2019-01-01

Ofelia the Saint

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OFELIA THE SAINT

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Master's Program in Creative Writing

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To my parents, Francisco and Soledad Duarte,
and to Ofelia.

OFELIA THE SAINT

by

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SAMUEL DUARTE

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

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Department of Creative Writing

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

December 2019

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A Critical Preface
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The first scene for *Ofelia the Saint* was written in the winter of 2004, on a flight back from Zapotan, a mountainous village in Michoacan Mexico where my wife's late mother, Ofelia, was born. Though I never had the opportunity to meet her, I recognized Ofelia's essence through the stories shared by her family. She seemed to be the archetype of the strong and resilient immigrant woman, the mother who believed tough love would prepare her daughter for the road ahead.

The story takes place between 1954 and 1979, during a period in which the Mexican economy boomed with rapid industrialization which included the mining industry. It centers around a young woman named Ofelia who rises up against a multinational mining company (*Empreza Stil*) that forces itself upon her ancestral land and traces her passage from birth to womanhood, challenging authority and inspiring the women in her village to break away from gender constraints and reclaim their land along the way. When I imagined Ofelia living in the village, she emerged as a playfully rebellious, strong-willed ten year old girl, ready to challenge the world, or at least challenge the traditional gender roles guarded by its paternalistic society. It became apparent that a woman with Ofelia's drive would find it increasingly difficult to negotiate around the domestic, political, and religious institutions that challenge women's ascent to a much greater degree. From there, other female protagonists began to appear, each facing personal issues that would culminate around Ofelia's evolutionary journey.

Ofelia's coming-of-age journey further resonated with me after a visit to the Monarch Butterfly Biosphere Reserve in Michoacan. This is an overwintering site where millions of butterflies gather between October and March. The remarkability of this creature, its yearly

migration, its generational resiliency and ability to carry an instinctual survival mechanism, seemed to personify Ofelia's tenacity. In my research, I learned about the Monarch Butterfly's fourth generation known as the Methuselah Generation. Unlike its ancestors, who live up to five weeks or so, this generation lives up to eight months. With this in mind, Ofelia became the fourth child in the novel and her life would be divided into four parts, each part focused on a different stage in life cycle of the Monarch Butterfly. I developed the story around these stages and tentatively titled the novel *Ofelia and the Journey of the Monarch Butterflies* until I noticed a much stronger theme emerge. The theme revolved around Ofelia's moral character as defined by culture and society, including by the governing and religious bodies ruling over the village. I saw how her challenging of these norms would stigmatize her as "rebellious" and "unholy," and how Catholicism and Protestantism play a direct and indirect part in creating a stronger hierarchical presence through which Ofelia and the women of Zapotan have to navigate.

But there is a more neutral presence in Ofelia that encompasses the institutionalized and moralistic order of her time. She cannot be defined or packaged by those external forces and therefore, operates outside of their control. Seeing how she would push back on existing social norms, the title "Ofelia the Saint" emerged. The title is meant to create a juxtaposition between the main protagonist, Ofelia, and the meaning of the word "*Saint*" which comes from the Latin "*sanctus*." The word translated into Greek (*hagios*), is derived from the verb "*hagiazo*," meaning "to set apart," "*to sanctify*," or "*to make holy."* The name "*Ofelia*" means "*who assists*" or "*helps,*" in Greek. This was all a welcoming discovery given how uneasy I had felt about having another book that uses the butterfly as metaphor.

Similarly, the first part of the novel introduces other village men and women who are dealing with their own needs and wants, and with the power dynamics working for or against

them. How these dynamics keep them from reaching their goals largely depends on their social status, their gender, and the characteristics and experiences unique to each one. These are magnified when Empreza Stil takes over the village and the villager's lives. The reactions vary, but the purpose is to show these characters breaking away from their constraints, challenging norms, and most importantly, challenging what they thought to have known. As the backstories develop, we see Ofelia's unconventional personality come through, though the totality of her personality is never complete.

Empreza Stil is part of an international conglomerate based out of an unknown location, though its entity is based on research of a Canadian based mining company known to have extensive operations in the region where the story takes place. The face of Empreza Stil is a Mr. Gudman who appears only once, during a meeting with a local wealthy rancher named Don Bojorquez. This meeting is the initial foot-in-the-door for Empreza Stil. From then on, it is Don Bojorquez and his questionable henchmen who begin their full-blown campaign to take over the land near the village of Zapotan where large mineral deposits are found.

The first villagers to be recruited are two young men named Juan Diego and Pazcuaro. Both seem to be on opposite sides in terms of their personalities. Pazcuaro is insecure, but desperate to prove his manhood. Juan Diego is ambitious and full of bravado, though most of it is for show. His motivation to work for Don Bojorquez is an opportunity to show everyone that h has "made it." What happens with these two men will be part of the overall theme as it relates to gender roles, the instinctual inclinations of men, including the learned and unlearned characteristics that propel each one toward a conclusion that causes each to switch roles in what may seem to be extreme ways.

Most importantly, the story follows a group of women whose most significant conversations occur amongst themselves. Just like the men, they search to fulfill their wants and to free themselves from the constraints prescribed by a developing culture that places their dreams and individualities to the side. The main women we follow are Doña Eli, Jovi, and Mari. With the exception of Jovi, at least in the beginning, we sense their desperation to break away from what's expected. By all appearances, the strongest woman is Doña Eli, a widow in her late forties who lives in the cottage closest to the river. She is the most outspoken, fearless woman, and yet there is something unsettling in the fact that she never leaves her cottage. Eli struggles with her husband's controlling demeanor, while Jovi serves as the peacemaker, the calm friend who soothes. Later in the novel, at the height of Empreza Stil's campaign, it is Jovi who suffers the biggest tragedy.

One of the toughest questions that arose during the writing process was the question of appropriation. I was concerned about whether or not I would be able to write this from women's perspective. But it didn't start off that way. Ofelia embodied a genderless personality to me, one whose dreams, motivations, and desire for autonomy, were universal and an extension, perhaps, of my own voice. I first came across this concern when, in developing Ofelia's grandmother's story, she came across as a one-dimensional cliché of the nearly voiceless and abnegated woman, whose history had been written for. As I researched the Soldadera, I came across a book titled *México's Nobodies, The Cultural Legacy of the Soldadera and Afro-Mexican Women* by. B. Christine Arce, which talks about how popular culture, including stories involving heroines largely written by men, are exoticized. Corridos, novels, murals, photography, films, theater, and music refer to the women of the Revolution with respite, always at a distance and that these were not the stories of the "whole" woman.

One of the first works that influenced my writing, was Gabriel Garcia Marquez' "One Hundred Years of Solitude." The narrative omniscient voice, especially, captivated me. With its ability to weave itself in and out of people's life and such rapidity while never losing the characters, kept me enthralled. The first paragraph of "Ofelia the Saint," in fact, was an attempt to capture both an intimate view of the village of Zapotan through Ramona, while creating the illusion of a more expansive story to come. I tried to do this by introducing the Monarcas soccer team and their match in the Capital City of Morelia, to create that expansion; "On the evening when the Monarchs soccer team faced their number one rival in the Capital City of Morelia, nearly eight-hundred kilometers away…" The next part of this sentence introduces the reader to a more intimate or grounded image, which is that of one of the main characters walking down the mountainside of her village; "…a woman named Ramona walked down the mountainside of her village with an earthen jar on her shoulder, an oil lamp, and a child inside her belly." It wasn't a direct attempt at imitating Marquez' own beginning in his masterpiece in which he creates the grand illusion of creation and discover while introducing his first protagonist; "Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendia was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice." From there on out, the story moves in an incredible, imagery-laden pace. Similarly, I wanted to moved my novel in a manner that could weave stories while guiding it toward a center, in this case being Ofelia.

The magical-realism in the novel was also inspired by Marquez. But other authors and their works influenced this as well, such as Alfred Avila's "Mexican Ghost Tales of the Southwest," Juan Rulfo's "Pedro Paramo," and Juno Diaz' "The Brief Wonderful Life of Oscar Wao. Both Avila's and Rulfo's' work, helped to create the more mystical moments of the novel, such as when Jovi visits the Ungara Gypsy or the backstory of the Spirit of Don Ernaldo del

Chorumo, with its ghostly elements. Rulfo, especially, with his ability to create both an absence and presence of spirit in such magical ways, informed this area of my work in ways no other reading could. Similarly, it was Juno Diaz' "The Brief Wonderful Life of Oscar Wao," that showed me that Magical Realism can be present without overtaking the narrative or suspending disbelief.

In pursuing the overall development of the "heroines," in my novel, it was important to capture the multi-dimensionality of the principal female characters and avoid patronizing, over-mythologizing, or creating clichés from the dominant male perspective. I found myself doing this in the development of Francisca, Ofelia's grandmother who had fought in the Mexican Revolution as a female warrior known as "Soldaderas." Her personality came off as the mystical, strong, wise and nurturing old woman, whose patience could fill a room. But when I discovered the book "Mexico's Nobodies: The Cultural Legacy of the Soldadera and Afro-Mexican Women," by B. Christine Arce, I realized that I was creating a caricature of an image enforced by mainstream entertainment and by particular histories largely written by men. Francisca's original personality in regards to her relationship with Ofelia, was that of a giving women. Arce points out that the women in the Revolution have been folklorized figures in the annals of history. That had been my approach because that is how I was informed. And so the new approach I took with developing Francisca and other female characters, I made sure not to box in their personality and show them as raw and human as possible. In the case of Francisca and her relationship with Ofelia, she turned out to be more expressive in her wants and needs, and much of her personality emerged without my having to overdevelop it.

Francisca's and Ofelia's development was also informed by the history of the Mexican Revolution and the women who participated in the battlefields. Two of the works that served this

purpose was Jocelyn Olcott's "Revolutionary Women in Post-Revolutionary Mexico, and Stephanie Mitchell's, "The Women's Revolution in Mexico." Though nothing specific to the war is actually in the novel, I was able to better understand the role women played during that era, and to have Francisca's backstory and her participation in the war, seem more credible. And although Ofelia is much too young to have been involved in that war, I intended to create a generational connection via her own eventual uprising against the mines, and show a similarity in the manner in which she takes on the powerful mining company. Both women confront the powers that be, as well as the expectations as to what they can and can't contribute to society or movement. Gertrude Yeager's "Confronting Change, Challenging Tradition, Women in Latin American History," gave a good overview as to the barriers women have faced, giving, once again, the female characters in my novel the multi-dimensionality I was looking for.

Similarly, Jessica Hoffman's "Feminisms in Motion: Voices of Justice, Liberation, and Transformation," was critical in informing the undercurrents of a hierarchal system largely controlled by men, and of the politics of privilege that cause oppression and violence against women. The most obvious influence this writing had in my novel, was in some of the characters, such as when Francisca, Profe Pimentel, or Jovi speak. It is these characters, apart from Ofelia's eventual awakening to becoming the central voice, that speak to the feminist vision, if you will, and whose domestic experiences best intersect with the politics of their community.

The overall history of Mexico, and in particular to the state where it takes place, Michaocan, Earl Shorris' "The Life and Times of Mexico," and Angelica Jimena Afanador's "The Revolution of Michoacan and the Politics of Representation in Colonial Mexico," served as rich sources in which Mexico's overall history could be depicted authentically and with its full history in mind. Margaret Chowing's "Wealth and Power in Provincial Mexico," was also key in

bringing the politics to the forefront, especially in regards to the dynamics surrounding the village of Zapotan in the novel in relation to its local, state, and federal politics, and its history as to the ownership of land. When the village debates as to whether or not they should allow for the exploitation of their land, there is, at one point, a full discussion in which this history is taken into consideration.

The arc of the first part of the novel, introduces the key players in what will become a confrontation between the villager's and the mining company, and also a confrontation with themselves as it pertains to their own struggles. The arc of the first part of the story, leads to the initiation of the mining company and the beginning of tensions, as well as Ofelia coming of age during the industry's takeover. We see the threading of stories by the various characters in each chapter, each taking positions as to whether or not they would accept the mining company, offering them progress and opportunity, and those who can see the problems this would bring. Major works that inform the mining industry are Napoleon Gomez' "Collapse of Dignity: The Story of a Mining Tragedy and the Fight Against Greed and Corruption in Mexico," particularly how the mining unions face resistance to better working conditions and pay from the industry, the government, and from criminal organizations.

There was also a more personal reason for the writing of this story. The 2004 visit to Mexico was my first visit to the "real Mexico," the Mexico that exists away from the border town I was born in, and further still from the Valley of San Joaquin where my family migrated to when I was seven. The visit to the village of Zapotan awakened a desire to explore the deeper aspects of my ancestral land. Ofelia became that vehicle. As I wrote those first scenes back then, fired up by my youthful naivete, I figured I would write the novel in less than a year. Fifteen years later I have learned that inspiration is only part of the ingredient toward achieving

something. You also need struggle and resistance before any worthwhile discovery. I also realize that I couldn't have produced this on my own. I am indebted to my wife, Jessica, for her encouragement and intuition. There were many time that whenever the work stalled, she helped to open the way. My parents too, Soledad and Francisco Duarte, have been a tremendous inspiration. Their experiences as immigrants gave me a more personalized point of view, and my father's amassing of books from across genres, in both Spanish and English, served as doorways to my falling in love with the arts of writing. I also want to thank Jessica's family for their generosity and their welcoming spirit, and to Ofelia, the woman I never met but whose imprint on earth remains strong.

PART I
1948 - 1968

Chapter One
PROLOGUE
Village of Zapotan
1948

On the evening when Las Monarcas soccer team faced their number one rival in the Capital City of Morelia, nearly eight-hundred kilometers away, a woman named Ramona walked down the mountainside of her village with an earthen jar on her shoulder, an oil lamp, and a child inside her belly. She stepped carefully over the vein-like furrows drawn by the torrential rains from previous weeks. The only rainclouds lay to the east, lingering high above the Sierra Madre Mountains like volcanic ash where rumbling bursts of light crackled. To the west, the sun began to settle, casting long shadows across the venerable village where wicks would soon flicker like fireflies inside cottages made of rough-hewn wood slats dabbed with mud.

Halfway down the mountain, Ramona's dog came running behind her, tongue hanging out, and with his defected right-hind leg twirling like a dirty rag in midair. Ramona picked up a rock and hissed, "Sh-taa!" she said, but the scraggly mutt kept coming and he ended up scuttling alongside her, sniffing here and there, moving swiftly despite his lifeless leg. She used to find his leg funny, the way it stuck out in a permanent pissing position. Or how, whenever he peed, he'd spin to keep it out of the stream's way, only to soak it every time. Now she couldn't find humor in anything, not with the incessant bouts of nausea, belching, and gas, or the deep sadness that had plagued the pregnancy throughout.

At the bottom of the mountain, Ramona and El Tres crossed a dirt path and stepped onto the plaza. It was lonelier than usual. Only a handful of children were running about while two lovers on a bench watched a pair of boys aim their slingshots at a row of bottles propped up

before them. But on the other side of the plaza, across the main cobblestone road, a group of men had gathered around a battery-powered radio outside Don Celestino's storefront counter. They were listening to a soccer game being transmitted from Morelia. Though unranked at the beginning of the season, Las Monarcas had made it to the finals and to this the men drank pulque and ron and smoked good cigarettes in place of the unfiltered Cigarrillos Alas. Whenever the team made a good play, the men cheered and smiled, wide corn-colored smiles. But if the team made the slightest mistake, or if the sportscaster pinpointed to the superiority of the opposing team, as he did that moment, they would erupt with insults.

"Que chingados!" said a man called Insecto because of his bulging eyes. "What does he know?"

"He doesn't know anything!" said the one known as Chicle because of his overgrown gums.

"He's been paid off!" said another, followed by a fourth, fifth, sixth, and so on, until they, just as abruptly, fell silent.

