sofia, years ago. To even consider it felt exciting and selfish all at once. Pursuing a PhD, on the other hand, now that was something she could only dream of.

Lori finally decided that her first goal was to get back in shape and fit into her pre-baby clothes again. When she told John of her plan, he approved and gave her some tips of foods to avoid. "I'll run with you on my free mornings." It was his way of encouraging her. "I need to loose weight, too." The goal was to run every day and not eat carbs. No tortillas. No pan dulce.

Every morning, after dropping Sofia off at her school, she'd go running in the greenbelt by her house for an hour. Some days, John would join her. After the jog, she'd shower, run errands or pay bills or shop for groceries, then prepare dinner, before finally rushing back to school for Sofia.

The days were busy and ordinary, but it was the nights that had taken a turn. John, whose sleep had been regularly interrupted, began to take notice. He worried about Lori, who would often moan and cry in her sleep. It started without warning, but when it continued, night after night, John let her know he was uncomfortable. "Wake up." He'd whisper and shake her at random hours in the night. "What's wrong? Does something hurt?"

"No, why?" She was surprised that John was interrupting her sleep. "I guess I was just dreaming." After a few seconds, she'd fall back to sleep.

Mornings were a burdensome, painful experience. She was so exhausted, she just couldn't wake up. John would be up as soon as the alarm went off at 6 am, refreshed, talkative, full of energy, like the birds outside their window. It annoyed her. He'd make

conversation with her while shaving in the bathroom, but she'd doze off while he yapped. "Did you hear what I said?" She'd hear him nag until her eyes opened. John would peek his head out the door just to make sure.

"Yes." She'd lie. God, why won't he leave me alone, is what she really thought.

Minutes later, he'd walk over to her bedside, dressed, impregnated with the smell of cologne. "Well? Wake up. Aren't you going to make Sofia late for school?" He stood over the bed, looking at her. She could see he was already irritated.

"No, I'll get her ready quickly."

"Something's wrong with you."

"I'm good. I guess I'm just sore from the running." She made excuses, but she was a wreck.

"For over three months? This isn't normal. You don't sleep well. I wake up every night. I even have to move to the couch just to sleep. It's gone on for too long. I think you need to see a doctor." It sounded like a criticism to her. "Don't you think maybe you need therapy?"

Lori knew John was right. She also knew exactly what was bothering her. Seeking therapy had crossed her mind, but no one in her family had ever sought therapy, at least not that she knew of. It wasn't the type of thing you did. To confess. Tell secrets. Break the code. It was like betraying the family. Some things you just had to take to the grave with you.

But Lori had to put her pride aside. This was not about her family. It was a matter of being a good mom to Sofia. And of saving her marriage.

She did her research before finally deciding on Dr. Stern. He was a very popular psychotherapist, and getting an appointment to see him was not easy. There was a long waiting list.

By the time she finally went in for her first appointment, Lori was convinced she was losing control. She really needed help.

The first session was fairly easy. It had consisted of Dr. Stern getting Lori's symptoms, her biographical sketch, talking about the goals for therapy, before finally ending with a book he prescribed to her. Lori had to read it before the next session.

The following visit was harder on Lori. She started feeling uncomfortable before she even walked into the office. He's a pervert. If I were you, I'd see someone else, a voice inside her head warned as she walked toward the building that looked more like a town house than a medical office. She ignored the nagging voice, let it float past, like a dandelion floret in the breeze. He can't be that bad.

She walked toward the entrance, looking down at her legs and feet, the clopping sound her espadrilles made on the concrete sidewalk, her shaved skin. Toned legs. Red toenails. "Shit." I should have worn pants. That was all she could think of as she stepped inside the office.

She sat in the empty waiting area trying to read from, *It Didn't Start With You*, a book written by Mark Wolynn, the one Dr. Stern had recommended, since it was about how childhood trauma can be passed on through DNA to children. After all, her daughter was the only reason Lori had sought therapy in the first place. Sofia's happiness is all that mattered to her.

