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I never left the borderland

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I NEVER LEFT THE BORDERLAND

A Thesis

by

ROSA E. TREVINO

Submitted to the Graduate College of
The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

December 2015

Major Subject: Creative Writing

I NEVER LEFT THE BORDERLAND

A Thesis
by
ROSA E. TREVINO

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December 2015

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ABSTRACT

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I Never Left the Borderland is a memoir encouraged seven years ago. It was originally meant to be the story of a young girl and her experiences as a migrant student, but once the writing process got under way, the narrative began to evolve. It became a complicated account of how the protagonist, now an adult, felt she was experiencing an inexplicable second coming of age, wrestling with her roles as a wife, mother and scholar. The critical introduction focuses on her relationship with literature and how it kept her sane while she struggled with who she was and who others expected her to be. She tells of the process of rediscovering herself, but most importantly—of finding her voice as a woman. The introduction touches briefly on the elements of writing and the challenges in creating this work. A large focus is placed on the literature that influenced the author's personal life and how it educated her, liberating her along the way.

DEDICATION

A friend once told me that I was a success story. I have never felt that way. A few years ago, I admired my oldest daughter, Becky, as she prepared to leave to her college classes, and a part of me was jealous. I wished that had been me twenty-seven years ago. I remembered how excited I felt about wanting to go away to school at age eighteen. I then looked at my second daughter, Kayla, with her band instrument in tow, wearing her dance clothes as she headed out the door, and I wished that had been me in high school. My boys, Jonathan and Joshua, followed in her footsteps and joined band as well while feeding other interests such as art, storm chasing, history and science. My children will never know what breathing diesel fumes in all day feels like. They will never work under the hot sun, cleaning fields. They will never be migrant kids because I was a migrant kid for them. Their father and I did the best we could to make their lives easier than ours was growing up. I want them to know they have a whole world ahead, and they should never stop dreaming. My task is to nurture and make their wings strong enough to fly and to let them go when they feel ready. If I succeed there, then that is my success story. This is for them.

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Many thanks to Dr. Hillrey Dufner, the first person who believed I had a story to tell. It may not be exactly the one he had in mind, but it's still my story. Thank you for the encouragement, the chats, the warmth and friendship throughout the years. I will never forget.

Last but not least, I want to thank my family. I wouldn't have been able to complete this degree if they had not believed in me. The road has been a bumpy one, but that's how life is. Good things don't always come easy. I hope my kids learn from my experience and never stop striving for more.

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CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

“A woman has to live her life, or live to repent not having lived it.” D.H. Lawrence

I grew up believing no decent woman would ever have sex outside of marriage and that marriage and family was the center of every (happy) woman’s life. My parents, my church and my culture engrained this belief in me. Talking about sex was especially taboo in our culture. Looking back at my childhood years, I recall being an avid reader and how literature played an important role in my life, especially during my adolescence when I discovered Judy Blume’s books, and she provided answers to questions I had regarding puberty, sex, religion or simply growing up. My narrative is a memoir of an adult woman looking back at her early life, at her love for books, at the family and cultural dynamics that contributed to shaping her identity, and ultimately shaping her life. It’s an attempt to make peace with her macho father, her mother (the disciplinary), her husband, and the systems of society and cultural structures she felt got in the way of being herself and achieving her goals.

Even though the telling of the migrant experience is an extensive one, its purpose is to help define the setting in which the events took place. This narrative tells of a child who witnessed domestic abuse, of being a teen bride who felt cheated and derailed, streamlined into a certain life after high school, filling a traditional role when what she yearned for was a college education, a chance to experience life on her own. Most importantly, this narrative is about a woman becoming self-actualized and attempting to rid herself of the deep resentment and anger

she carried for many years. It's about finding the courage to admit she's a sexual being who was once afraid to be herself and use her voice for fear of being chastised.