Among these men was Ramona's husband, Salvador, who sat next to his donkey looking as angry as he would on the happiest of days. Perhaps this was because of his deep jawline and mane of unruly hair, or because his bushy brows slanted inward toward an aquiline nose pointing down to his thin undecorated lips. Her father had never liked him. He used to call him a "no good Indio" with nothing but a dull machete and a flatulent donkey to call his own. When she was sixteen, he wanted her to marry a thirty-eight-year-old rancher named Rafael Bojorquez who owned a dozen cattle and a grove that produced some of the most beautiful mangos anyone ever saw. With her father's permission, he took her on long walks through his grove, always with her eagle-eyed aunt walking a few paces behind. During their walks, all he talked about were his

'joyas,' his jewels, how they originated from Burma, India, and Malasia, and were brought from Portugal to Brazil before spreading across the Americas. After one such stroll, he showed her how to propagate one. He extracted the embryo and planted it in a seedling bed. But all Ramona could think about was Salvador, how he'd shimmy up palms trees with his bare feet when she wanted a fresh coco, or when he'd serenade her or recite one of his atrocious quatrains with his raspy voice.

By then, they had resorted to using hand signals and lip reading to communicate because her father didn't want him anywhere near. When this wasn't enough, their friends arranged clandestine meetings under the Zancudo Bridge. They wouldn't meet for long because prying eyes and ears were as prevalent as corn stalks in those regions. Ramona eventually grew tired of the whole thing and so, during one such rendezvous, asked Salvador to kidnap her.

'Midnight is best,' she said. 'Preferably under a full moon. It's more romantic that way. And make sure to wear dark charro garb and borrow a nice steed. I don't want your donkey's farts anywhere near. When you're ready,' she continued, 'give the secret signal, and I'll climb out my window and run towards you. Make sure you gallop ahead, but not too fast. Let me catch up. And as soon as you see me running beside you, lift me onto the saddle and we'll ride off into the woods.'

Salvador scratched his head.

'And what's our secret signal?' he asked.

'A búho's hoot," she said. Then added, 'And don't worry, my father's a lousy shot.'

This last bit of information worried Salvador. He had heard many stories of jealous fathers killing their daughter's thieves during similar attempts and didn't want to become another casualty. In all truth, these killings were rare, mostly accidental. It was more of a ritual, a way for

fathers to let go of their daughters without feeling guilty that they didn’t do enough to protect them. Either way, Salvador felt sick to his stomach. But as the day neared, he summoned enough courage to gallop over to Ramona's cottage, except it wasn't a gallop because El Pedorro walked as though he was being led to the slaughter and Salvador didn't ride him because the obstinate ass wouldn't move after a few yards. Salvador pulled him most of the way. He led him up to a ridge and crept under the brush. When he peeked out, he saw two rabid dogs sniffing the air. Salvador was ready. He had practiced the secret signal for weeks and had come close to imitating an owl. But just as he called out, the thought of Ramona's father shooting him popped into his head, and the intended 'hoot-hoot' sounded more like a dying chicken's cluck. It didn't matter. Ramona was ready. And so was her father.

'That's him, Fernanda,' he said, tugging at his sleeping wife.

'Who?' she said.

He reached for his carbine and stomped to the window.

'That no good Indio,' he said, resting the firearm against the sill. 'He's pretending to be a chicken. But I can see him now, that fool. He's hiding up on that ridge. And there's the whore of your daughter now, climbing out the window. And now she’s stepping all over my pepper plants,“ he said, steadying the barrel. "Si, Fernanda," he said, 'I have a clear shot.'

"Don't hurt him," Fernanda said, slumping back into bed. 'And be careful not to shoot our daughter.'

He had long ago given up arranging her marriage and didn't fire a single shot, not even a warning shot. Ramona, on the other hand, had imagined a more dramatic scene; an escape amidst a flurry of gunfire; a horseback ride with her arms clasped around her man's waist dressed in a ruffled shirt and a jacket decorated with buttons, and a full night of lovemaking under a silver

moon. Who knew she would spend the night nursing Salvador's ankle and a welt on his head the size of an egg after El Pedorro sent them tumbling to the ground.

Years later, when Ramona asked her mother why her father hadn't tried saving her, her mother said, 'Oh no, Ramona. He *did* try. But his carbine jammed, and by the time he fixed it, you two were long gone.'

The truth was that after Ramona and Salvador rode into the woods, her father cursed under his breath. He tossed the carbine to the floor and slipped back into bed.

'Are they gone?' asked a groggy Fernanda.

'Yes, Vieja,' he said. 'They're gone.'

'Good,' she sighed. 'It's about time. Now let's get some sleep.'

Ramona broke away from these memories and crossed the main cobblestone road and reached the Zancudo Bridge. With his gunk-filled eyes, El Tres watched Ramona hunch over and moan, and then step over the planks jostling under her feet. Now the night had broken over the mountains and Ramona lit her lamp. After the pain dissipated, they crossed the bridge and walked down Chorumo Road, past a giant Oyamel tree on which a leathery umbilical cord was nailed to its massive trunk. Ramona crossed herself. She did so again as they walked past the cemetery, and a third time when they stepped into a steep trail leading to the moonlit river below.

"This is it, Tres," she said, lodging the lamp on the rocky bank.

El Tres tilted his head. Through his gunk-filled eyes, he watched her lift her skirt above her knees and tie a pair of knots. The contractions intensified. They felt as though the child was somersaulting and wringing her entrails at the same time. During a pause, she grabbed her jar and stepped knee-deep into the river. If she gave birth, the currents would take the child’s body to wherever its end and everyone would lament her loss.

As she angled the jar's mouth against the current, a sharp pain forced her to let go of the jar. She lunged forward and held herself against the stony bottom. In the distance, the jar bobbled away and chattered, sending its smaller pieces further down the river while the heavier ones sunk to the bottom, some of them with their sharp edges pointing toward the starry sky. El Tres whimpered. He moved back and forth as if wishing to have human hands. Ramona opened her mouth and let out such a heartrending wail that it burrowed itself below the earth's thick foliage and startled the three-women sitting outside the cottage closest to the river. Like a gust of wind, it shot up the trail over which they had come and moved along Chorumo Road, shuttering the cemetery's weathered crosses and wreaths peeking from the undergrowth, and causing maize stalks and palm trees to sway in an uncomfortable dance. Moving fast, her shrill rattled the leathery umbilical cord on the Giant Oyamel and reverberated across the bridge with its planks clapping over its rotting foundation. Stunned, the lovers in the plaza pulled away from one another, and the slingshot-wielding boys let their projectiles drop to the floor. Even the men outside Don Celestino's straightened their spines in bewilderment.

"What in the devil was that?" one of them said.

"That's a wolf."

"That's not a wolf. Wolves don't sound like that."

The men fell silent.

Then, from a corner where no light could penetrate through, a large Mexican match flared. It was Pasita, the Chief Elder believed to be nearing the century-year-old mark but whose vigor and awareness rivaled that of younger men.

"That sounded to me," he said, "like the Spirit of Don Ernaldo del Chorumo."

A nineteen-year-old named Juan Diego scoffed.

“Bah!" he said, “Nothing but superstitions, old man. I believed it when I was a boy. I’m a grown man now. I see things as they truly are."

“Have some respect, Juanito,” the men reprimanded.

"Look at you," Juan Diego laughed. "Grown men believing in *cuentos*."

Just then, the sportscaster went into a frenzy.

‹Gooool!› he shouted. The opposing team had scored again and the men raised their fists and cursed as if their voices would reach the Grand Stadium of Morelia through the airwaves and as if nothing else mattered at that very moment.

Chapter One
An Open Womb

Shortly before Ramona and El Tres reached the river, a squat man of forty-three named Grifoldo and a young man named Patzcuaro, led a junta of oxen and a corn-filled oxcart back to the village. Both were in good spirits because Grifoldo's maize harvest was healthy and plentiful. Grifoldo was especially proud because Patzcuaro had matured in many ways. His shoulders had broadened and his once slangy posture now resembled a bull's.

"You'll not deny me a round of beers tonight, eh?" said Grifoldo from underneath his drooping mustache.

Patzcuaro's chest swelled.

"Thank you, Don Grifoldo," he said.

The grave-looking man lifted his sombrero.

"Don't thank me, cabron," he said. "You worked hard. You're not the same snot-nosed kid from a few months back."

Patzcuaro was about to apologize but Grifoldo told him not to do that either.

"Take life by the ahuácatls," he said, simulating the weight of testicles in the air. "Hold on to them, like this, and squeeeze everything out of em."

Patzcuaro assured Grifoldo he would take life by the balls and that next season, he swore to the Holy Mother of God, they would have a bigger harvest, buy better equipment, hire more hands, and in turn become as rich, if not richer, than Don Bojorquez, the wealthiest ranchero in those regions. Grifoldo lifted the kerchief around his neck and wiped the sweat off his face. He had heard many young men say similar things and wanted to call him a 'tonto,' a fool, but decided to let the young man's optimism live for the moment.

As they neared the cemetery, Ramona's cry stopped them in their tracks. Patzcuaro unsheathed his machete and assumed a striking pose.

"What was that?" he said.

"The hell do I know," said Grifoldo, scanning the darkness. A moment later a large shadowy animal jumped from the wayside and the men scurried behind the oxcart like lizards. The beast growled. It moved closer, baring its teeth. Grifoldo turned to Patzcuaro.

"I don't have my machete," he said. "Go out there and cut that beast's head off."

Patzcuaro had never killed anything that large before. Once, when he was ten, his father handed him a knife and pointed at a wounded pig's jowl.

"Plunge it here," he said. "It's where the main artery runs."

His father's friends stood around with drinks in hand, their eyes brimming with anticipation. But when the boy saw the bullet hole between the convulsing pig's eyes up close, he dropped the knife and ran off with peels of laughter trailing behind. Now, he stepped out from behind the oxcart and walked slowly toward the beast.

"Get him good!" Grifoldo said.

Patzcuaro took a deep breath. He raised the machete over his head and, just as he was within striking distance, the beast stepped onto a moonlit patch to reveal himself to be no beast at all, but Ramona's scrawny mutt!

With a sigh of relief, Patzucaro announced his finding.

"It's El Tres!" he said.

"Eh?" Grifoldo said.

"It's El Tres. And it looks like he wants us to follow."

"What? You talk to dogs now?"

It was easy to see what El Tres wanted because he pointed his snout back and forth from the spot he had come. Without another word, Patzcuaro stepped into the brush and slashed his way down a dense trail. Grifoldo stood alone now, his eyes sweeping over the mass of mountains and trees. Above him, a búho dug its talons into the bark and rotated its head.

"Cabron," he said under his breath. "We should've got those beers I promised."

He tethered his oxen and followed Patzcuaro and El Tres to the river where Patzucaro had found Ramona wreathing against a downed tree. Her gown was soaked and scrunched over her thighs. Patzcuaro had taken off his shirt and wrapped it around her. The men lifted her and they carried her along the river's edge like a hammock between two trees.

The first to hear them was Doña Eli, a robust woman in her mid-forties who lived in the cottage closest to the river. She was sitting around a fire drinking a Cuba with her friends, a self-proclaimed fortuneteller named Jovi and a forlorn-looking woman named Mari, when she heard the men's cries. The women stood and looked confusingly about.

"It's that imbecile of your husband, my dear Mari," Eli said. "I recognize a pig's wail when I hear one."

Mari recognized Grifoldo's voice too. It made her tremble. She started walking away but Ramona stopped her in her tracks.

"You're not going anywhere, my dear Mari," she said. "You're staying right here." Then she pointed to her cottage. "Go!" she said "The both of you! Go prepare for a delivery!"

Jovi grabbed Mari by her arm and went inside. Eli gulped the rest of her drink. She whistled at the men using her fingers and a moment later saw El Tres walk out of the dark. Then came Grifoldo and Patzcuaro, struggling to keep Ramona from twisting out of their grasp. When Grifoldo's and Eli's eyes met, she scowled and said his name in the way that reflected her

disgust. He did the same, except he scrunched his nose as though an acrid stench had suddenly filled the air. Making sure that El Tres didn't squeeze through, Eli held the door. And as the men walked past the fire, her attention was suddenly drawn to the shirtless young man holding Ramona by her pits. It was as if Patzcuaro had suddenly emerged as a majestic butterfly - or rather - a lion. She could see a network of veins running down his neck and branching out across his brawny chest. If she gasped, she didn't hear it, because of the sudden desire overtaking her loins.

"Where do we put her?" The agitated voice snapped her out of her thoughts. She pointed the men to a makeshift bed softened with straw and blankets. Jovi rushed to Ramona's side. She soothed her arms and whispered words of encouragement while Mari stood over the adobe furnace, cutting and dipping rags into a kettle. She had felt Grifoldo's sharp glare the moment he came in. On his way out, he opened his mouth, but Eli shut him down.

"She's not going anywhere, Grifo," she said amidst Ramona's moans. "Why don't you make yourself useful and go find that husband of hers. Tell him he's about to have a fourth child."

Grifoldo mumbled. He flounced out and disappeared into the dark. As the young man headed to the door, Eli startled him to a stop.

"Hey Patzcuarito?" she said, smiling coquettishly. "I could really use some help around here from time to time." She leaned closer. "I've got a few things needing attention."

A glimpse of her generous cleavage made him conscious of how his body had suddenly become mush.

"Alright - Doña Eli," he managed to say.

“Please,” she said. “Call me Eli.” She stepped aside and let the man-boy walk clumsily out the door.

Eli rallied back around the women.

“That young man,” she said, grabbing a jar filled with pig’s fat. “He’s sure bulging like a horse. Don’t you ladies believe?”

The women blushed.

“For goodness sakes, Eli,” said Jovi. “He’s much too young.”

Eli opened the jar.

“Sixteen, seventeen, you think?”

Eli snickered and fed Ramona a spoonful of fat.

“He looked like a man to me,” she said.

Jovi took a feather and directed the sage smoke over Ramona’s feet. Mari placed boiled rags under Ramona’s hips and kept her from digging her nails into the bed’s wooden frame.

“It’s going to be a boy,” said Jovi.

“How can you possibly know,” said Mari.

“Because it’s stubborn like one. And because I read it in my tarot cards, no more than a week ago..”

“Oh please, dear Jovi,” said Eli. “Spare us your predictions. You never get them right. I bet the yellow-eyed Ungara who visits the village has more talent than you.”

To women’s surprise, Mari spoke up and said it was an unfair comparison because the yellow-eyed Ungara consulted with the devil. And who can compete with that?

“Well it doesn’t matter,” Jovi said. “As long as the child is healthy, we’ll count our blessings.”

“Ha!” mocked Doña Eli. “Come, my dearest Jovi. Everyone knows life is much more difficult for a woman.”

Jovi’s eyes watered. For many years she was unable to conceive. She had pleaded to the Saints for a child, promising to dedicate her life to the church. And so, each morning, after preparing her husband’s meal and sending him off to work, she would sweep the church, dust and polish the wooden pews, the altar, the crucifix, the brass chalice, the ciborium and communion tray, and make sure the votive candles were lit and the withering flowers replaced. She would wash the silky drape on the communion table, sweep the paths meandering along the rose garden behind the church, and tend to the San Frances de Assisi statue, requiring her to climb a ladder and detail the marbled saint from head to toe. Only then would she go home to finish her chores. And at night, no matter how exhausted, she would recite a prayer over her ovaries before turning seductress so her husband could perform.

The years went by and she neared the age when giving birth was more difficult. She bedded a few men from the village to assure herself that her husband wasn’t at fault. But unless an epidemic of male infertility was running rampant, nothing changed. Then, in the winter of 51,’ when the Ungaro Gypsies visited the village, she went to the tent Father Ignacio had prohibited everyone to enter, to see the gypsy woman rumored to have half-moon irises and nails so long they had become flesh. When Jovi stepped inside, the warm hypnotic plumes of amber, white pepper, and lotus, enveloped her. Around her stood liquid-filled jars containing hair and beads, roots and plants, bone and tissue, and other strange things resembling animal parts. Then came the serene voice asking if she wanted a child.