"A well-documented feature of trauma, one familiar to many, is our inability to articulate what happens to us," the sentence read. Lori read it for the fifth time. She stared

blankly at her finger on the page. He probably is a pervert, she couldn't help thinking. The way he stared at me the first time, like he was penetrating me, communicating in another language. *You think you're in control, huh? Look how I'm enjoying fucking you. There's nothing you can do to stop me*. He had sat there in his wooden chair, staring. His lustful eyes, behind his perfectly clean glasses, disguised with compassion. Sitting. Staring. Fucking. He waited to hear all the details. What a creep. With that tweed coat he wore over his perfectly ironed button-down shirt. His slacks, creased precisely down the middle of the legs. The clipboard with the blank, white pages that rested on his lap. He probably used it to cover his hard-on. His wrinkled, dark hard-on. Veiny. Restless. Pulsating, she thought.

After that first visit, Lori had told John, how uncomfortable she'd felt with Dr. Stern. What did she mean by uncomfortable, he'd asked her? But Lori didn't have anything concrete to offer as an explanation of how she felt. If he's a pervert, don't see him anymore, John had nagged her when she told him she'd scheduled a second visit. Suddenly, he was opposed to her seeking therapy. "For what?" He had surprised her, since he'd been the one to suggest it. "If you don't want to, you don't need to tell some pervert all about your personal life." But she had her own reasons for wanting to go through with it. "Fuck." Lori heard the doorknob turn.

The doctor peeked his head from behind the door that separated the waiting room from the privacy beyond. It made her remember her father and how she hated for him to lurk around doorways. Always watching her. Spying. Creeping. He made her feel like the protagonist in her own suspense movie.

"Lori." Dr. Stern greeted softly with a warm smile. She smiled back and closed her book. Lori stood up from the cushioned couch, holding her handbag close to her body,

like she always did at night when she walked to her car from the grocery store. For fuck's sake, she thought, you're in a doctor's office. Relax, woman. "This way." He extended his hand in the direction of the empty hallway.

Lori brushed her hand over the back of her fitted skirt. She sensed his eyes on her as she walked in front of him. I bet he's looking at my ass, she thought. I can feel those vulture eyes on me. Two vulture eyes. Not just one like the old man had in "The Tell-Tale Heart."

She walked the length of the grey carpet until she stopped at the door with an engraved placard. PRIVATE. Just like she had done at her last appointment, she stood there and waited for him to turn the knob and let her in.

Lori stepped to one side when the doctor's hand reached for the doorknob. "Right in here, please." He entered and walked over to his rocking chair. Lori's eyes scanned the sunny space that was the therapy room like it was her first time. They moved from the white-shuttered windows on the opposite side of the room to the six-tiered bookshelf wall, to the bronze menorah on a wooden desk, until they came to rest on the floral-print calico couch by the door where she had sat previously. She sat on the end of the couch closest to the door where she stood. Lori noticed a box of tissues on the couch where she placed her bag. No doubt for patients like me, she thought. Surely he expects me to cry this time, and I'll probably do it, too, but it won't be out of weakness.

Dr. Stern was a balding, smartly-dressed man in glasses. Probably in his sixties. He looked attentively across the room into Lori's eyes and asked, "Is that where you would like to sit?" He had asked the same question during her last visit. She had thought it strange. He's probably a control freak. Lori's eyes moved to the empty armchair across from where the doctor had seated himself. It looked like a comfortable chair and the place

he’d designated for his patients. Perhaps. It reminded Lori of her own reading armchair at home, although hers was a leopard-print fabric. Cushioned. Cozy. Not the type of chair you'd imagine in a therapist's office. “Yes, sir.” She caressed the cushion where she sat. “This couch is very comfortable. I prefer to sit here, if it’s okay.”

She observed as the doctor reached for his clipboard and flipped through his pages of notes. During the first interview, she recalled, the exchange had been routine. The first part was mostly a collection of history: 30 years old. Married. 6 years. A daughter. 5 years old. Currently unemployed. Three siblings. Sisters. Father died. Mother never remarried. "What are your symptoms?" He noted everything she told him. Depression. Anxiety. Nightmares. Childhood sexual abuse was the last thing she mentioned.

Their eyes locked during the long pause.

You heard right, her eyes seemed to say. You’re probably thinking, ‘How can you just sit there? Straight-faced. Like some tough bitch. Pretending you didn’t just say what you did?’ I bet that’s what you’re thinking. But I’m not crying. Not yet. So stop staring at me.

Then Dr. Stern had continued with, “Okay. We’ll get back to that in a moment, but first tell me about your sleep patterns. What are they like? Do you drink? How much? What about fatigue? Concentration?” Then later, “Why are you here today?”

Isn’t it fucking obvious?

“I’m sorry, doctor. What do you mean?”