My relationship with books began at a young age. In grade school, I read all the original books of The Boxcar Children series. I sympathized with the characters because they were poor and orphaned, but I enjoyed knowing they lacked an authority figure in their lives since this allowed them to experience all sort of adventures. I discovered Beverly Cleary's *Ramona* and was instantly hooked. She was a little rebel and quirky. Henry was the male best friend I never had, and Beezus treated Ramona like my own sisters treated me when I was growing up. Being a middle child and thought of as my father's favorite was hard on me. Ramona's adventures gave me a temporary escape from my own life at home. Ramona's parents didn't fight. Her dad did not hit her mom, and her mom did not hit her kids. I secretly envied Ramona. I followed her adventures alongside her best friend Henry and sister Beezus, but I was far from being anything like her—except maybe for the sagging socks she wore.

The positive side to losing myself in Cleary's books was her ability to make me laugh, how she propelled my imagination to dream up adventures in my head. I read Cleary's entire Ramona Quimby series in middle school before graduating to the young adult novels. I will not deny that at that early age having Ramona as entertainment was possibly the best thing for me, providing escape from conflict at home between my parents. Beverly Cleary and Judy Blume were positive influences at the time, but I now hold a certain ambivalence toward their works. When I was back home in Weslaco every fall, I thought that aside from my siblings, I was the only migrant student in high school. I have no recollection of a classmate sharing confidences about their days in the fields or the days on the road to get to states up north. Perhaps we were all a bit ashamed of having lower family incomes or the instability that migrating from one state to

another caused in our education and our homes. I realize as an adult now, that being a migrant worker was not something to be ashamed of. It played a crucial part in my formative years, something I would value as one of life's great lessons. As much as I loved Beverly Cleary and Judy Blume, their stories did not give me the encouragement or the permission I felt I needed, as a first generation Mexican American migrant girl, telling me it was okay to break out of roles and stereotypes. I was oblivious to this until I began writing about my life as a migrant student. An old friend, Jim Douglas, the first person who believed I had a story to tell and who first encouraged me to write, suggested I look for similar writing (that of memoirs) in order to learn what was out there and how others had told their stories.

After high school, it would be eighteen years before I picked a book up again for enjoyment. Once in college, at the age of 38, I became aware of literature that described women's struggles relating to academia, writing and gender roles. I also discovered authors who wrote of childhoods similar to mine, to parents and homes like mine and most importantly, to struggles like mine. In these books, I saw a language I could relate to, including Spanish language idioms my parents used as warnings or on a day-to-day basis to communicate certain ideas, idioms known as *dichos* or *refranes*. Norma Elia Cantú's *Canícula*, Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*, *Loose Woman*, *Woman Hollering Creek*, and Helena María Viramontes's *Under the Feet of Jesus* were just a few. I began to feel a connection with these writers through the words on the pages. I caught myself literally smiling every time I came across an expression I could relate to. What perhaps seemed foreign to many readers outside my culture became a welcome mat for me in literature.

As pleased as I was about discovering these Chicana authors, I also experienced a sadness. I wondered where these writers were when I was growing up and why it took me so

long to find them. I began to feel angry. I realized how as a young girl I had no choice but to look for answers to my many pre-adolescent questions in books where the main characters were very different from me. I wanted to believe I could have broken free of the chains of fear and guilt I carried when young for wanting to explore and be independent had I seen my Mexican American self in books.

As I attempted to make sense of why I discovered this specific literature so late in life, I thought of the mostly white teachers I had growing up. My first reading teachers were: Mrs. Wallace, Mrs. Dei Rossi at New Haven Elementary in California and Mrs. Davis back in Texas. In seventh grade, I had Mrs. Stanley, who was the only Jewish teacher in Weslaco. She had us read a book a week and turn in a book report every Friday. We'd get extra points if we read more than one book. I earned 'Top Reader' several weeks in a row while in her class. All these women were enthusiastic about literature and encouraged me to form a reading habit at a young age, but the books that were readily available for me were not about cultures like mine.

Later, I began to choose novels dealing with adolescent issues. Judy Blume carried me through my preteen and teenage years. She taught me about boys, puberty, sex and menstruation. Her book *Blubber* taught me about bullying. *Are You There God? It's me, Margaret* showed me it was okay to question religion. My parents were not devout Catholics. They only attended mass when they were invited to be godparents at christenings, communions, confirmations, or they'd attend for family weddings and funeral services. Even though my mother had never set foot inside a Christian church, she accepted the invitation from strangers one day and allowed four of my siblings and me to be picked up twice a week for church services. We were the only Mexican American kids attending that church in Weslaco at the time, so our presence was noticeable. My mom used this time to enjoy a break from the five kids she was raising.