“Yes,” Jovi nodded. She tried making out the details of the figure sitting cross-legged at the far end of the tent. The women motioned her forward. Jovi expected to see the features

rumored of the witch, but instead found a light-skinned woman with sky-blue eyes, wearing a handkerchief on her head, and a fine array of jewelry around her neck, wrists, and fingers. At arms length, the woman reached for Jovi's hands.

"Hmm," she said, looking closely. Then she let them go and placed her ear over Jovi's belly.

"Oh," she said. "I see."

"You see?" Jovi said. "What do you see?"

The woman gazed up.

"Many sacrifices come with having a child," she said. "With much love comes much pain."

"Yes," Jovi said. "I know. And I'm fine with that."

Without another word, the woman mixed an infusion of thyme, chamomile, and skunk sweat, and had Jovi gulp it down. She handed the cup back and then noticed that the woman was getting smaller and smaller, and her voice more distant, as though she were falling in a void. Jovi looked at the ground. The world was spinning under her feet. Above her, a wave of colorful musicians and acrobatic performers appeared. They danced and spun around an orange moon decorated with trees and carnations, and with a sea so vast that the idea of it having no end, caused Jovi to panic. Dropping a handful of coins, she rushed out and slid back into bed, careful not to wake her husband. It didn't matter. Like many other nights, he pretended to sleep.

Not long after that, Jovi gave birth to a boy everyone considered a miracle and who was named after that very phenomena - Milagro.

With this in mind, Eli turned to Jovi.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “You’re absolutely right. As long as the child is healthy, it doesn’t matter what gender it is.”

They women held hand for a second and rallied around Ramona again. But the child was adamant. It held on to her mother’s feeding tubes and to the lining of her *tipili* with such force, that Ramona’s ligaments stretched and popped over her bones. The child didn’t give way until the wee hours of the morning. The women smiled. It was a girl.

They cleaned the afterbirth and placed the child on Ramona’s chest. But Ramona looked lost with a distant gaze.

“What’s her name?” A voice could be heard.

“She doesn’t have one.”

“Ramona? What’s the girl’s name?”

“Isn’t it bad luck?”

“Is that what they say?”

“That’s what they say.”

“Where did you hear that?”

“Somewhere. I don’t know. That’s what they say.”

Chapter Two

Ofelia

When Father Ignacio, the young, charismatic priest with a receding hairline, heard about the trouble Ramona was having naming her newborn, he decided to intercede. He prayed each morning before the wooden crucifix in the altar and visited each of the seven Apostles housed in the evenly-spread niches in the interior diameter of the church. He would pray before the San Frances de Assisi, an unfinished, nearly ten-foot-tall marbled statue standing in front of the church, and stroll the church garden in a meditative state asking that a name be manifested in his heart. He did this until finally, in the predawn hours of the fifth week, he awoke with an ecclesiastical smile and with a name revealed in his mind.

After donning his robe, he went to his kitchenette to grind a handful of coffee and brew a cup over a portable petrol cooker. With cup in hand, he stood by the window and looked at the sky, half of it dressed in orange-yellow hues, the other in deep lavenders and blues oozing over what remained of the night. Only three years before, Father Ignacio had been living in the Convent of San Buenaventura, under the monastic catacombs connecting the city. Much of what was happening outside remained unknown to him throughout those years. When he was finally ordained, and he stepped out into the world, he realized that he couldn't maintain the most basic of human connections. He couldn't have a mundane conversation without elevating his speech pattern to sound as though he had suddenly appeared from the sky. Then again, wasn't that the purpose? To fully dedicate oneself to a profession, a particular field of study to embody it fully?

He placed his cup down and entered the vestibule. He slipped on his soutane and wrapped a clerical collar around his neck, then attached his collarino over his clerical collar and concluded that "yes," it was his responsibility to connect the divine with the mundane; to heal the brokenhearted, bind their wounds and restore them into righteousness with words and actions.

He looked himself in a small ivory-framed mirror and tugged at the collarino so that the small white square centered at the base of his throat. As he adjusted his collar, he heard sweeping coming from the temple. It was Jovi who, even after her little miracle's birth, had never failed show.

When he entered the temple, the first thing he noticed was three-year-old Milagro making his way to the altar.

"Blessed morning, Jovi," the priest said, making the sign of the cross and side-eyeing the boy.

"Good morning, Father," she said. She stood between the pews with a rag and a cup filled with vinegar.

"He's getting big, Jovi," said the priest, calculating the distance between the boy and the Holy Table's decorative mantel.

"Yes, he is," said Jovi, moving on to the next row. "I can't believe how quickly it's happening."

"Such a blessing," he said, then added, "You know, Jovi. I would like you to give your testimony during Mass someday, about how your dedication to the church made all the difference in God keeping His promise and blessing you with a child."

"Of course, Father," she said, hiding her worried expression. The guilt for having disobeyed the priest by visiting the Ungaro fortuneteller's tent back in the winter of 53', surged inside her.

She turned to her boy. Most times, her disobedience felt worth it.

As the boy crawled up the altar, the priest twitched.

"Is everything alright, Father?" Jovi said.

"No, not at all," he said. "I'm admiring your little gift." Though in reality, he was worried about the boy pulling the mantels. One tug by his curious hands would surely cause the candlesticks and liturgical book to tumble down. He could get hurt, though, in all honesty, the priest worried more about the venerable items on the tables than a gash these might produce on the boy's massive head. The boy turned his head. When the priest focused in, he noticed a snot oozing out the boy's nose.

"Can I hold him?" he asked Jovi.

"Of course, father," Jovi said.

With studied calm, the priest walked toward the boy. But, as the enormous snot oozed out, he raised his cassock over his ankles and rushed in and caught the slime with his outreached hand. Alarmed and embarrassed, Jovi helped him up, apologizing to no end.

"I'm alright," he said. "Nothing broke."

That afternoon, Ramona's eldest daughter Alicia announced the priest's arrival from atop the mango tree.

"Here comes the priest!" she said, scattering down.

Salvador nearly toppled from his hammock. He ran and jumped over his daughters playing with corncob dolls under the tree, and welcomed the priest with a bow and a kiss on his hand. Fernanda watched the spectacle from the veranda with a glint of satisfaction.

"You haven't been to mass for a while, Salvador," Father Ignacio said.

"I know, Father," he said. "It's just that - I've been busy."

The priest traced an upright cross over the smaller man's shoulder.

"We're all busy, Salvador," he said. "But should you neglect your soul?"

If Salvador had given voice to his thoughts, he would've said that he didn't believe in Mass, that the whole damn thing was made up, a way to exert control over the masses. "That's why it's called Mass," he explained to Ramona one day after she insisted they attend more regularly. The problem was that Salvador believed there were only three events in a person's life that warranted attending one. These were baptisms, weddings, and funerals, each representing the beginning, middle, and end of someone's life. That's it. The rest are unnecessary, especially since, according to Father Ignacio himself, God is everywhere, even in the darkest corners of our hearts.

He wanted to say this to Father Ignacio, but he was sure that debating a priest was a sin. And so, to the priest's question, he answered as he always did. "I'll be there next Sunday, Father," he said. Then, reaching into his shirt pocket, he handed the priest a few coins for "the completion of the San Frances de Assisi."

On their way to Ramona's room, the priest blessed Salvador's daughters and paused before Fernanda.

"Blessed afternoon, Fernanda," he said.

Fernanda crossed her leg over her knee. She took a drag from her cigarette and blew a great cloud of smoke. She made no secret of her contempt for the priest and his attempt to diminish the collective decision-making power of the Council of Elders, of which she was a part.

Salvador idled past her, drew the curtain over the doorway leading to the room where Ramona and the child rested and entered. Displaying a priestly smile, Father Ignacio excused himself and ducked under the threshold, careful not to bump his head, and stepped into the room. Ramona sat on the edge of her bed.

“It’s good to see you, Father,” she said, making a genuflection and kissing his hand. It was smooth, and it smelled of ammonia and rosemary. He cupped her hands and noticed the dark cloud clinging over her. When he told her he was there to offer a name for her daughter, Ramona’s eyes welled, and her lips broke into a smile.

“What is it, Father?” she asked.

The priest let go of her hands. He walked to the crib to say the name. But as he leaned over, he froze with a fractured expression.

“What is it, Father?” Salvador said.

The priest scratched his temple.

“I don’t know,” he said. “The name seemed perfect a moment ago.”

The three of them looked into the crib and saw the wide-eyed girl scowling and suckling at a shawl as if the sweetest milk poured from its fibers.

“Pray,” the priest said. “Both of you.”

Ramona did pray, and some names did come, such as Ana, Rebecca, Maria, Julia, and Linda, but these tasted bitter against her tongue. She tried a combination of these; MariaRosa, RosaLinda, AnaMaria, JuliAna, but when she said these out loud while peeking into the crib, she was met by the same expression Father Ignacio had described. She often wondered how the Hungaro Gypsies could come up with three names for each of their children; one for official purposes, another to be used by Gypsies, and a third, the most secret of all, to be whispered by the mother in the newborn’s ears to ward off evil spirits, never to be mentioned again.

The following morning Ramona slung the girl on her back and with her daughters and El Tres in tow, took her laundry basket to the river. A line of women had already gathered. They spoke heartedly, whistled and laughed while they scrubbed over washboards and over ready-

made washing stones. Jovi and Mari were there. They welcomed Ramona and helped her settle in a washing spot. The other women gathered around to take a look at the girl. They marbled at her eyes.

"They're like midnight moons," someone said. "So aware!"

They found out that she didn't have a name yet, they suggested their own. Some of them were the ugliest Ramona had ever heard, such as Constantina, Epifania, Lumbertina, and Eustenacia. One of them suggested the name 'Ramona,' but Ramona hated her name, the sound of the "R" and its misplaced roughness. Then someone suggested the name 'Rosenda' and everyone tensed up.

"It rings of delicateness and beauty," said the young woman who brought it up.

"No," someone said from the rear. "It rings of looseness. Smells of whore."

The women gasped. It was Mercedes, the gossipiest woman in the village. She had a square face and tiny round ears, capable of picking up on the most carefully guarded conversations. She'd store these in her mind and for a fee, share them in the form of chisme.

"And what's wrong with that name?" the young woman wondered.

Mercedes realized that the woman was too young to have remembered the summer when a Rosenda moved to the village with a man everyone thought was her Abuelo. "Turned out, he was her husband," Mercedes said. "A nearly deaf and blind man. Lucky for him because if he knew how Rosenda went about seducing our men, he would've dropped dead. I don't know how she did it. If you ask me, she looked like a horse. She had a canny snout and a huge ass, and her low-cut blouses exposed a sweaty gorge between her breasts."

"But how does that make her a whore?" the young woman asked.

Mercedes shuffled her weight to her other foot.

“The thing about whores is that they seem like docile creatures. Timid little birds. But, as that saying goes, the strongest undercurrents are oftentimes found underneath seemingly calm waters.” She turned to the women. “Isn’t that right, ladies?”

The women gave sparse mumbles and scattered to their washing spots.

“Oh!” said Mercedes. “I forgot. No one agrees because everyone at the time was in denial, including myself. We didn’t realize that our husbands had taken the bait. I should’ve suspected it when my husband began to desire me all over again. He wanted to make love every day and in the most unexpected ways.”

“For God sakes, Mercedes,” someone said. “I don’t know why you have to be so vulgar.”

“But it’s all true!” she said. “How else will this girl understand?” Then, turning toward the rest of the women said, “If you don’t want to hear it, cover your ears. Better yet, walk further into the river until your ears are under water.”

Some of the women packed their laundry baskets and walked away.

“Like I was saying,” said Mercedes. “I didn’t realize something was wrong until my husband blurted her name during one of our trysts. Now, I’m no prude. I didn’t mind his fantasizing as long as it’s kept in his head. But then it happened again, in his sleep! He made this little moan, and he grunted her name, ‘Ayy Rrrrrrrrosenda!’ he said, and he shivered, and his legs stretched like he was suffering a cramp.”

“What did you do?” asked the young woman.

“I reached for my sandal and smacked him stupid. He said he was dreaming that Rosenda was chasing him with a knife. I asked, ‘And what about your grunting and moaning?’ Do you know what he said? He said, ‘That must’ve been the moment when Rosenda slashed me.’

‘Oh!’ I said. ‘That’s interesting. So you moan pleasurably when someone hurts you?

‘No,’ he said with a guilty grin.

‘Because if that’s the case,” I said, “I’ll go grab a knife since you enjoy it so much.’

The young woman chuckled.

Mercedes continued.

“The next day, I asked some of you here if you had any similar experiences. Most said, yes. The others didn’t want to admit it because those were times of plenty. You didn’t care that your husbands stared at Rosenda like malnourished dogs. I did. That’s why I confronted that snake. Next thing you know, she and her husband end up packing their things to leave.”

The young woman gazed at Mercedes.

“What I’d like to know,” she said, “is what made her into such a whore?”

“Are you kidding me?” said Mercedes, “She was a whore of the worst kind. She seduced our men with the whim of their imaginations, and who would want to name their daughter after someone like that?”

“But I thought you said she looked like a horse?” another woman said.

Mercedes took in a mouthful of air.

“Not just any horse,” she said, “but a reddish-brown thoroughbred in the lineage of a fine family. A beautiful horse, for sure, but still a horse.”

Ramona watched the soapy swirls in the river. Overcome by a heavy gloom, she picked up her basket and headed home.

The days passed, and Ramona became increasingly morose and taciturn. Then came the heavy rains, and the girl took her first steps. In November, Ramona woke to a cacophony of roosters and to the sound of the accordion player and the melodic voices of men, women, and children, singing as they marched along the main road;

Praise be to thee, O Lord,

for all the creatures,

and especially for our brother

the Sun…

Salvador watched from the doorway.

"What is it?" Ramona asked.

"The processions have begun," he said.

"Which processions?"

"It's November Ramona."

"It can't be November already."

"Yes. It's November. We should join them."

"And the girls?"

"They've gone with your mother."

Ramona drew a long breath. When she stood, her bones cracked. She picked up the child and, alongside Salvador and El Tres, joined the people below. Now they marched to the cemetery bearing armfuls of gladioli, marigolds, and carnations, and baskets filled with fruit. Families swept the graves of their loved ones. They hung multi-colored wreaths, replaced old candles and sugar skulls with the names of the departed written on their heads, all while the villagers continued to sing. At night, they built fires, and many of them stayed. Come morning, a child saw a butterfly in the sky. "Papalotl!" he said and began chasing it. A moment later, the village was filled with hundreds of thousands of them. They fluttered through the cottages and rested and drank from water deposits before moving on to the Giant Oyamel Forest, where they would

wait for the northern summers to arrive. Then in mid-June of 1957, while Ramona picked limes from a tree, the name ‘Ofelia’ came to mind.

Chapter Three
De Blasphemia

One Sunday morning, the village awoke with an air of festive expectancy. One could hear the clattering coming from the wall-less kitchens, the slicing, cutting, stirring, and churning of the communal feast being prepared to celebrate Ofelia's baptism. Women across the village scooped the wax out of their children's ears. They wiped, braided, fed, fetched, shouted, kissed, sprinkled, laughed, and hummed with palpable excitement. The dogs sensed this too. Days like those usually meant there'd be leftovers, scraps of soaked bread and tortillas, and, if they were lucky, a pig's or a chicken's leg with a bit of meat clinging to the bone. No one was as excited as Ramona. She had birthed a fifth child by then, a boy named Alfonso, and no longer felt the guilt for having tried to birth Ofelia in the Zapotan River.