Why was she seeking therapy, he'd clarified, and what did she hope to accomplish?

He'd been mostly silent during the second half of the interview. It had seemed obvious that he wanted her to talk as much as possible. Dr. Stern had studied her facial expressions as she responded to his questions. He looked at her lips while she spoke, but

Lori pretended not to notice. He alternated between looking down on his notes as he wrote and looking up at her as she answered questions about her childhood. Was that a look of concern, she'd wondered? Well, at least he was pretending to be. Mostly, he was like a researcher conducting a fucking experiment, she remembered. Here I am again, doctor. I'm your specimen. Time for another dissection.

“I want to talk more about your childhood again, Lori,” He flipped to a specific page on the clipboard and pointed to a spot with his pen. “Is that okay?” He looked up at her to see if she agreed. He began by asking, “When were you the happiest?” Then, more details and questions followed: Happiest during kindergarten. Church on Sundays. Catholic. Then Jehovah’s Witness. Then Mormon. Not sure. Confused. None. Atheist.

While she spoke, his eyes moved cautiously about her. She pretended not to notice him looking at her legs, her tanned skin, and her intense, brown eyes. She knew they were intense. She knew that he knew they were intense. Almost as intense as her tone when she declared she was an atheist. Disappointed, or so it seemed to her, he asked her why. Lori responded with her own question, as if to challenge him, “Why? You want to know why I don’t believe in God?”

He replied with a nod.

“Dr. Stern, my father molested me from the time I was eight years old until I was eighteen. This was a man who took our family to church every Sunday. From my pew, I would watch him stand behind the pulpit and preach the gospel to the congregation with tears in his eyes. His fellow brothers and sisters were full of blind admiration for him and his unshakeable faith in The Lord. I listened to these people praise my father in God’s house, then went home to become a victim of his perversion within the privacy of those walls and closed doors. And I never stopped praying to God. I never stopped talking to

him, like he was a real person. Especially when I matured to the point of becoming aware of my situation, around the time I was eleven years old. I created my own prayer for when it started. 'In the name of Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ. Please, God, help me. Take me away from here. I beg you.' But God was nowhere to be found. Only me. Only me and the power of my inner voice. The inner voice that was forced to privately kill him every time just to survive the moment. I relied on no one but myself. I was all I had. Of course, I didn't realize it then. I didn't realize I had been deceived into believing a fairytale. I was only a child, and children believe in Santa Claus, the Tooth Fairy, the Easter Bunny, the monster under the bed. Children especially believe in God. That was me. That was me then. But I'm not that innocent child anymore, and I can't be imprisoned by an idea that was imposed upon me. It was chosen for me. I didn't choose it."

When the hour was up, Lori and Dr. Stern emerged from behind the door of the therapy room. "Please, remember to keep reading Wolynn's book," They shook hands. Lori was glad it was over. I survived another session, she thought.

He smiled before Lori walked away in the opposite direction. She walked down the grey hallway that led to a sliding glass window. There, she scheduled her next visit with the receptionist. Would she like a morning or afternoon visit, the lady asked repeatedly. Lori wasn't listening. From the corner of her eye, she saw him go into the restroom at the end of the long hallway. She couldn't get the image out of her mind: Dr. Stern masturbating in the restroom.

Night in the Brush

How does one tell a story like this? I never know where to begin. I've asked myself if this even has a beginning. Many times, I've wondered where it started. Did it start with him? Maybe someone did something to him. Is that why he did what he did? Maybe he did it, because that's all he knew. If that's the case, he was just repeating what he'd learned. Or was he just born that way, and what he did has no connection to anything else. I've tortured myself this way over and over again, but I'll never know. That's for sure. I know that now.

In the past, I've almost been on the verge of telling it to my friends. Those I thought were my friends and later discovered weren't. But, damn, am I glad I didn't do it. Experience has taught me that people use your suffering to feel better about themselves. They don't really care about you. That it's always better to wait and not act on impulse. Wait until you have no other choice. Like it happened to me on that night. As far as I remember, I felt I had no other choice…

"Why are you doing this?" I sobbed and sobbed.

My voice was soft. Not at all like the other me, the me raging in my head, causing me to shake in despair. I hate you. I hate you. I hate you, it rolled inside of me.

"Don't you know how much I love you?" I heard myself ask.