Through Blume's Margaret, an American Jewish girl, I learned about the menstrual cycle and found myself relating to the changes her body was going through. Margaret was perhaps the character whose challenges and fears came closest to resembling mine, but I know the universal themes surrounding the puberty period had a great deal to do with my connection to her. Judy Blume's books fed me information about adolescence, first loves and much more. I relied on her more than I did my own mother.

When I began writing seven years ago and sharing bits of my history, a Facebook friend of mine, Rich Garcia, encouraged me to continue. He invited me to be a part of his team on a grassroots initiative he and his colleagues had named Project Cangrejo. We went back to our high school alma mater on several occasions to speak to graduating seniors in an effort to encourage them to not give up on their dreams, to realize it was okay if you failed sometimes because failure made you stronger. We also told the students to beware of *cangrejos*, people who will try to hold you back. We were attempting to teach these young kids of the crab mentality that is dominant in our culture, where like crabs in a bucket, people will pull each other down to keep everyone at the same level. It is as if to say: No one is better than the others. Who do you think you are? But the crabs are not limited to people of our own culture, in some cases it is the white bourgeoisie or our own fears that attempt to keep us down.

We shared personal testimonials hoping the students could relate and not surprisingly, many did. When I spoke to a class of graduating seniors one day, a young lady raised her hand to speak to me during the one-on-one question and answer sessions. "I am where you were twenty years ago," she said. "My parents don't want me to go away to school. I was accepted to a university in the east coast," she continued, "but they're too scared to let me go." If it wasn't because I had already teared up in front of them during my presentation, I would have cried

again with her, but instead, I encouraged her to talk to them, to give them reassurance that she would be okay, that an education was worth leaving home for. I even suggested speaking to them myself if she wanted me to. Even though I had not accomplished great feats, except bearing and raising children, Rich never failed to introduce me to every class we spoke to as the “future Hispanic Judy Blume of the Valley.” As old as I felt at the time, it still felt good that someone believed in me.

When I was already a wife and mother of four, I discovered Judy had written an adult book titled *Wifey*. It told of a cheating housewife and the sexual desires women have. My initial reaction was one of shock after seeing her name on the cover. I felt disappointed, thinking Blume ruined my image of her, but then I realized that once again Judy had written on a subject very taboo in my Mexican American culture. She had provided me with another perspective, a perspective separate from that of men, macho males.

My initial thoughts against Judy were a direct result of the cocoon I lived in and the patriarchal hegemony that had entrapped me my entire life. I realized I was judging her based on male-dominated notions, and I became grateful to Judy once again for her courage and uninhibited ways that were foreign to me. The literature I was exposed to in my parents’ home as I was growing up was very different from the literature I was exposed to in classrooms and libraries. My parents purchased graphic comics and novels, crime tabloids and *fotonovelas* in Mexico and it was through them that I learned and strengthened my Spanish vocabulary. I also learned about love gone wrong and what I would later identify as the objectification of women and the punishments they endured for going against what men considered the norms of society and womanhood.

I read Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying* almost a year after Judy Blume's *Wifey*. I was already an undergraduate student at the University of Texas Pan American when a professor suggested I look for it. I was going through a moment of self-doubt, and having shared my life story with him, he felt the book would help me see things differently. The professor had given me a gift. I fell in love with Erica for her boldness, her courage and honesty, her vision. I felt I was a closeted Isadora Wing, the main character in the story. I realized I wanted those sexual liberties, that drive to live my life the way I wanted to, to voice my needs and not be afraid to show the world who I was. After *Wifey*, I was no longer as afraid or perhaps embarrassed to read about sex and desires. All my life, I had been taught to keep those things quiet, but these women were showing me that it was natural and not something to be ashamed of or to hide. I wanted to fly too.