From the kitchen, she whistled at El Tres and pointed to the room where her daughters slept. He ran over and barked and licked their faces until, one by one, they stood. When he came to Ofelia, he wrapped his mouth around her ankles and gently pulled her out of bed. She was up in no time, chasing after El Tres, aiming to pull his defected leg, poke his eyes or rear. When she couldn't get to him, she explored the vicinity. She ran after the chickens, paused, and stared at a long line of chicharra ants marching toward a tree. In a moment's notice, a wounded beetle fell nearby, and the tiny creatures, sensing an opportunity, broke ranks and converged around it and began nibbling at its wings and legs. The beetle eventually buckled, and the ants lifted it on their backs and carried it away. Ofelia tried to follow, but her mother's hands squeezed around her and lifted her. Now, she flew over the ants, over Salvador sitting on his hammock with a smoking stick clamped in his mouth. And there was her sister Miro having her hair done and one of her aunts clipping her nose and stepping back when Ofelia wiggled by. Ramona took her to the

room. She bathed and rubbed lavender on her skin. She dressed her up in a white-on-white satin-laced gown and then weaved marigold through her braided hair.

Near midday, in a devout procession, villagers ushered themselves into the church. During the baptismal ceremony, Ofelia looked at the priest's dark wings and at the sad-looking man suspended on the wall. With Salvador, Ramona, and the Godparents, Jovi and her husband looking on, Father Ignacio leaned over her. His warm breath washed over her when he spoke,

"*Quando – Omni – Flunkus – Moritati,"* he said, and he imposed his hands over her and dabbed blessed salt on her lips. "*Si hoc compre-hendere potes, gratias age magistro Latinae*." He placed his stole over her and touched her ears and nostrils with spittle before anointing her with oil. Next, he changed from his violet stole to a white one and administered the threefold ablution. He made the sign of the cross three times, "*De omnibus dubit-andum,"* collected water in a golden cup and said, "I baptize thee, Ofelia, in the name of the Father, the Son, and…" and just as he was about to complete the sentence, Ofelia said the word "chingado" as clearly as the gasps and scattered chuckles that followed.

"Quiet down," Father Ignacio said. "Respect the House of the Lord." When Ofelia repeated the word, the parishioners gasped, and Father Ignacio ordered Ramona and Salvador to take the child outside. A deathly silence descended over the entire church. Ramona explains to the priest that the child couldn't possibly know what she was saying.

"Maybe not," said the priest. "But the Lord knows."

Standing before the San Frances de Assisi, Father Ignacio ordered Ramona to recite two-thousand seven-hundred fourteen Hail Mary's, two-thousand, seven-hundred fourteen, Our Fathers, and nine hundred sixteen Hail Mary's before he would consider baptism again. Ramona's insides churned, and the heaviness that had at once lifted, suddenly returned. Moments

later, a boy stood in the middle of the plaza. At the top of his lungs, he announced the cancelation of the celebration.

The announcement reached Doña Eli's cottage, who lay terrified in bed beside Patzcuaro. Though her friends chastised her for trying to seduce the young man, she had continued in her pursuit long after Ofelia was born. Every morning since, she would step out in a see-through gown knowing full well that Patzcuaro would catch a glimpse of her on his way from work. Unfortunately, since he worked alongside Grifoldo, Grifoldo would catch a peep of the corpulent woman too. Both men pretended not to notice how Eli would bend over to pick up random things. Or how she'd stroke her hair and rub her ample thighs. Unable to hold back any longer, Grifoldo asked, "Are you looking at her, eh?"

"No," said Patzcuaro. "Are you?"

"Ni lo mande Dios," he said. "God forbid. The woman is a drunkard and a lonely reck. She only leaves her cottage on Tuesdays when the horse-drawn carriage delivers a fresh batch of homemade rum to Celestino. She's the first one there."

On Tuesday morning, Eli left her cottage much earlier than usual. Her timing led her to cross paths with Patzcuaro and the imbecile in the Zancudo Bridge.

"What a surprise!" she said. She smiled broadly and went in for a hug under Grifoldo's benign glare. Patzcuaro wasn't sure where to place his hands. They ended up far up her waist before sliding and resting naturally atop the woman's humps. After her embrace, she invited him to her cottage to help out with a few things, particularly with slicing wood.

"Sure, Eli," he said. "I'll be there tomorrow."

"Oh! thank you, Patzcuaro," she said, caressing his strong jaw. "I'll see you then."

She walked off, and Patzcuaro felt Grifoldo's stare casting shame.

"What are you, her servant, eh?" he said. "You act as if you've never been with a woman."

Patzcuaro tried to look Grifoldo in the eye.

"Of course I have," he said. "What do you think…"

"Ah!" Grifoldo interrupted. "You've never *been* with a woman."

"I never said that."

"You don't have too," Grifoldo said.

Patzcuaro felt ashamed, and he quickened his steps across the bridge as if he could outrun it.

The next day came and went, and Patzucaro didn't visit Eli. It wasn't until Saturday afternoon that he finally showed up. Eli was still in bed, curing a hangover when he called out. But as soon as she heard his voice, she slipped on her gown and craned her neck out the window.

"Patzcuaro!" she said.

Drops of sweat gathered on his temples. She hurried out, grabbed his hand, and led him to the back of the cottage to a stump with an ax lodged onto its surface. She wanted to make a move but wondered about timing.

"I still have a few to go," she said, pointing to a stack of logs behind her, while a woodpile she had no trouble splitting the day before lay to the side.

Patzcuaro dislodged the ax. He brought its blade eye-level and ran his index fingers along its edge.

"It needs sharpening," he said. "But I think it still has some life."

Just as he prattled toward the logs, Eli reached out and reeled him in. She pressed her lips tightly against his, and he felt himself drift away. Before his legs buckled, Eli grabbed and led him to a spot layered with undergrowth near a line of trees. She unbuckled his belt and let his jubilant *tepoli* free.

"Oh, my Lord!" she gasped. Ignoring the premonition that someone was watching, she dragged him into the weeds and tangled him with her limbs. In a matter of minutes, she rode him and left him strewn like withering milkweed while she went back to her cottage to fix herself a drink. By the end of the month, Patzcuaro would have moved in. He would have replaced the cottage's palm-thatched eaves, tidied-up Eli's chicken coup, and firmed up her rickety bed. He would've also felt obligated to drinking Eli's Cubas, though one was usually enough to get him talking about his hopes, dreams, and fears, and about the loneliness, he felt not having known his real family. He turned to Eli. "Do you like being alone?"

Eli shrugged. “It isn’t loneliness," she said. "It's solitude. And I like my solitude."

When the invitation to Ofelia's baptism arrived, she was determined to leave her cottage to attend. But on that Sunday morning, when the village was abuzz, she grew fearful and confided in Patzcuaro that she couldn't get out of bed. Then came the cancellation, and it eased her down.

That same month, Mercedes gave birth to a little girl. It happened while she was telling one of her neighbors about having seen Doña Eli and Patzcuaro rolling around in the brush.

"It didn't seem like he knew what he was doing," she said, "but the size of him made up for his clumsiness."

No sooner had she said this, that her water broke. In a matter of two hours, she gave birth to a girl named Nena. All the while, Ramona continued to pray. She burned incense and with her

rosary, knelt before the Virgen in her room, tallying each set of prayers on a wooden beam above her bed. By the end of that year, she had completed a total of one thousand nine hundred sixty-eight Hail Mary's and one thousand seven-hundred fifty 'Our Father's.' And then in mid-July of 1958, a great downpour came. It carved trenches and turned the ground into running streams. For five days and five nights, it rained. And on the sixth day, the clouds gave way to a clear blue sky. When the sun shone through, children grabbed home-weaved baskets and ran to the swollen river and filled them with jittering fish and chacales, big red crayfish being pushed downstream. Time and again, the youngsters loaded and unloaded their cargos. A few months later, Ramona birthed a sixth child, a boy, and her prayers become sparse as the seasons. Soon, the men burned the mountain sides into ashes and turned the dirt. They dug holes and planted seeds, five in each one so that at least one could grow. By the time Ramona's seventh child came along, she had stopped praying altogether. And with four-hundred sixteen Hail Mary's and four-hundred Our Father's still remaining, left Ofelia to live with an uncertain eternity.

Chapter Four

A Simple Man

Morelia, Capital of Michoacan

1962

From his room in El Hotel Imperial, Don Antonio de la Cruz Bojorquez watched the Capital's Historic Center teeming with life. He stood behind the closed French doors leading to the balcony and watched the mass of people, the street peddlers and vehicles rushing down the narrow cobblestoned streets, honking and spewing smoke into the increasingly gray sky. He rolled his fingers into his palms and squeezed. The thought of stepping out into the balcony, an otherwise desirable upgrade, frightened him. Except for the tourists, it seemed no one had time to breathe. Perhaps if he explored the city he'd marble at its rich history, at its murals, gardens, museums, and aqueducts, and at its grand cathedrals and monasteries reminiscent of Spanish and Moorish kingdoms.

He took his trousers from the coat rack and sat on the edge of his bed. He slid his feet into the leg openings and pulled up from the waistband over his knees. He tried catching a glimpse of his zipper, but his belly got in the way. He hated the look of it, how it folded over his large Mexican golden eagle buckle, leaving a red mark under his belly-button. An incision. Magdalena always nagged. "Less meat, more vegetables," she'd say. What was he, a rabbit? He liked his lard-fried beans spread over handmade corn tortillas, topped with melted cheese and green salsa, and finished off with a dash or two of salt. He liked his red meat too, savory undercooked steaks oozing red from their pours. She'd give him permission to eat this at least once a week. Other than that, Magdalena had a cook prepare him bland-tasting vegetable-based meals, which left him hungry. Sometimes at night he'd ask his assistant to sneak him some red meat. He'd take the contraband to the stable and among the horses, rip the meat like a wilderbeast.

His stomach growled.

He stood and cradled his belly. Then with an arch of his back and an upward tug, zipped his pants, snapped the button, and buckled his belt. Next, he slipped on a starched white shirt. He pushed each button into its respective slit with his stubby fingers. Magdalena was right. He *was* fat. But he wasn't always so. Back when he was growing up in El Chorumo, he was as thin as a brown thread-legged bug. He may've not been physically strong, but he had what his father said was the most important trait any man could have; *Ambición*: a fervent desire to succeed; the needed fuel to achieve extraordinary things. Though he didn't realize it at the time, it was the reason he inherited a truck and a small mango grove as opposed to the thriving businesses his brothers were endowed with. They believed that their father had given Antonio the grove because they thought Antonio would lose it and it represented the lowest financial risk. But after a few years, it was his brothers who nearly drove their businesses to the ground. Antonio, on the other hand, increased the value of his grove. He took a trip to Brazil and brought back a variety of seedlings until he found the plant that produced the deliciously acclaimed fist-sized mangos he branded "Joyas Bojorquez." Demand for his Joyas grew and he expanded his acres. And by the time of his father's passing, he was supplying restaurants and supermarkets across the states, all the way to a Texas canning company. What a shame. Mangos in cans. But that's business. The increase in profits allowed Antonio to explore other ventures. He bought a mass amount of land, entered the avocado and papaya industry, and purchased a few low-key hotels around areas he predicted would one day attract tourism. These ventures would soon be more lucrative than his mango grove. But it was the grove that reminded him of his father's faith in him. Even when he was presented with generous offers for those groves, he declined.

He reached into his suit jacket hanging from a clothing stand and took out a tie. Made of polyester, it had brown, tan, and white diagonal stripes, and a dark stain on the tip. It was the only one he owned. He bought it years ago from an old man in the Plaza de Armas. Bojorquez was on his way to secure his first bank loan. The old man sold it for two pesos and helped Bojorquez adjust it to size. He attributed the approval of his loan that day to that tie and had been carrying to every business dealing with exact knot, since.

He looked himself in the mirror and inserted the loop over his head. He had a benign head, one of those oval shaped heads on which a wisp of hair hovered. A mango-shaped head. For his fifty-fifth birthday, Magdalena gifted him a long-hair toupee that she liked him to wear in the bedroom. He hated it. But when he saw how wild Magdalena became, he began to tolerate it and later, actually acquire a wide collection.

Bojorquez looked at his tie. He placed two fingers between his shirt collar and his Adam's apple and slid the knot toward his neck. He felt a tingling sensation in his fingers, like ants crawling through his veins. Magdalena said those were the first signs of a heart attack. Perhaps he should take those meditative walks she insisted on. She said it would help his stress and stop him from chewing his nails. He hadn't noticed that. But he *was* restless. Except for delving into new ventures, nothing satisfied him. That's why when he received the call from Empreza Estil, inviting him to meet its representatives, he jumped and shook with so much excitement his belly jiggled.

"Can you believe it, Magdalena?" he said. "That was Empreza Stil. They want to meet to talk about a business opportunity!"

Magdalena glanced up.

"I have no idea what that is," she said dully. "But I do see you need some serious exercise."

"This is big, Magdalena," he said. "Empreza Estil is the largest mining conglomerate in the world. It's known as *Predpriyatiye Stali* in Russia, *Zîyè Gāng* in China, *Impresa Acciaio* in Italy, *Yritys Teras* in Finland, and *Empreza Estil S.A.,* in Mexico. It's the same company that owns the mines in Aguililla. Now they want to open another one in the Giant Oyamel Forest, above Zapotan."

Magdalena turned to filing her nails.

"I want us to go," he said. "They're giving me two tickets to a private box on the main grandstand in the Gran Stadium of Morelia to watch Las Monarcas and Las Panteras."

"You know I don't like soccer," she said. "Take that traveling temptation of yours instead."

She was referring to Bojorquez' assistant. He'd known her long before he met Magdalena.

"Ay, Magdalena," he said, sitting beside her. "I've told you a million times. That's not a temptation. Besides, why would a cute girl like that want a fatso like me?"

"Because," she said, "fat can be overlooked for money."

Bojorquez pecked her cheek. If what she said was true, he thought, then perhaps he would've ended up with Ramona, the only other woman he ever truly loved.

He couldn't convince Magdalena to go and brought his assistant instead. She was staing in the suite next to his and dialed her to come over to straighten him up.

"I think I'm overdressed," he said, looking himself in the mirror. "I look like a sack of corn husks."

The woman stood behind him.

"You look fine Señor," she said, adjusting his collar. She brought him the Oxford shoes Magdalena purchased in Spain, and helped him slip them on. He hated those shoes, the way they squeezed his toes. Didn't Magdalena understand that he was a simple man. "Un hombre sencillo." A campesino at heart. It was Magdalena who wanted the fancy stuff. She even picked the style of their home to resemble the exquisite architecture specific to the province of Granada, where she was born, and had a little red European care he'd gifted her for her birthday. What could he say? She was an extravagant woman. That's love. You take the good with the bad. On the other hand, his car was a six-cylinder, three speed 1942 Chevrolet flatbed passed on from his father. His biggest vise were his horses. He searched the world over for the most excellent steeds, dressage horses and Aztecs he loved more than most things.

"You're ready, Señor," his assistant said. With one final glance, they headed to the lobby and stepped out to a waiting vehicle. The chauffeur opened the door and they scooted in. On their way to the stadium, Bojorquez felt his toes crumbling up and asked the driver to search for a place to buy a pair of cow-hide sandals. His assistant looked at her watch.

"Are you sure, Señor?" his assistant said.

"I'm sure," he said. "Fucking Oxfords. I don't understand Magdalena's obsession with them. If she likes them so much, maybe she should wear them."

They eventually found a sandal vendor on Avenida Cuatemoc. The assistant purchased a pair and then ran into a store nearby and returned with a bottle of Tepeztate-based mezcal.

"For your nerves, Señor," she said, twisting the cap and placing the orifice under Bojoruqez's nose. The aromas reminded him of home, of the rich agricultural land and its people. His people.

He straightened up and took a drink, then offered some to the driver.