I wanted to hope for something better, hope that my plea would travel across the space between us, would somehow find a way to break through the prison walls that held him captive, would reach the ears of a loving father. I had hoped that my words would be magical, that the demon that possessed him would melt with the power of my words. It was easier for me to believe that something else made him do what he did. Easier to believe that it wasn't really my own father. I really hate you for doing this to me was all I

could think of inside, when I thought of how he looked. He had blindfolded me, but his face in my mind was clearer than ever.

"You don't have to do this." I reached out to see if he was there. He drove without saying a word.

I felt like a hostage negotiator—like I was bargaining for someone else's life. When he finally parked the car somewhere in a remote area, I knew all hope was lost. The run-down Cadillac we rode in was a hearse. My hearse and his hearse. It held the stone-cold corpse of our relationship. I didn't know it then, because that part of me was dead. And how can a corpse be conscious of its own death?

I heard the sound of him turning off the headlights before he tore the blindfold from my eyes.

He had begun blindfolding me when I was very young. I guess that's when it first started. Back then, I had no idea what was going on. I was only eight when it happened the first time. We're going to play a tasting game, okay? I remember him asking me. You can't tell anyone, he made me promise, it'll be our little secret. When the game was over, he untied the handkerchief and gently let it fall off…

An invisible cloud of dirt lingered in the air and stuck to my dripping mucus. I licked it off my lip like I had done many times when I was a child, when instead of dirt, the mucus was mixed with the flavor of Cheetos or vanilla ice cream. The salty mucus felt gritty in my mouth.

I struggled to see, as my eyes adjusted to the darkness. I began to look for the possibility of freedom, like one looks for an end to a nightmare. I looked all around, but I

couldn’t tell exactly where he'd taken us. I was almost sure that we were in the brush, at the very gates of hell, it seemed, somewhere between Brownsville and Boca Chica Beach. I could tell by the sound the road had made when he was driving us there. The road that led to the beach had spoken, had made itself known, as if to alert me. As if to resist with me.

It was a narrow and sloppily constructed road, certainly not a road of importance. That road was mostly traveled by local poor people on their way to a fishing spot near the mouth of the Rio Grande River, where it spills out into the Gulf of Mexico. Smaller, hidden dirt paths which led deep into the brush to target practice spots, or drinking spots, or to secret fishing holes near the ship channel, sporadically branched off of that main road. He had turned into one of those.

When I was around thirteen, I had overheard my older cousins talking about their boyfriends. We were at my grandparent’s house for a family New Year’s Eve party. All the adults were inside drinking and eating and dancing, while the cousins played outside in the courtyard. My older female cousins huddled together in a corner and didn’t want the younger cousins to be with them, so naturally, I became curious and wanted to hear what they were saying. I pretended not to care that they had excluded me by bouncing a ball off the wall, close to where they were huddled. I looked at the wall. Bounced the ball and listened. Bounced and listened: the road that leads to Boca Chica Beach…(bounce)…drove me out by…(bounce)…make out session…(laughter)…told Mom and Dad…(bounce)… never knew…can’t believe you went out there…(bounce)…dangerous…rumors that a couple went out there…(bounce)…Prom night…doing it in the car…bandits attacked them…(gasp)…beat him up, stole his wallet and watch… girl said they didn’t hurt

her…blindfolded her…I don't believe it…Why are you eavesdropping??…(silence)…She's gonna tell.

I had been down that road so many times, especially during the day when he'd take us shooting or fishing. The secret dirt paths and their dead ends weren't scary. Watch out for the rattlesnakes, he'd say. That was the real danger. We were always the only ones out there. The only signs that people had been there before us were the empty, aluminum beer cans with jagged holes where the bullets had pierced them, or broken glass, or bottle caps, or shell casings, or tangled up fishing lines with rusted hooks still attached to them…

I knew the way to that place very well, even with my eyes closed, because the main road had significant joint repairs, and the wheels made a galloping sound every second along the drive. My mind knew the sound very well, but I had never paid attention. It had never mattered. Until that night.

"I know you love you me," he finally responded, "but I can't help what I do. Something else in me makes me do it. I can't explain it."

That was the crack-head's response, words that almost sounded like they came from a frozen body. His throat must have been so burnt from years of drug use, because it caused his voice to shriek dissonantly when he spoke. Uttered in that oppressive darkness, my 17-year-old ears could swear, his was the voice of a demon. In the name of Jesus Christ, I command you to leave me alone, you have no power over me, I recited in my mind.