After *Fear of Flying*, I purchased six more books by Erica Jong and fed my mind and heart with women's issues, from the bedroom to writing. *Seducing the Demon: Writing for My Life* was another one of her books I felt strongly about. Jong wrote: "We know that mistakes are part of wisdom and wisdom is made of plenty of foolishness. If you learn to loaf and invite your soul, you will make mistakes you wish you could cancel with a word. You cannot. You can only confess and hope for the mercy of heaven" (90). I knew exactly what she was talking about, what demon she was fighting and I was slowly finding the courage to push ahead. My writing had been met with opposition early on when I first told my family I was going to write my story. The opposition came both from loved ones who had clearly expressed it and from my old, lingering beliefs. Certain family members didn't want me to write a memoir. I imagine they feared me airing dirty laundry or depicting them unfavorably. Jong described my struggle perfectly when she wrote "I have to release the inhibitions that imprison me. I have to get rid of the voices that

urge: Write nice things, don't embarrass the family...nothing freezes the imagination like family loyalty or political correctness" (138). In composing my narrative, I continuously struggled with the stereotypical conflict about what is appropriate behavior for women and what should or should not be written about. In *Telling Women's Lives: The New Biography*, Linda Wagner-Martin says "Even for the contemporary, successful woman, discourse about living life as a sexual woman remains forbidden" (72). I knew I had lived the life of a good wife and mother. Now, I wanted to write about the other side of me, the side I'm not supposed to talk about, the sexual and self-willed side.

In my new quest to find literature I could relate to, I began looking at publishing dates and came to the realization that most of this literature was fairly new. Most books concerning Mexican American migrants or females were published in or after the 1980s and it took a while before they were noticed on a larger scale. I graduated from high school in 1989, so this literature missed me during my formative years. I knew I felt the brunt of the loss. Other girls like me would surely have benefited if they too had seen themselves in literature early in life. I felt certain they would have felt empowered to propel themselves towards greater goals and achievement if they'd recognized themselves in the pages of a book. The corpus of Chicano/a literature is still relatively small but it is much bigger than it used to be when I was growing up.

As recently as this semester, while searching my bookshelves at home and putting my bibliography together, I came across the book *Growing Up Chicana/o* by Tiffany Ana Lopez. My youngest sister Maribel had given it to me years ago; it must have gotten lost among my stacks at home. I don't recall reading it. On the title page, my sister wrote "For Rosa: I remember when I barely got to Stanford, I was so excited to find rows and rows of books by Mexican Americans. Here's a collection so that you can pass the pride onto your beautiful kids. I wish I

had had books like this as a child. Con amor, Maribel. April 1996.” I met Tiffany Ana Lopez two years ago at a writing workshop and I shared this just recently with my sister, telling her how I felt the exact same way and how these books had impacted me this late in life. Maribel said “Everything comes full circle.” Perhaps she was right. This was the time I was meant to discover them, and not earlier.

As my narrative will explain, months before returning to college, when I was living a period of emotional instability, I once again escaped into literature. I found myself at home, alone, and Oprah came to my rescue. She introduced me to Joyce Carol Oates when I read *We Were the Mulvaney's*. I'd sometimes find myself crying on the couch as I related to the characters or the story lines. I was surprised to hear Oates's name again a few years later when I was an undergraduate at UTPA. It thrilled me to know her literature and critical essays were studied at the university level. When I lived this moment, I felt I was at the right place at the right time.

In the preface to *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldúa says that books saved her sanity; they certainly saved mine. She said books taught her “how to survive and then how to soar” and I remembered what Jim told me one day via email. He said “Have you noticed your name morphs?” And he wrote “Rosa, Asor, Osar, SOAR.”

When I read *Borderlands/La Frontera*, I saw more and more of myself in Anzaldúa's writing, but I fought her teachings until recently. I had taken to heart exactly what she claimed when she wrote:

If a woman remains a virgin until she marries, she is a good woman. For a woman of my culture there used to be only three directions she could turn: to the

Church as a nun, to the streets as a prostitute or to the home as a mother. Today some of us have a fourth choice: entering the world by way of education and career and becoming self-autonomous persons (39).