“No gracias, Señor,” he said.

“Come on,” Bojorquez said, tapping the bottle on the man’s shoulder. “Never refuse a good drink.”

The driver grabbed the bottle and took a swig.

“What’s your name?” Bojorquez asked.

The man wiped his mouth.

“Reymundo, Señor,” he said.

“Tell me, Reymundo,” Bojorquez said. “What keeps you up at night?”

“The yelping dogs, Señor,” he said. “Sometimes the neighbors.”

“No. I mean - what worries you most?”

“Oh. My children, Señor,” he said. “I worry about their future.”

Bojorquez noticed a picture of two boys and a girl on the gauge panel and immediately thought of his step-daughter, Polenicia. It was difficult to say that he worried about her future because she had everyone. Sometimes he worried that he loved her less than his horses.

Bojorquez patted the driver’s shoulder.

“I understand,” he said to him.

They drove off and zoomed through the city toward the massive stadium where the Monarcas were facing off against Las Panteras. They entered a side tunnel and stopped at a roundabout where a man shrouded in shadows, waited. He led them down an orange-carpeted corridor, lined with logo-imprinted wallpaper, and into an elevator that lifted them to the top floor. They headed down a long hall to a door with a sign that read, “*Empreza Estil, S.A. Mx. Privado*.”

The man pressed the ringer.

Bojorquez looked down at his tie, how it curved over his belly, and then kicked up his foot to look at his new huaraches. His assistant leaned into his ear.

“They look fine, Señor,” she said. Then a slender woman opened the door and introduced herself as their interpreter. In the room, five suited men sat smoking and drinking in front of a giant window overlooking the glowing field below. Displaying a grand smile, Don Bojorquez walked up to the men and extended his hand.

“Antonio de la Cruz Bojorquez,” he said.

The men stood. They shook his hand and welcomed him to the table.

Chapter Five
Villains, Heroes, and a Macha

When the man in the passenger's seat of the shiny red truck stuck his head out the window to ask Ofelia for directions, the girl snickered because the man's chin resembled a baby's ass. She had been walking to school that morning, thumbing a new comic book series Don Celestino had given her, when the truck rolled up.

"Eit, Chamaca!" said the gruff voice. "Point me to El Chorumo Road."

He wore a white dress shirt with the top buttons loose, revealing a golden crucifix on his hairy chest. Ofelia flipped a page. So far, "Kalimán El Hombre Increible," didn't seem all that incredible. His costume was a plain white with a red cloak, and he wore a turban with a jewel in the front. His weapons were mediocre, too; an elaborately decorated dagger and a blowgun with tranquilizer darts that seemed more like accessories than real villain-defeating weapons.

"I asked you a question," said the man.

"That wasn't a question," she said. The man's curly brown hair was slicked back, cascading into a splash of curls behind his neck. The butt-chinned man stared at the tawny girl with dark thigh-length hair and large eyes. He turned to his driver. "Can you believe this malcriada?" he sneered. He turned to her again.

"Listen, *cha-ma-ca*," he said. "Why don't you point me to El Chorumo Road?"

Knowing full well that the main road led to a dead-end, Ofelia pointed ahead. The man nudged the driver's arm. "Let's go," he said, and they roared off in a trail of dust.

Ofelia had been called a 'malcriada' before. She had also been called rebelde, macha, and terca, none of which bothered her anymore. People saw her in the way they saw her.

By the time she reached the adobe schoolhouse, she earned that Kalimán was from the Valley of Kalimantan and that he had the power of levitation, telekinesis, and astral projection.

He also had a sidekick named Solín, a useless eleven-year-old boy, as far as she could tell, who only seemed to get in the way.

As the teacher Camila Pimentel jotted the morning's math problems on a freestanding blackboard, Ofelia tucked the comic book under her arm and sat on a chair. Suddenly, the affable teacher displayed a superpower of her own.

"You're late again, Ofelia," she said without taking her eyes off the board or interrupting the musicality of the chalk tapping the board.

Ofelia grabbed the comic book and slid it under her thighs.

"Bring it here," the teacher said.

Ofelia walked to the front of the class and placed handed the book over. Profe Pimentel's hands were as white as Kalimán's, except that her fingers were extraordinarily long and bony.

The teacher riffled through the pages.

"Hm," she said, raising her brows. "I see." Her eyes were light and transparent, like when the sunlight shines through a jar filled with honey. "I'll tell you what," she finally said. "'I'll give this back if you write me a short essay about a heroine in your family. Write about what makes her heroic and be specific. When you're finished, give her a superpower of her own. Turn it in Wednesday."

Ofelia took a deep breath.

If Ofelia could give Profe Pimentel a superpower, it would be for her fingers to stretch like vines and return to normal at will.

"Si, Maestra," Ofelia said.

She could feel her classmate's glares, especially from Nena, a wiry girl with knotted braids whose piercing vanity everyone seemed to gravitate towards. She'd make the perfect

villain, a creature whose self-absorption could suck everything into its void. During break, while the girls clustered around Nena, Ofelia sat at on the sidelines of the patchy field to watch the boys scramble after a soccerball like a graceless sounder of wild boars. The ugliest of the bunch was Nena's brother, 'Chingas,' as in 'como chingas,' a proper nickname given his propensity to be a real pain in the ass. Having short legs and a distended face, he looked like his dog, El Rudo, whose razor-sharp teeth hung over his bottom lip. The worst player had to be Milagro or "El Mariposa," as they called him, because he ran frantically about, flapping his arms and ducking whenever the ball flew near. She had chatted with him before, mostly about unimportant things, and often saw him from the Giant Oyamel, languidly hanging out along river, tossing sticks or skipping stones, or sometimes even smelling flowers.

"Come on, Mariposita!" the boys yelled. "Hit the ball!"

Ofelia felt an urge to jump in the game and give the ball a more graceful existence. She had a recurring dream in which she'd snatch the ball away from Chingas and juggle it to a standstill under her feet. Chingas snarled. When he moved in, she scudded past him and around the buzzing boys until she broke free. Now she was heading straight towards the goalie who must've considered stepping out of the way. Instead, he froze. Having gained momentum, Ofelia vaulted her steps. She sprung her leg back and snapped the ball with such force that, blood-tinged mucus and saliva sparkled out of the boys nose and mouth, leaving him laying as flat as possible in that uneven field. When they asked the boy questions, he only recalled the moment that his dear mother sent him off to school with a kiss on his head. This last part wasn't in Ofelia's dream. She enjoyed imagining a better conclusion than simply scoring a goal.

Ofelia turned her thoughts toward the assignment Profe Pimentel had given her and made a mental list of possible heroines in her family. No one stood out. Some of the men, on the other

hand, had had some real heroic moments; an uncle who smuggled firearms and munitions to the rebels during the Cristero War; a grandfather who nearly gave his life for a wealthy hacendero during the Revolutionary War, and an uncle who trekked to the United States as a Bracero, with nothing but a suitcase and a dozen English words cradles in his tongue, such as, "*My nay is Luis,*" and "*I like coffee and bread, pleez."*

Later that afternoon, as she headed to the Giant Oyamel, Celestino called her over to ask about her thought about Kalimán.

"A bit boring," she said, standing upright to get a better look at the man. "Too perfect."

Celestino leaned over the counter.

"Too perfect? What's wrong with that?"

She wrinkled her nose and shrugged. "Nothing. Just not that interesting. Heroes should have flaws, don't you think? Something to work through. He doesn't even get dirty, Don Celestino. Imagine that. He wears all white, lives in the desert, and manages to stay clean. That doesn't seem right."

Celestino scratched his chin. Ofelia continued.

"And you know what else, Don Celestino? He talks like Father Ignacio. Like a priest giving Mass."

A passerby looked over at them.

"Shsht, Ofelia," Celestino said. "Not too loud. People take offense to those things."

Ofelia didn't know what he was talking about and went on to tell him that Profe Pimentel had taken the book away and that she had to write an essay about a heroine in her family. "But they all seem ordinary, Don Celestino," she said.

Celestino scratched his chin.

“I know someone,” he said.

Ofelia’s eyes sparkled.

With a nod of his head, he directed her to the door. “I’ll show you.” He let her in and they walked past a display rack and shelves, and across a small storage space with tools, produce, and sacks filled with potatoes, beans, and grains. They entered another door, into a living area with a bed, a small desk doubling as a dining table, and a detailed nineteenth-century armoire passed on to him by his mother. From it, he took out an old homemade photo album and flipped to a page with a sepia weathered-curdled photo captioned, 2 de Octubre, *1913, Batalla de Torreon.* La Batalla de Torroen is considered the largest battle of the Mexican Revolution. Ofelia leaned into the picture. It showed nine rifle-wielding men with ammunition belts across their chests, standing on a railway platform. She had seen pictures like those before, from Profe Pimentel during a history lesson on the Revolution.

“Alright,” Ofelia said. “What am I looking for?”

“Look closer,” Celestino said.

The girl looked again. She noticed the men’s spurs, their wide-brimmed hats, and hardened stances — Nothing else.

“Closer,” Celestino said.

Using her finger as a guide, Ofelia moved from soldier to soldier and paused at a familiar face. She leaned in. Could it be? The young man looked just like Fernanda. Same pursed lips — same penetrating stare. She looked up at Celestino.

“That’s her,” he confirmed. “That’s your Abuela Fernanda. And that’s my mother standing next to her.”

Ofelia’s eyes lit up.

“All I know,” Celestino said, “is that they joined the Revolution when they were sixteen or so, and joined a company of women.”

“Soldaderas,” Ofelia whispered and smiled. Profe Pimentel had given a lesson about those women too. Refusing to be mere mistresses, cooks, or babysitters during the war, they disguised themselves as men so that they would be allowed to fight. That was one version. The other, as Ofelia heard a man once say, was that they were mostly women who liked to sleep around. Ofelia wanted to learn more about the photograph but Celestino didn’t know much. “They never talked about the war,” he said. “My mother gave me the photo shortly before she died. She had kept it from being destroyed by Fernanda.

Ofelia looked at Celestino with an expression of wanting to know more. He encouraged her to talk to Fernanda and, though it would surely be a stretch, get her to open up. Ofelia did exactly that. She thanked Celestino and immediately went to visit Fernanda. El Tres joined her to the cottage near the entrance of the village, where they found her grandfather kneeling over a cross-bred pepper plant, carefully checking its leaves. For years he had experimented with pepper varieties, aiming to produce one that could “rip through a man’s intestines,” he’d say. He’d name it, “Chile Matador.”

Ofelia snuck up behind him and wrapped her arms around his waist.

“Abuelo!” she said, startling the hollowed-cheek man.

“Damn it, Ofelia!” he said, nearly tipping over. He eased the rim of his hat upward with one finger and looked at the ornery girl. “Don’t you have better things to do?”

“Yes,” she said. “That’s why I’m here to see Fernanda.”

“Good luck with that,” he said. “Better just leave it alone.

“I’ll ask,” she said.

She entered the cottage and went out the back door where Fernanda was adjusting a hammock to a tree. The woman glanced over.

“What are you doing here?” she said.

“Came to say, hi,” she said.

“I doubt that,” Fernanda said. “What is it?”

“I heard you fought in the Revolutionary War and that you were in the Battle of Torreon.”

Fernanda pulled at the knot. She pursed her lips, trying to keep herself from cursing at the girl.

“I have to do a report,” Ofelia said, “and I have to write about a heroine in my family.”

Fernanda gave the hammock a tug and sat to test its sturdiness. Ofelia jumped on too. She bounced and pushed against the ground, forcing Fernanda’s feet to pop up in the air. When Ofelia saw Fernanda’s feet, how they curled up against one another and hung over the edges of her huaraches, she said, “Oye, Fernanda, why are your feet so ugly?”

Fernanda looked at her feet and tilted her head.

“I could care less how they look,” she said. “They’ve never kept me from doing anything.”

Ofelia pondered.

“You mean like marching? Or fighting?” she said. “I imagine you had do a lot of it during the war.”

Fernanda looked at the girl’s inquisitive eyes.

“My past isn’t any of your business,” she said, digging her heels on the ground, forcing them to an abrupt stop. “Go find some adventures of your own,” she ordered.

When Ofelia didn't budge, Fernanda took a mouthful of air and slapped the persistent soul's thigh.

"Are you deaf, child?" she said. "Get out of here!"

Ofelia didn't move until Fernanda reached for a stick.

"Out!" she said.

Back home that evening, the kitchen smelled warmly of lard and oil. As soon as she walked in, Ramona stopped ladling churipo into the bowls sitting before Ofelia's siblings, and turned sharply towards the girl. Ofelia's brothers and sisters sat on the table, quietly now, feeling the intensity in the room. El Tres hid behind Ofelia's leg and then scurried under the table.

"What am I going to do with you, Ofelia?" she said.

Ofelia wasn't sure what trouble Ramona was referring to, though she suspected it had to do with school. Word got out fast. She scanned the table, searching for a guilty expression, but everyone turned their attention to hearty stew's fragrance billowing under their noses. Ofelia never knew how to answer that question by Ramona, so she would usually stand there, looking blankly, until Ramona followed up with her demands.

"You're going to finish that essay," Ramona said, "and you're not going to go bother Fernanda at her home or ask her anymore personal questions."

Ofelia curled her lips.

"Oh," Ramona said. "And that book, when you get it back, I want you to give it back to Celestino."

Ofelia's "Why?" was answered with, "Because I said so." That was that. She went to bed without supper and she lay there listening to a group of men in the plaza engaged in some sort of hacking competition. For a long time, Ofelia felt like stranger in her own home, disconnected

from everyone and seeing how her mother, especially, showed not the slightest interested in her, unless there was trouble. The chasm between them was unexplainable, perhaps a case of two spirits unable to see the similarities. Somewhere, ruckus, a faint sound of the accordion player's melody, sparked Ofelia's imagination.

Chapter Six

Rooster of Zapotan

On Tuesday morning, Patzcuaro woke up under the kiosko feeling as though a large rock clanked loosely against his skull. He had been drinking all night, celebrating a winning bet that consisted of hacking-up lumps of saliva and launching them at great distances. He had never won anything before. In his excitement, he ignored Grifoldo's advise to save his winnings and instead bought three gallons of mezcal. This made him popular among the men, at least until the alcohol ran out. Then he was alone again, wandering the plaza, until he eventually dozed off on a bench.

As he peed behind a bush, he noticed the lanky and querulous twenty-eight-year-old Juan Diego, waking beneath a tree. Juan Diego had also drunk himself into a stupor the previous night. After everyone had left, he joined Patzcuaro on the bench and blustered on and on about his dominances, including one in which four women were supposedly battling over his affection. He dubbed himself "ElGallo de Zapotan," even though he had nothing of a rooster's majestic air. The only time Patzcuaro remembered seeing a glimpse of vulnerability, was when Juan Diego talked about he wished that his father were proud of him. His voice quavered then and his eyes turned misty. Then he shook his head and returned to his feel-good stories, the ones where he always came out on top.

Before Patzcuaro zipped his pants, Juan Diego walked up and slung his arm around him.

"What a night, hu, carajo?" he said. "I've never seen you so out of your mind! The way you stood on that crate last night and gave that speech about taking life by the balls, that was really something!"

Patzcuaro felt foolish, especially because Grifoldo had also been there.

While Juan Diego kept talking, Patzcuaro held his head.

“I’ve got a cure for that,” Juan Diego said, pointing to Celestino’s store. “A morning drink,” he said. “On me.”

Patzcuaro couldn’t take another drink. What he needed was Eli’s concoction of ground bird-beak and myrrh served over chamomile tea and a few hours of sleep. What he didn’t know was how Eli would react. He had never stayed up so late, especially not drinking.