"Please. Please. Please. Stop this. I can't take it anymore. All my life has been a misery. I hate myself because of you. I hate my life. I don't want to live anymore. I'm disgusted with myself. I've spent years waiting. Hoping. Praying that my life would

change. That you'd be normal. Like a father. A real father. But my prayers are never answered. Because of you, I stopped believing in God. Do you understand?" I wasn't talking. I was screaming. My two fists held my hair by the sides of my head. "Many, many nights and days I've prayed to him, begging him to make you stop, asking him to take me from this world, just so I can be free of this. Free of you! But he's never answered any of my prayers!"

My sobbing turned to wails. I could sense his agitation and immediately regretted my outburst, but I couldn't stop my voice. I imagined him holding a gun, saying, Shut the fuck up, or I'll shoot you, and me holding his armed hand down against the seat with all my strength, begging him, No, Daddy, please don't hurt me, I'll be quiet, I promise.

I was broken girl, physically and mentally, just pieces of a being, something that once was. I had a doll like that once. I remember when I got her, I snapped her arms and legs and head back into her torso. I brushed her golden hair, wiped her crayon stained face with the wet corner of a towel. Her dress was stained and her eyelashes had been cut, but I didn't care. It's okay. See? All better. I smiled, and she smiled back. I'll take care of you, I had whispered into her ear.

But that night, every muscle on my body was tense and sore from being contracted during the thirty-minute-long drive to that dreaded place. It was almost like riding in a roller coaster, where playing with death is fun because it's such a remote possibility, except that night, in that seat, there was no telling when the ride would end. The hair on my head was messy from being pulled and gripped in despair. I was a mess.

I admit I panicked in fear, not knowing how the night would end. I had been in that state before, and I had always managed to make it out alive. This will end, the me inside

of me said. Hang in there. This will end, too. Soon you'll be free, it kept saying. But something about that night was different.

He had dragged me to the very edge of a precipice that threatened to swallow me whole, like the last bits of sand in an hour glass, how they accelerate as they fall through the hole. Except in my case, there was no flip side. In my desperation to resist being consumed by the event horizon, I panicked and rebelled. I rose against the force that had hijacked my essence for so long. I had to say something. I had to do something. The me inside my mind could no longer live, knowing that I was too scared to fight for my freedom, too scared to fight against my oppressor.

"You always preach to people, telling them about Heavenly Father, pretending that you're so good, but you're not! You're not good! If you were, you wouldn't hurt me!" I watched his face closely, afraid of how me might react. "If they only knew this side of you—the real you!" I almost couldn't believe those words came from my mouth.

"None of that matters. Now, nobody will ever know. After I kill you, I'm going to kill myself. Then we'll both be free."

An old box of black Hefty trash bags waited on the floor between our seats. It had been there for weeks, like something hidden in plain sight. But I had paid it no attention. When I became aware of myself, I felt shame. And with shame came resistance. The fun of the tasting game that had started when I was eight ended, and if someone would ask me to tell them when it ended, I wouldn't be able to say. It's like when you grow up. It happens gradually, every second, every minute, every day, week, month, every year we develop, we teethe, break out in acne, we menstruate, change, get taller, mature, and it all just happens, and before you know it, everything's different, and you aren't really sure of when any particular thing happened, and all you know is you're this different person, and

the past doesn’t matter, because you’re not the same, you’ve expanded, and nobody can shrink you back to size, nobody can put you back into the box, like a Jack-in-the-box, because you’re more than your body, and your mind can’t be imprisoned.

I grew to hate what he made me do. I grew to hate him. I resisted in my mind, because it was the only thing I could do. Eventually, I resisted with my body, too. I ran away. Faked seizures. Cut myself. Fucked anyone I wanted. The only thing I couldn’t bring myself to do was report him to the police. Over the years, he had been meticulous with how he worked on my fear. Had always threatened me. At first, it was I'll kill myself if you tell. I wouldn't want to keep living, he'd say. And of course, no daughter wants to be the reason for her father's death, so I promised him I wouldn't tell. Then, he'd threaten to hurt Mom. Eventually, he also threaten to kill me. Don’t even think of telling anyone, if you do, I’ll kill you. He was very graphic, too. He’d say, I’ll cut your body into parts, put them in black trash bags, and dump them in the brush, and, of course, I believed him… So, I knew the box of bags were for me when my eyes adjusted to the darkness, when I finally saw them threatening my existence.