Before the men could part ways, the red truck others saw the day before, roared into Zapotan. Villagers suspiciously peeked form the corners. They cracked their doors and watched the truck grunt toward the plaza, next to the men. Except for the occasional fish truck or the yellow Volkswagen with the four megaphones welded to its roof blaring the latest news, or a pre-recorded, overblown message by some political figure, it was strange to see anyone else.

With his elbow resting outside the truck’s door, the passenger with the funny chin saluted the men.

Juan Diego returned a depreciating glare.

“Who the hell are you?” he said.

“Carajo,” said the man. “What is it with you people? A kind welcome would be nice. Anyway, my name is Antonio Padilla and this,” he said, turning to his driver, “is Vladermo. He goes by Cuerdas because, well,” he said, spinning his index finger around his temple. “He’s a bit nuts. Now, you’re turn,” he said to them. “Introduce yourselves.”

Juan Diego stepped forward. “I am,” he said, “‘El chingon mas chingon de los chingones’ of Zapotan. The baddest baddass of all badasses of Zapotan.”

Padilla drummed the side of the truck’s door.

“Oh yeah? And what makes you such a badass?” he said.

Juan Diego waved off the flies in front of his face.

“For one, I’m not afraid to die,” he said. “And I’m not afraid to say things as they truly are, like how everyone says that your chin resembles a baby’s ass. What do you think about that?”

Padilla smoothed his chin.

“It’s my mother’s chin,” he said, smiling grandly. “There’s nothing I can do about that. She also gave me the jaw of an Achoque. But let’s get back to you,” he said. “You’re a man who doesn’t mince words. I like that. But in regards to the other thing, I have to say that men who aren’t afraid to die are a peso-a-dozen.” He turned to his driver. “Isn’t that right Cuerdas?”

The driver gave a slight nod.

“You see?” he continued. "It's these quiet ones you have to watch out for. Of course, it helps to be mute. Pobre. Still, the loudest men are usually the biggest cowards. They draw attention to themselves, showcase their bravado, because they fear death. *You*, my friend, seem to be one of those.”

Juan Diego jerked back.

“What did you say, cabron!” he crowed and pulled out a knife. “Why don’t you step out and see what I’m made of!” He raised and pointed the blade toward the men.

“Calm your bravura," Padilla smirked. “By the looks of that knife, I doubt it could penetrate a banana leaf, much less a man’s skin. Learn to think, man,” he said, tapping his forefinger against his temple. Have some razonamiento. Reason. I’m sure it’s burrowed in there somewhere.”

“I’ll show you razonamiento!” Juan Diego said, slashing the air.

“Don’t be a pendejo,” Padilla said. “I have a revolver sitting on my lap, waiting to be used. Believe me. There’s nothing more I’d like to do right now than to put a hole between your

bloodshot eyes. The only reason I don't do it, is because *my* brain reminds me I'm not here for that. It says I'm here for other business, that I'm supposed to offer someone like yourself the opportunity to make good money working for Don Bojorquez. If the answer is 'yes,' then that man wouldn't be as stupid as he looks. But if he says 'go fuck yourself', then we'll drive off and watch the fool throw fits through the rearview mirror. I'm sure you'll find plenty of half-starved men jumping at the offer."

Juan Diego lowerered his knife.

"Did you say Don Bojorquez?" he said.

"Yes."

"Carajo!" he said. "Why didn't you say that in the first place. I know these regions better than anyone around. I know every mountain crease, creek, cave, arroyo, ridge, bridge, trail, and tree-line around these parts. I walk them every day; all mapped out, right here," he said, tapping his temple. "I can show you around if you like. Just say the word."

"Ah," said Padilla. "That's more like it." Then, turning away from the baboon, he asked Patzcuaro, "How about you? Are you interested? I'm sure Don Bojorquez could use two men."

Fanning away the flies that crisscrossed his face, Patzcuaro opened his mouth. His answer was short. It was clear. And it was strong.

Chapter Seven

Rancho Cielo Azul

Long before Patzcuaro moved in, Eli had grown accustomed to living alone. For nearly five years, after her husband's abandonment, her constant companion was the river's shush and the soft warbling sounds coming from her coop. But Patzcuaro had awakened something in her. And it wasn't the idealistic notions of romance, or the need to have someone to share her thoughts, emotions, or ideas with. It was simpler than that. It was, as she put it bluntly, pure unmitigated lust and, for that, Patzcuaro couldn't have come at a better time. That's why, when Patzcuaro showed up and a tremendous fear enveloped her throughout the night, it caught her by surprise. She resisted rushing over to Celestino's, or the plaza, or wherever he was, to avoid the embarrassment and the mockery Patzcuaro had endured all those years from the men, that Eli could've been her mother. Instead, she got up after midnight to fix herself a drink, and she sat by a fire and listened to the men's echoes, their laughter and cheers. When Patzcuaro showed up, he didn't let him in and didn't forgive him until the following morning. She would've gone longer but, seeing him bivouacking under a low-laying canopy of leaves and bathing in the river, made her jittery with desire. Standing at the door, she ordered him to remove his sodden clothes. She warned him never to stay out again and she pulled him and burrowed themselves in the cottage the rest of the day. Patzucaro kept his ears open for the sound of the truck. Padilla had said they would return and drive them to meet Bojorquez, possibly stay a few days. The problem was Eli's warning. It clung over him and, during pause from their lovemaking bout, asked her to consider what working for Don Bojorquez could mean for their future. "We'd be able to afford good rum," he said. "We could move out of Zapotan and open that restaurant/bar we've always talked about."

The corners of her lips jittered.

"I don't want to go anywhere," she said. "I'm perfectly fine here…in my little abode by the river."

Patzcuaro locked his hands behind his head. The thought of losing out on something significant, frightened him. That night, while Eli slept, he let his fingers glide over her skin. She purred and turned toward him and let her breath wash over him. Come morning, he cooked breakfast, brought her coffee, and tightened the reeds on the thatched roof, still listening and periodically glancing toward the bridge. At midday, Eli prepared him a mixed pineapple drink and they sat at the river's edge and watched the currents move serenely along. Shortly after that, while Eli collected the laundry from a cord, she turned to the bridge at the sound of an engine's roar. At first, she thought it was an illusion brought about by the couple of drinks she had. Then she clearly saw him, Patzcuaro dropping his ax and running toward a trail leading to Chorumo Road. Stunned, it took her a moment to realize what had happened. On their way back across the bridge, Patzcuaro sat on the edge of the truck's bed facing Juan Diego, his back toward Eli's cottage. He resisted turning his head, until he didn't. He caught Eli's eyes, the fire in them gone and replaced now by the imminent look of abandonment. Still, he was certain she would come around once she saw his achievements.

The truck roared out of the village under the spherical crowns of leaves shading the winding road. After a while, it broke through the mountains and reached Tecoman, a flat dusty town sweltering with heat. The townspeople jittered about, many of them bouncing along the pitted roads on bicycles and mopeds. Earth-scented herbs wafted through the dusty air, as did fruity and citrus fragrances, and the unmistakable smell of roasting and raw meat dangling outside a few scattered carnicerias. The truck pulled over in front of a low-slung cinderblock

building with a pair of small iron-barred windows and an iron green door with the words "*Policia Municipal de Tecoman*" painted on top in thick black letters. Ordering the men to stay put, Padilla walked into building. As they waited, a boy on a bicycle rode up to the drivers-side window and offered Cuerdas a wooden pirinola. Cuerdas cracked his knuckles and the boy fumbled with his bike to get away. Before he could ride off, Patzcuaro asked for the toy's price.

"Twenty cents, Señor," said the nervous boy. Patzcuaro gave him a peso and told him to keep the change. Cuerdas glared.

A moment later, Padilla walked out of the building accompanied by a khaki-clad policeman with lash-less eyes and teeth so long they overlapped his bottom lip. They conferred under a tree, glancing furtively with subtle facial expressions. The Policia Municipal of Tecoman, also known as the Ministerial Police, was made up of no more than fourteen officers. They were responsible for keeping the order int he various towns and villages in the region, including Zapotan, though it was rare to see them anywhere near. Any disagreement, the villagers handled themselves. More serious issues were handles by the Council of Elders.

At burst of the church bells, Padilla and the policeman broke from their conversation with a handshake and a pat on each other's back. Soon, the red truck was on its way again, heading westward toward the Carretera Costal, along the craggy coastline where the sea salt lingered in the breeze. Whenever the mountains broke down onto one another, the men could see the ocean's vastness. Along the way, shrines lined the meandering roadway, solemn animitas, grutas, and capillas with lit candles inside. Moving in the opposite direction, they came across a caravan of Ungaros cloaked in earth-colored garb, staring suspiciously from their intricately painted horse-drawn wagons until their gaze disappeared around a bend.

After nearly an hour or so, the truck turned into a palm-tree lined cobbled-stone road and reached a cast-iron fence with a large archway that read, “Rancho Cielo Azul.” Juan Diego and Patzcuaro had heard second-hand descriptions of the ranch, many of which sounded like exaggerations. But when a magnificent terra-coated behemoth of house rose before them, with its balconies and a dozen windows framed by creeping vines, they realized those hadn’t been exaggerations at all. Perfectly manicured bushes speckled with color, surrounded the place, as did a mango orchard and a long barn stable and a vast field where horses sprinted majestically across.

Juan Diego slapped Patzcuaro’s arm.

“Can you believe this?” He sat up and gave such a horrendous crow, that Cuerdas slammed the breaks, sending the men careening against the cab. Padilla looked through the rear window and laughed.

As the truck rolled into a half-moon driveway, Juan Diego and Patzcuaro noticed a woman with long amber hair and wearing a mod-printed skirt, walking around a cherub fountain flooded with flowers. She was slender as a salamander and as pale as a wayward spirit wandering about in eternal penitence.

“Will you look at that,” said Juan Diego.

Padilla led the men into a vestibule with a crystal chandelier radiating with natural light. While Patzcuaro marbled at the multi-colorful splash created by the crystals against the walls, Juan Diego stared at Padilla’s olive crocodile boots and at his silver pistol with a mother-of-pearl handle engraved, “J.D.R.”

At that moment, a middle-aged, silver-haired woman with porcelain-like skin and wearing a dark silk dress, appeared. Forcing a haughty smile, and without as much as a glance,

she welcomed the men and introduced herself as Magdalena, Bojorquez' wife. The men removed their sombreros. She led them through a swinging door, into a dining room that had the longest wooden-slab table and the largest window the men had ever seen. The table could sit up to sixteen, and the window overlooked a mango grove and a garden juxtaposed with distant hills and mountains. Out of a corner of the room, an apron-clad woman stepped out and pulled the woman's chair at the head of the table, then proceeded to do the same for the men.

"He's late again," Magdalena said, unfolding her napkin over her lap. "I suspect you're starving.'

"Very much, Señora. Yes." Juan Diego said, looking at the plates and at the bowls flanked by glimmering silverware, and at the four glasses varying in size and shape. After an exchanged of names, Magdalena looked out to the garden and at the distant hills and thought about her time in Andalucía, with its rugged peaks facing the Mediterranean and the slender straits weaving themselves into the blue. She was reminded of the work of the great orator and poet, Romana de la Verde, who performed the sonnet, *Weeping for the Heart of Spain* one night in Seville, inspiring in Magdalena so much nationalistic pride, that she had decided to tell Antonio she wanted a second home in the country of her birth.

"Apologies, Señores," said a man pushing through the swinging doors. "My call went longer than expected." It was Don Bojorquez. The men were about to stand, but he insisted they remain in their seats. "Let me just acknowledge this beauty right here," he said, standing over Magdalena and planting a backward kiss on her forehead.

"Ay, Gordo," she said. "You're just happy because I'm letting you eat whatever you want today." He gave a hearty laugh.

“You hear this woman?” he said to the men. “This is what I keep telling you, Padilla and Cuerdas, about finding yourselves a strong woman. They’ll extend your life, whether you like it or not.”

He went around table and, halfway to his seat, Juan Diego stood and walked around to extend his hand.

“It’s an honor, Señor,” he said, grabbing the man’s hand and shaking it vigorously. “I’ve always admired what you’ve built for yourself.”

“No, muchacho,” Borjorquez said, prying his hand loose. “The honor is mine. It’s always nice to have visitors from the village of my roots. But please,” he said, indicating with his hand, “Go take your seat.”

Padilla introduced the two men as hardworking and full of ambition, to which Bojorquez smiled and said, “That’s the most important trait any man could have. As my father always said, a man without ambition, is a man without a future.”

“That’s what I’ve always said too, Don Bojorquez,” Juan Diego said. “That’s why I’ve always imagined myself in a house like this.” He turned to Magdalena. “How many rooms does this have?”

“Eight,” she said proudly. “Not counting the guest houses near the creek.”

“Well, I’m thinking a house with twenty rooms, each with their own kitchenette and restroom.”

“Ha!” Bojorquez chuckled. “How about a good wife?”

“How about two!” Juan Diego said.

Bojorquez roared with laughter. “Whatever you like,” he said. “But for me,” he said, smiling tenderly at Magdalena, “One is enough.”

She titled in her chair and smiled.

"You're overdoing it, Gordo." Then she gave a soft whistle and a pair of waitresses swung through the door bearing platters with steak chunks bubbling with heat. They went back and forth through those doors, carrying bowls of rice and beans and many other things the men didn't recognize. Juan Diego packed his plate and, when he couldn't fit anything more, he pulled out the under-plates and filled those up too. He wasn't done just yet. Between stuffing his mouth, he said he also wanted a pair of boots and a pistol like Padilla's. Everyone looked under the table.

"Those *are* nice," Bojorquez said. He looked up at Padilla. "I must be paying you good money."

"You've been very generous, Don Bojorquez," Padilla said. Bojorquez turned back to Juan.

"Maybe we'll get you a pair soon."

Juan Diego beamed.

"How about you?" Bojorquez asked Patzcuaro. "What's your ambition look like?"

Patcuaro thought about owning a large piece of land and opening a that restaurant/bar he dreamed about for Eli. They'd call it, *La Cubita de Eli*, and they'd specialize in handmade rum and cook up the best food around.

"I just want opportunity, Don Bojorquez," he finally said. "Anyone gives me that, and I'll see to it that I make anything succeed."

Bojorquez leaned back. He crossed his arms and took a long look at the young man. Then he shared the story about how he made his mango orchard thrive, and how this led to more lucrative things and, in turn, sparked the interest from representatives of the largest mining

conglomerate in the world, Empreza Estil, now interested in opening a mine near Zapotan. "You're job is to be much more than our eyes and ears," he said. "Your job is to rally the villagers, share with them the prosperity awaiting when they open up their lands and let the company in."

He turned to Juan Diego.

"You," he said, "are going to be my new *Representante de Contactos Publicos y Personales Bojorquez,* one of the most crucial and important roles to bring the people of Zapotan together."

Juan Diego's eyes flashed open.

"And you," Bojorquez said to Patzcuaro."I want you to join the Muncipal Council. I've already spoken to the Municipal President and is excited to meet you. In the meantime," he said, signaling to the waitresses, "let's toast."

The women filled the men's shot glasses and placed quarter-sliced lime wedges before them, and a few salt shakers too. Don Bojorquez raised his glass. "Gentlemen," he said. "Here's a warm welcome to Ambition," he said, turning to Juan Diego, "and," he said nodding and smiling at Patzcuaro, "to Opportunity."

"Salud!"

Chapter Eight
Transgressions

In her essay, Ofelia described Fernanda ascending the Sierra Madre mountains alongside a company of hardened women and plodding across a desolate landscape toward the city of Torreon, a key stronghold controlled by the Federales. In a wild uproar, the women charged enemy columns amidst a tumult of gunfire and shells exploding in concussive thuds. Heads and faces were blows off, and described eyeballs dangling by the thread of their nerves. Great clouds of smoke threatened to choke the women into submission. But time and again, Fernanda would rise and, with unbridled courage charged with rallying cries until they smashed the defenses and overtook the city.

When Profesora Pimentel shared the essay with Ramona that afternoon, Ramona apologized for Ofelia's lies. To her surprise, the Profesora said that even though she knew that Fernanda wouldn't open up like that, it was an incredibly well thought out and creative piece. She was especially captivated by Fernanda's superpower; the power of levitation, so that when she reached the city of Torreon, the Federal soldiers who still clung to their mothers' faith would be compelled to drop their weapons and prostate themselves for the good of their souls.

Ramona shared this with Salvador later that day.

"Hm," he said, dropping a few pinches of salt over his leftover churipo. She talked about visiting Eli and that Jovi and Mari joined her for the visit, and that there was going to be a meeting tomorrow at Celestino's to talk about the men in the red truck and about Juand Diego and Patzcuaro.

Salvador grabbed an inflated tortilla from Ramona's hands. He juggled it and patted it down to let the steam out, while Ramona described how badly Eli was doing. They had found drunk as can be, lurching toward a chicken with a knife. When she saw them, Eli pressed her

index finger to her lips. “Shsh,” she said. The women froze. “I have her cornered.” Then she lunged and the chicken moved out of the way, causing Eli to land flat on her chest, knocking her out for a minute. The women lifted and dusted her off, and then carried their slurring friend inside. They gave her water, wiped her lips, and moisturized her legs and knees with coconut oil before taking her to bed. When they asked her about Patzcuaro, she slurred and, in a cursed-laden speech, threatened to load a pistol and shoot him.

“No one knows who the men in the truck are,” Ramona said too Salvador. There are rumors.”

“Always rumors,” he said, rolling the tortilla and dipping it in a fresh salsa Ramona made from a batch of peppers her father had given her. “I’m not worried,” he said, sticking half of it in his mouth.

She sat in front of him.

“They say they work for Emprez Estil,” she said. “The same company that owns the mines in Aguililla.”

Beads of sweat began to form on Salvador’s forehead and around his eyes.

“Not worried,” he said in a muffled tone. “It’s probably a job. Everyone know Juan need to work. Not worried.”

Ramona leaned forward.

“You should worry,” she said. “Imagine if the mine company took over our lands the way they did in Aguililla.”

Salvador sniffled. He scooped salsa from the mortal and mixed it into his stew.

“No one took over anything,” he said. “The townspeople made a collective decision. The company promised them jobs and they delivered. Now everyone’s better off.”

Ramona shook her head. “But at what cost, Salvador? The rivers near Aguililla are turning to mud. Swaths of land are being cleared of trees, and there’s been two landslides in the last six months. Some even say that the land isn’t producing as much anymore, that there are days when the town is filled with so much dust and ash that people can hardly breathe.”

Salvador grabbed another tortilla. He rolled it up, dipped it, and stuffed it whole in his mouth. He recalled one of Father Ignacio’s ‘fire and brimstone’ sermons where he talked about the terrible plagues and pestilence that would one-day do away with mankind. The sun would scorch the rivers, and the streams would turn into blood. A living hell. A place of death, darker than darkness and deeper than an abyss. Ramona sounded like that. But at least she sounded like the young woman he used to know; passionate and with a tinge of urgency in a voice she hadn’t heard in years. He just didn’t understand how more stable and better paying jobs, was a bad thing. The town of Aguililla had grown exponentially. They had better roads and schools, and they even had electricity, for God-sakes! Salvador’s eyes watered.

“Can you imagine, Ramona?” he said between his intense heaves, “having electricity and a television, and watching Las Monarcas play live? Wouldn’t that be great?”

Ramona wasn’t going to let him break her line of thought.

“Are the company’s henchmen *great* too, Salvador? Is it *great* that they strong-armed the community? That they threatened men, women, and children, and killed Amador Guillermo Lopez?”

Now Salvador’s intensities seared. He grabbed his cup of water and took a long drink. Everyone knew, including himself, that the dead of Amador Guillermo Lopez, the activist’s leader against the mine’s expansion, hadn’t been suicide, no matter what the authorities said. They set him up, accused him of embezzlement. Under threat of arrest and a likely conviction by

the corrupt Municipal government, including that long-toothed ass face of a police commander, the judge, and Municipal Council and their President, Amador

disappeared before his arrest. Days later, they found his decomposing body in Satans Ravine, covered in leaves and detritus, and with a nailed note hanging from his exposed ribcage. In it, he bid farewell to his wife and children and apologized to the community for his "transgressions." Everyone agreed that it *was* his handwriting. But it was his use of the word 'transgressions' that sparked doubt among his followers. He would've never used such a liturgical word. They couldn't imagine the word being anywhere near his tongue. He would've simply apologized. That would've been enough.

Salvador wanted to admit that Ramona was right about the henchmen, but instead looked at the salsa and said that it was the best damn salsa he'd ever had. Ramona looked at him curiously. She recognized his cue to wanting intimacy.

Fourteen villagers met inside Celestino's storage room the following morning and sat on chair, on overturned crates and buckets among the five member Council of Elders. The Council was the decision-making body of the village. They are elected by their respective neighbors within the five sections of the village, and meet at least once a week.

After everyone settled, Ofelia walked in with a notebook and with Kalimán under her armpit, and with a pencil behind her ear. Ramona's face soured. So did Fernanda's. Ramona was about to blurt something but stopped when Salvador squeezed her leg and whispered in her ear.

Having also heard about Ofelia's writing, Celestino invited her to be their scribe, though she needed to get permission first. She was intent on doing so, but ended falling asleep without letting Ramona or Salvador know. Now Ofelia sat there among the elders, looking at Celestino who, with a wink and nod, encouraged her to begin.

Notas de Junta Prileminaria
Council of Elders - Junio 22, 1962

Present: Guillermino Romero, Eduardo Atica, Paulino Giron, Emilia Lomeli, Grifoldo Arriaga, Manuel Sauceda, Rafael Escobedo, Mercedes Paz, Ramona Murillo, Salvador Murillo, Lucio Perez, Fabiolo Rangel - Concilio de Ancianos: Pasita Giron, Fernanda Luna, Antonio Meza, Abundio Amaya, Paloma Arriaga, Alejandro Pedroza, Bonifacio Paz.

Pasita leans into his cane. Gives welcome. His skin looks like dried driftwood.
The meeting is about the men in the red truck.
Pasita invites Mercedes the Journalist to give report.
Some call her Mercedes La Chismosa. She knows everything.
She says that the truck returned on Tuesday at approximately 5:43 a.m.
It pulled up beside Juan Diego and Patzcuaro.
There was a tense exchange between the passenger and Juan Diego.
Mercedes says Juan Diego brandished a knife.
The men inside the truck seemed calm.
A moment later Juan Diego lowered his knife.
The men jumped on the truck and they zoomed off.
They returned in the evening. They dropped them off outside the village.
They wouldn't say anything to anyone.
Then the truck returned for the men yesterday. They didn't return.
Ramona says she and Jovi went to visit Eli and found her very drunk.
No one has talked to her yet, but Ramona says she will go visit her again.
Fernanda asks where the rumor that the men in the truck work for Empreza Estil came from.
Mercedez says she saw a decal with the mine's name on the rear windshield of the truck.

At that point, Ofelia's notes became choppy because Fernanda went into a compacted lecture on land rights and on the communal landholdings that were part of at the agrarian land reforms of 1923, and which were implemented under Cardenas' rule. Ofelia couldn't have written all that. But she *did* write that Fernanda insisted on calling for a community-wide meeting, and that they should reaffirm those agreements in written and oral form. Almost everyone agreed, except for Grifoldo and another man, and probably Salvador. Grifoldo believe that mines would lift Zapotan out of the dark ages, push it into the age of progress. He insisted upon presenting the villagers with the facts; with the pros and cons of allowing the mines to enter their land. Pasita spoke to this, reminding Grifoldo that the protection of their land had long

ago been prioritized by their ancestors, a strong stewardship passed down in oral and written decrees. When a bit of crosstalk broke out between Grifoldo and Ramona, Fernanda clapped her hands to get their attention, to which Grifoldo gave scornful gaze. She stared at him back, sternly, until he redirected his gaze. At the end, with a show of hands, they agreed on having a community-wide meeting, to take place on Sunday after Mass.

As soon as the meeting was over, Ofelia handed Celestino her notes and bounded out the door. El Tres met her outside. She leaned over and, tapping his head, told him how dizzy she was from everything she had just heard. The mutt seemed to smile. He shook his tail and he defected leg. He accompanied her to the Giant Oyamel tree and walked around it. She ran her fingers around the deep-grooved trunk, skipping over the umbilical cord hanging at her chosen height, then climbed the tree, up to her favorite branch where she liked to think, see, and imagine, or, in this particular case, finish reading Kalimán. At midday, she saw Milagro near the bridge. He was skipping stones beside a densely leaved tree. Further to her left, she could see Jovi sitting beside Eli. She could see the village and villagers, and above them, Father Ignacio standing beside the San Frances de Assisi looking at everything below.

Chapter Nine
An Important Man

Late Friday afternoon, Juan Diego and Patzcuaro were dropped off far from the village entrance. Juan Diego cursed and slapped the trucks roof to tell Padilla that he better order the mute to take them to plaza. Padilla sat calmly until a raging Juan Diego hopped off. They he signaled to Cuerdas, and they drove off. Now the two men walked toward the village, each lost in their own thoughts. Juan Diego's jumped from thinking about his newly acquired title, to the crocodile boots Don Bojorquez promised him, to the night when he knocked on Bojorquez' stepdaughter's bedroom door to give her flowers snapped from the garden. Patzcuaro's thoughts were more conflicting. He couldn't shake the memory of Eli and the disappointment in her eyes, nor the thought of the previous night at Rancho Cielo Azul when, stepping out to the balcony of his room to smoke, noticed the young woman they had seen by the fountain, reading on a bistro table two balconies to his right. She aimed to ignore him, but the boredom those foresaken rural lands, had gotten to be too much, and so she closed the book and introduced herself as Polenicia, "stepdaughter of the almighty Don Bojorquez."

Patzcuaro coughed out the cigarette smoke and gave his name. Her sarcasm hadn't escaped him, and understood the friction of being a stepson or daughter, created. To his surprise, Polinicia invited him over for a "charlada," she said. Thinking that was a brand of beer, he tiptoed over to her messy room, saturated with the smell of lotions and perfumes, and with mounds of clothes, shoes, and fashion magazines rising from every corner. She quickly guided him to the balcony and he sat there listening to a longwinded story about her life in Spain, about her dwindling modeling career, her desire to move to New York, and expressed sadness for the poverty plaguing Patzcuaro's people, all while he waited for a beer that never came. At one point, Juan Diego came to the door and handed her a batch of fresh flowers. Having aimed at

being invited in, he had used a pomade his mother had made him to crate the slickest cowlick in all of Michoacan. Instead, she thanked him for his sweetness and, opening her mouth, produced a long exaggerated yawn. She apologized for being so tired, wished him good night, and closed the door.

When they entered the Zapotan, villagers asked them about their whereabout. Juan Diego didn't hesitate to give a mouthful of descriptions until he became too exhausted to keep explaining. At Celestino's, they were surrounded by the men getting their evening smokes and drinks. Juan Diego ended up entertaining their questions, making sure to announce himself as Don Bojorquez' new *Representante de Contactos Publicos y Personales, de Bojorquez, S.A.*

"Carajo," said a man nicknamed Alambre because of his wiry frame. "That sounds important."

"It is," said Juan Diego.

"What the hell does it mean?" asked a man nicknamed El Trompas because of his pouty mouth.

"It means a whole lot of things," Juan said. "There are a whole lot of responsibilities and a massive amount of work to be done for the project at hand."

"What project?" the other men asked. "And why are you talking funny?"

"Señores," he said. "Calm yourselves. Please trust us." The men looked confusingly at one another. Juan Diego turned to look for Patzcuaro, but had already snuck away to Eli's cottage. He found her sitting wither Ramona and Jovi by a fire, each with a drink in their hand. Springing to her feet, Eli grabbed a rock and, before her friends could grab her arms, managed to pelt Patzcauro on his chest. He could have moved out of the way but had decided that if he wanted forgiveness, he had to suffer an equal amount of hurt and rage to earn it. He would come

to underestimate Eli's bullheaded strength. When she warned never to leave her again, she had meant it as solidly as was her word. Her forgiveness would come many years later on a fateful night when, in the midst of tragedy, she understood that to have one's heart broken, is to discover that one's free.

Back at Celestino's, Juan Diego excused himself and he walked away as proud as anyone had ever seen him. When he told his family about his new title, they chuckled and gave sidelong glances. His father sat stoically, glaring at his son.

"That doesn't sound like a real title," his older brother said. "It's made up!"

Juan Diego's mother jumped in.

"Leave Juan alone!" she said, standing by his side. "Is that all all of you know how to do?"

"It's a real a title," Juan Diego said to them.

"Juan," he heard his father say. Everyone turned. "Let's say that it is a real title. Do you think someone like that would ever give someone like you a position in one of the biggest mines in the world?"

"He's paying us," Juan Diego said, "and he's paying us good."

"You ignored my question," his father said.

Juan Diego hooked his thumbs in his leather belt and walked out of the room.

Shortly before midday on Sunday, Pasita sat on one of the four stumps under the kiosko, watching a red-knee tarantula climb his staff. It crawled slowly onto his fingers and settled on his knuckles. When the rest of the Elders arrived, the tarantula scurried away, its odd legs working in conjunction with the even ones, and snuggled underneath the stump. Each Elder sat on a stump and waited for Mass to come to an end. Soon, the parishioners snaked out of the temple and a boy

with a resonant voice ran to the plaza to invite the villagers to the plaza for the planned community-wide meeting. When the majority of the villagers gathered and Pasita began to stand, Juan Diego stepped up in front of him, then turned his back to face the audience. And as he looked at all of those faces, he remembered the ridicule he had suffered and resolved to let everyone know who he, Juan Diego Villahermosa de La Cruz, also known as El Gallo de Zapotan, was; *El Chingon mas Chingon de los Chingones*, and the new the new Personal Representative of Public and Personal Contacts for Bojorquez & Co. But something happened. He became aware of his body, how he shifted his weight from one foot to the other and twirled his fingers. He also became aware of the glares shooting him from every direction. The one that wounded the most, was his father's. That's when Fernanda grabbed his arm and pulled him away.

"What disrespect is this?" she said, giving him a good shake. "This isn't *your* meeting. On your way!"

The meeting went on as planned. If all the villagers already didn't know, which they did, the Council of Elders announced that there were rumors about Empreza Estil coming to their midst, and to be watchful of those who present themselves as allies, only to be quick to betray their land. This is why it was important to present to them a decree.

Just as Fernanda was about to read it, Patzcuaro's spoke up in a resonant voice. First he apologized for the interruption, then asked if anyone was interested in having good paying jobs that did not depend on the seasons. Some nodded their heads.

Fernanda raised her arms to grab everyone's attention, but Patzcuaro talked about the opportunities a mining company could bring, and the possibility of each family member getting paid a quota, the way they did in Aguililla. They would have better roads and schools, and even have electricity to watch the Monarchs play.

Ripples of excitement spread among the villagers while Fernanda raised her arms again.

"That's never the whole truth!" she said.

Chatter broke out.

"The real truth belongs to our ancestors! The one that prohibits us to turn over our land and have been rot by power and greed."

Then, someone suggested that another community-wide meeting be held, and that Patzcuaro and the Council of Elders, should each present their side, after-which the villager's vote.

Patzcuaro agreed, but said he needed time.

With that, Pasita asked for a show of hands of those who agreed with having a second meeting. A wave of hands followed. It was settled and they negotiated with Patzcuaro to hold it in three weeks. By then, he would have the answers everyone was looking for.