Suddenly, I saw a reflection. I looked down and realized he had been gripping what looked like a freshly sharpened butcher knife in his right hand. It glared in the darkness like a mirror, forcing me to look at it. Forcing me to see my reality. I was terrified to look directly at it. I wanted to ignore it more than anything, to once again ignore how dirty I felt and just go through whatever disgusting crap he would force upon me. For a moment, I thought if I only blocked what was happening to me, and not anticipate what would happen to me, if I could only escape by means of my usual trance (I had done it before), create a gap in the reel of my existence, and jump across it, like one uses scattered boulders to jump across a stream, that it would not be real, and I would eventually thrust

myself to the other side, into the safety and freedom of a new day, like when one wakes up from a nightmare, relieved to be back to reality.

I panicked when I saw a light's glare—the glare of what was to come—reflect inside the darkness of the car again. It was hopeless. When I looked down, I saw the shiny blade. I don't even know where the light was coming from, and it didn't even matter. It could have been the moon, because there was no other source of light. But it, alone, revealed the threat and the solution. I thought, I'll unbuckle myself, open the door, escape, I might not be fast enough, he might cut me, I have to try. I had to do something. To scream. To fight for myself. To run. Anything. I devised several plans within the safety and privacy of my mind, but I knew it was hopeless. I tried to ignore another voice deep inside of me, a naked voice, one unencumbered by fear or emotions or familial bonds.

He had driven us far away from any neighborhoods. Outside, I believed there was freedom, but I was too scared to fight for it. There weren't any lights from any other cars, as far as I could see. All I could see was brush all around me. We were embedded in the primordial darkness of that night, the primordial darkness of our minds, and it was all because of him. I had to think of something, or else not think at all.

"But I haven't told anyone." I screamed, crying as the mucus and tears rolled over my stretched, trembling lips.

I lifted my face in desperation and pounded the back of my head against the headrest, my tears and sweat and mucus, all viscous, streaming down toward my neck, like lava flows out of a volcano, wetting my shirt's collar.

"Scream all you want to. Nobody will hear you." It was a demon talking.

It felt like he was taunting me, like he was angry, full of vengeance for my outburst.

All hope is lost. Nobody can help me now, I thought. The Walther's grip stuck out from the side pocket of his pants.

He had taught me shoot with his Walther. How I loved shooting that Walther. I felt in control holding that Walther. Once, I had even used that Walther to kill a snapping turtle that was sunning on the river's edge. Atta girl, he had said. You got it! That must be 50 feet away. Great aim! Deep inside of me, I regretted it, but I felt good when he hugged me in that way, in the way that I actually wanted to be hugged. I felt that maybe I wasn't really in control, but killing the turtle was worth the hug…

I saw the gun when he leaned back against the leather seat to unbutton his pants. He had laid the knife down on the dashboard in front of me, and I knew he wanted to scare me into submission, as he had many times before. Suddenly, he grabbed a fistful of my hair, and he forced my head down toward his crotch.

"NO!" I resisted and jerked my head back.

I'm not your daughter anymore, you monster! The me inside screamed at him. This is the last time you'll force me to suck your cock, the voice roared. The wave of its roar seemed to silently reach his ears hear the voice, seemed to let him know how hated he was, and he became angrier. When he reached toward the dashboard for the knife, I grabbed the gun from his pocket. The knife slid away toward the windshield, as if refusing to be his accomplice. He tried to lean forward to reach for it, but I guess he'd forgotten that he'd moved his seat back after he put the car in park. He was too far to reach it.

The gun became like an extension of my body. Just another part working for the whole, autonomically, like just like the lungs and the heart inside of that body. I used my

right thumb to release the safety and cocked the chamber. It was an instinct. I didn't even feel myself close my eyes right before I fired all six rounds.

Vita

Irma Leticia Nikicicz was born and raised in the border town of Brownsville, Texas. She earned her BA in English from Texas Southern University in Houston. Nikicicz holds a Bilingual MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Texas at El Paso, where she has taught undergraduate Rhetoric and Writing Studies in the English Department. She has acted as moderator and panelist in numerous conferences, most recently having participated in a panel at the Association of Writers & Writing Programs Conference 2019 in Portland, Oregon.

Email address: imimo@hotmail.com

This thesis/dissertation was typed by Irma Leticia Nikicicz.