That night, unable to sleep in the spare room Grifoldo had offered him, he asked Grifoldo to let him borrow his horse, and he rode off into the night until he reached Rancho Cielo Azul just as the moon had begun tucking its head. When he approached the entrance, someone ordered him to stop. Two men wielding rifles and with handkerchiefs covered half their face, stepped out from behind the large posts holding the sign, and, seeing it was Patzcuaro, escorted him inside. Bojorquez appeared on the stairway with a grouchy expression, and wearing a robe. He invited Patzcuaro to his office and asked what the hell he wanted. Patzcuaro told him about the impromptu meeting, and that he had mistakenly created the idea among the villagers, that the mining company would improve the roads and build school, and offer individuals yearly quotas, without knowing if any of it was true, but that he had to say and based this on what he'd heard occurred in Aguililla. At that moment, Bojorquez realized he had made a mistake. He had moved too quickly, encouraged Padilla and Cuerdas to canvas the region and recruit a local to prepare the way without having

solidified the details with Empreza Estil. He picked up the phone and dialed the direct line to the company's CEO. As they waited for an answer, Patzcuaro noticed a clump of reddish-blond hair caught between Don Bojorquez wisp of his own hair. Caught within that old-aged dilemma of whether or not you point something embarrassingly out, Patzcuaro waited for Don Bojorquez to hang up the phone after no one answered, and possibly told he had reddish-brown hair on his head. Bojorquez shook the clump off and, with a tinge of embarrassment, affirmed the obvious, that no had answered the call. He immediately dialed the Municipal President and eventually got ahold of the person in charge of the mines in Aguilalla. Bojorquez handed Patzcuaro a paper and pencil, but quickly realized by the way Patzcuaro glared down at the tools, that the young man didn't know how to write. And so he wrote the notes for him and went over them after the call. Then, handing him the keys to the red truck, wished him luck.

On his way out, Patzcuaro saw Polenicia standing on the balcony. When she smiled, he could've sworn that her sweet scent reached his nose, and in a flash, imagined her under his grasp, pushing against her delicate salamander body.

Back in Zapotan, Juan Diego would awaken in the plaza reeking of liquor while the village began to buzz. A deep sense of failure had overtaken him. But now, he thought while he made his way to find another drink, it's time to get out of my slump.

Chapter Ten
Ofelia the Saint

Whenever Ofelia climbed the Giant Oyamel, she imagined being one of those low flying birds that glide and swoop along the river and disappearing way beyond those mountains. The tree itself was an intimidating looking tree. As it's been said before, it had a massive trunk that split a few yards up, as if two distinct trees suddenly emerged. One side kept its markings of its base. It looked healthy and it led to fine bushels of bright leaves stretching up to the sky. The other side was an ashy black. It looked brittle, as if lightning had struck it.

That morning, she had run off from school after punching Chingas in the face. The reason? She was positive that he threw the soccer ball at her when she wasn't looking. An angry mob gathered and, feeling their energy, Ofelia swung and it went smoosh, right on his face. HE fell with a wimpier. Everyone gasped. Then, the circled opened up and Nena came rushing from behind and saddled up on Ofelia's back, grabbing her hair and pulling at it like reins. Ofelia eventually managed to arch back and grab the girl by her neck and pushing her back. By the time the Profesora ran out to stop them, Ofelia had taken off.

She went to the Giant Oyamel and teased the umbilical cord. She remembered Pasita telling them the story about how the umbilical ended up there. He said it belonged to the unnaturally born child of Ernaldo and Carmen of El Chorumo, two wealthy hacenderos who died violently alongside their five daughters at the hands of the Revolutionary, Francisco Villa, a man considered a hero, or a brute, or sometimes both, just depends who you ask. Most villagers didn't believe it was Villa, but a lookalike named José Doroteo Arango Arámbula and his rogue posse. When Ernaldo heard that José Doroteo was in the vicinity burning plantations and ravines, he armed himself and his men, and ordered his most loyal terrateniante to lead his pregnant wife and five daughters to safety, ordered his peones to set a perimeter around the hacienda. Then he

locked himself and a few of his most loyal terratenientes in one of the guest houses and waited. The pose was at least fifty strong. They prodded around the hacienda while their leader took center stage. In a rousing speech, he told Ernaldo's peons that if they were tired of being Don Ernaldo's slaves, of serving others for an impoverished way of life, then they should lift up their arms and join him in the Revolution. More than half of Ernaldo's peons deserted their ranks. As they rushed off, one of Ernaldo's terratenientes shot a deserter in the back. In a great uproar the men opened fire and all around the bodies fell. The sky and everything filled with white smoke, and in the end, Doroteo Arango Arámbula found Ernaldo crawling for his gun. He was wounded, crying in pain. What soothed him was the thought that his family was safe. Doroteo burst out laughing at the shadow of pain and fear in the man's eyes. He had his men force him to his knees and pull his head back to expose his neck. And in those final moments, when Doroteo's blade glided smoothly across his neck, he thought to have heard his children's cries and his wife begging for mercy. The following morning, villager's found Ernaldo with his head nearly severed, and bodies of children and wife, along the river's bank. His wife had been cut open, the unborn child ripped out and his umbilical cord hung from the Giant Oyamel tree. They say that the child survived. That it was a boy, and that Doroteo took him to raise as his own. They say Don Ernaldo's spirit appears here and there, strolling the mountainsides in search of his son. Only until he finds him, can the umbilical cord can be removed from the tree. Until then, anyone who tries will be haunted and even killed by Ernaldo's Spirit.

Some of the kids looked frightened when they heard this story. A few of them ran off to cling with their mothers. Some of them trembled a little, while the skeptical ones hissed or laughed. Ofelia remembered sitting with her little sister Chayo, and thinking that anything was possible. Now, from the heights of that tree, she could see greater things far beyond those

mountains, like the Valley of Kalimantan, or, better yet, the City of Torreon where her Abuela had fought. She also thought about that time, long before Chingas hit his first major growth spurt, when she found him clinging to the brittled side of the tree, and scaring him by giving it a good shake. Maybe that's why Chingas had had it out for her for so long.

Ofelia sat up in that tree for hours, fearful of going home. In the late afternoon, she watched men walk out of the many trails that branched out along Chorumo Road, and saw Milagro in the river's banks skipping stones. She joined him for a while and then shared with her that his grandfather was very ill.

"He's shakes and whizzes a lot," he said, "and sometimes he even stops breathing. I don't," he said, looking very sadly, "I hate to see him suffer that way."

Ofelia faced him but didn't know what to say, so she just stood there, watching him pick up oval-shaped stones, listening to the river's lapping. At dusk, Milagro said he was heading home, but wondered if she wanted him to accompany her to her home first.

"I'm fine," she said. "But we can walk together to the other side of the bridge."

Back home, Ramona had her magic stick ready, managing to give Ofelia a pair of slashings and, worst of all, letting her know that she have better get ready for her first confession and that she had already talked to the priest about it. Ofelia was motionless. All she think about that night was the dark wooden box with two compartments, carved with narrative scene fragments of the life of the Virgin and Christ. She imagined it had to be sturdy so that the sins people have shed in it throughout the decades, wouldn't spill out. Father Ignacio would often give a detailed history of that relic; a sixteenth century "treasure," he called it, traded and exported throughout many countries in the Western World.

When the day came, Ofelia stepped into one of the cavernous compartments, knet down, crossed herself, and said “Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned,” just as Ramona had instructed.

“Tell me your sins, child,” the priest said from the other side of the little window, but Ofelia only told him about the fight she had at school.

“How did you feel, Ofelia,” he said.

“At first I felt terrible, Father,” she said. “But then as the day passed by, I felt more comfortable with what I had done.”

“But, you hurt someone, Ofelia,” he said.

“Yes, Father,” she said. “But he deserved it.”

The priest coughed uncomfortably, then changed his tone.

“You need to either confess your sin, Ofelia, or go home. It’s no use asking for forgiveness without having any guilt.”

Ofelia understood, and she walked out of the booth and out of the temple feeling pretty good. She loved the warmth of the sun on her skin, and the way El Tres’s tongue felt when he licked her hands. Still dressed in her communion dress, Ofelia gathered her little sister Chayo, her brother, and a few of their friends, and walked over to Milagro’s cottage to ask him to help them improvise a similar progression that occurs during the celebrations of the Holy Mother of God. Milagro loved the idea. He welcomed them inside and had his mother use the material she had to make clothes, to make cloaks and gowns for everyone. Ofelia was more specific for herself. She wanted marengols weaved into her hair. When they were done, Ofelia lined them up in two rows of three and had them spread out a blanket between them. She lay down on it and they carried her to the plaza and place her under the kiosko. Neither Ofelia, Jovi, or Milagro, realized the extent of Father Ignacio’s rage when he saw this from the church. In a rage, he

stomped down the mountainside mumbling “abomination,” and ignoring other villagers’ bidding him a good day. At the kiosko, he pulled the sheet off of Ofelia, grabbed the flowers from her hair, and smashed them under his feet.

“What abomination is this?” he said, glaring at her as if she were the only one there. Ofelia stood stiffly, looking off into the distance and unwilling to break her Saintly role, at least not until she saw Ramona pouncing down the mountain, her face flushed with anger and wielding that magic stick, did Ofelia seemed to awaken from her trance. Before Father Ignacio could grab her, she was off running back to the Giant Oyamel tree from where, a few hours later, she would watch the community-wide meeting take place and, not long after, see things begin to change.

Chapter Eleven

Leader of One

Walking straight and tough to the kiosko where the Council of Elders waited, Juan Diego now wore a black felt vaquero hat, a tucked-in white buttoned-up shirt, black jeans, and the finest boots anyone had ever seen, all thanks to Don Bojorquez. He looked like a true Norteño! He stood before Pasita and reiterated the importance of his new position, and asked that they allow him to make a statement to the villagers highlighting the importance of the mines. The Elders didn't have time to respond because, at that moment, a commotion drew their attention to two trucks making their way into the village and to the plaza. It was the red truck with the same two men inside. The other was a white one and where, inside, sat Patzcuaro and another man who introduced himself as the Municipal President of Aguililla, which included Zapotan. The man was an affable creature, with a body shaped like a trompo, like his legs would buckle under the weight of his upper body at any time.

"Good afternoon," he said to the Elders. "Very glad I finally get to meet you." He shook each of the Elders' hands and in his mind thought about how distrustful Indios always were, and that it was this particular distrust that got in the way of their progress. Still, he smiled all the way and offered himself and the men accompanying him, their full undivided attention.

After the majority of villagers had gathered, Fernanda stood to address the crowd. In as a resonant a voice as ever, she gave a rousing speech about the importance of keeping the exploiters out of the land that their forefathers and mothers, bestowed on them. She went full force, condemning Epreza Estil of greed, explaining that the company had been long in cahoots with the Federal government, long before the Revolutionary War even, and they used henchmen to cause violence, kidnap, and murder, and that even local representative, she said, glancing over at the

Municipal President, are guilty of allowing such impunity unchecked. The President lowered his gaze and in a barely audible voice said to himself, “Ay, Cabrona. You’re going to pay.”

When she was finished, she returned to the stump. Now it was the Municipal President’s turn. But instead of him speaking, he signaled Patzcuaro and Patzcuaro stepped onto the kiosko with a megaphone speaker in his hand. Not wanting to miss being seen, Juan Diego followed a few steps behind and stood right beside him, hands locked in front of his crouch, making sure his body remained as stiff and, therefore, as dignified-looking as possible. Without a moment’s hesitation, Patzcuaro spoke calmly and with so much clarity and certainty about what a mine could mean for the future of each one of the villager’s families, that it took everyone a while to accept that it was he, the once quiet young man usually standing under Grifoldo’s shadow, who was saying these things. He didn’t scream or sound angry, the way Fernanda had, though some villagers knew that having a speaker phone could’ve created that illusion and advantage. Regardless, by the end of his talk, a few scattered claps could be heard, followed by a few more and, before they knew it, a significant number of villagers joined in. Next, villagers we’re given the opportunity to speak. Quite a few of them did. Many of them spoke in favor of the mines so as long as they responsibly took care of the lands. Other stood up completely against it. Through the thicket of voices, Ramona spoke. Her visit to Aguililla gave her a firsthand view of what the effects of the mines had been.

In two weeks time, a gray herd of semi trucks and cranes staked wooden utility posts from the valley and lined them up along a dirt road that meandered into a village tucked within the mountains. They weaved and routed heavy metal cables so that every cottage would have light, and brought in lampposts and placed these in the plaza and along the main road and a few places in between so that villagers could walk at night without their oil lamps or gather in the plaza as late as they wished. Then came the trucks carrying giant metal trompos that spun sideways and

shitted concrete over the roads. In a day's time, they took down the old wooden bridge and built one made of iron, wide enough so that instead of oxcarts crossing one at a time, four could do so side by side. The villagers celebrated. “Now this is progress!” they said. A few months later, the mine company that sold them this utopia, brought in a hardware store. They stacked it with things like flashlights and batteries and with the newest farming equipment and gadgets few villagers had seen. In the meantime, villagers marched to the company’s main office to sign their names. They were immediately given oxygen masks, mining helmets and overalls with the mine’s logo patched on their chests. And then they were off, picked up by trucks that transported them to the mines. Soon, the village tiendita’s were forgotten, as were the once indispensable oil lamps standing in corners collecting dust. Day in and day out, the mine groaned, always with a steady stream of somber looking men entering and exiting its chambers. And then, every two weeks, when they looked down at their checks, their muck-filled faces would smile. When another large store opened, they bought things and went on to renovate their cottages. They tore down walls made of sticks and dabbed with mud and erected them again with bricks. They added rooms and covered their dirt floors with tile and their roofs with clay shingles where the birds, too, found homes. Everyone marbled at it all. And as if things couldn’t get any better, the store began selling televisions a week before the soccer finals were to take place. The villagers flocked over and bought them all and now entire families sat in their homes. They adjusted their antennas and stared at the staticky images, their eyes and mouths wide open in awe.

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Vita

Samuel H. Duarte was born in Nogales, Sonora Mexico on January 9, 1974. He graduated from Corcoran High School in June, 1992. He enrolled in Visalia's Sequoia College, transferred to Bakersfield College, and finally to Fresno City College before earning his Bachelor of Arts degree in Sociology from Fresno State University. During those years he worked as a Youth Development Specialist for a non-profit in the San Joaquin Valley, as an instructor for a vocational college in Fresno, and a Parent Liaison for the Woodlake Union School District. In 2010, he and his wife Jessica moved to the California Central Coast where he has worked as a Parent Engagement Coordinator at a non-profit known as the Little House by the Park in Guadalupe California. He has been the Executive Director since 2018. In the summer of the same year, he helped to co-found a cultural and creative arts center, Corazon del Pueblo, in Santa Maria California where he now serves as Chair.

In 2017, Samuel was awarded the Latino Legacy Award as a recognition for his non-profit work. In 2016, the Anne La Bestille Residency, also known as the Adirondack Writing Center, awarded him a writer's residency. As part of his work with the community, he compiled and edited a community anthology, Small Town, Big Dreams, in 2014, which highlighted the leadership and experiences of the immigrant community of Guadalupe. He served as commissioner for the Santa Barbara Arts Commission from 2017 to 2018, and was the North County Vice-President for the Fund for Santa Barbara from 2014 to 2016. In 2013, he founded the local Santa Maria One Hundred Thousand Poets for Change chapter, and joined the Language Justice Network in 2013 to advocate for interpretation with a social justice lens. Samuel is also one of the founders of the Dual Immersion Alliance that brought Dual Immersion classes to the Santa Maria Union School District. In 2017, he was sponsored to attend the Gamaliel Institute of Chicago by the McCune Foundation.

He has done extensive readings of his work throughout the Central Coast and the San Joaquin Valley, and has served as a collaborator for the InVisible Memoir Project, La Bloga, and the anthology Corners of the Mouth, as well as translator and editor of Casitas Boladoras, a project based out of the EDELO artist residency in Chiapas.