I didn't want to accept that she was right about our culture and upbringing, because accepting her theories would mean denouncing my father and my husband and all these years of marriage. I had been taught to obey and be a good woman. I am still working at achieving the last of Anzaldúa's claims, that of acquiring an education and becoming self-autonomous. I realized my life had followed what is known as the marriage novel pattern—the female character moving from her father's house to her husband's and unfortunately, feeling trapped in the confines of motherhood, becoming a bitter wife and mother. I felt that all my life I had been commanded by my father and then by my husband.

I began to think more seriously of writing a memoir while I was still taking undergraduate classes, where Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" was assigned reading. I had been the woman trapped in the walls of her home. I could relate to the insanity that was brewing just beneath the surface. Like the protagonist, my own husband did not understand the depression I had fought through. As I read and felt the mental clicks occurring, my intellectual self began to awaken once again. It had been dormant too long, suppressed. In her speech "Professions for Women," Virginia Woolf claims she had to kill the "angel in the house" that was keeping her from writing and being who she was. For me, the angel role was not only imposed by outsiders, but myself as well. I had put others first and sacrificed my likes and wants to keep others happy, to avoid meeting opposition by those who felt I had a certain place, a specific role to fill. I was similar to that angel in that my own characteristics were holding me back from being an individual and having my own thoughts. My ambitions had been set aside for

many years while I fulfilled everyone else's idea of me. Recognizing this was the beginning. In *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, feminist theorists Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar claim that "for all literary artists, of course, self-definition necessarily precedes self-assertion: the creative "I am" cannot be uttered if the "I" knows not what it is" (17). I was re-learning who I was, again.

As an undergrad, I learned how important it was to have "A Room of One's Own" as Woolf describes. I craved that room. The essay had a significant impact on me because I felt confined to the expectations of women, especially in my Mexican American culture, and I wanted to break free, not just to create but to escape the dominance of patriarchy. In some ways, I am still seeking that space. As I delved deeper, I began to understand what Gilbert and Gubar meant when they wrote: "Women will starve in silence, Bronte seems to imply, until new stories are created which confer on them the power to name themselves and control their world" (391). They were analyzing Charlotte Bronte's feminist novel *Shirley* and the manner in which the character Caroline subjected herself to self-starvation as a means to revolt against men and conventions. These are the kind of punishments we put ourselves through when we feel we've lived in shackles. My personal torture was suffering depression. Before returning to school, my husband used to ask "What are you sad about? You don't lack anything." But I did. My mind was not being stimulated like it needed to be.

Inevitably, I was naming myself in the stories I was reading for class and memoir research. I realized that as women we seek that familial label that can identify us. We seek to define ourselves, find our voice in order to free ourselves from the objectification imposed on us, where we see and define ourselves and our roles in society through the eyes of others. At some point in our lives, we begin to hide and conform in order to fit into other people's idea of us and

our place in this world, how we live as well as how we write. We lose our identity. If we are not the angels society wants us to be then we must be the opposite, we must be monsters.

Dr. Douglas LaPrade suggested I read Gilbert and Gubar as well as literary criticism by Linda Wagner-Martin. I was working on an independent study on women's literature under his supervision at the time. After reading these women's work, I realized it was Anglo women, at first, who were telling me it was acceptable to tell my story, that I had a right to reclaim myself. They weren't necessarily opposing my ethnicity and culture and blaming it, but simply encouraging another woman to write.

Gilbert and Gubar outlined themes and motifs surrounding women writers and explained how these directly affected women when it came time to categorize their work. I read several memoirs written by Latino women and after perhaps the fourth book, I noticed a pattern. Some of these authors' last names were hyphenated or ending in a non-Latino surname, Elva Treviño Hart, Frances Esquibel Tywoniak, Pam Muñoz Ryan, Rose Castillo Guilbault. They had married men of a different ethnicity than theirs. I wondered if this had made a difference somehow in their literary career. I shared this thought with my first writing mentor, Jim, one day and without saying much, he knew where I was headed, the thinking vein I was on. He could tell I was getting emotional about it as well. "They married men who encouraged them to write," he replied through the telephone. If that was indeed the case, then I was envious of the encouragement they had received from their husbands who, unlike mine, may not have felt threatened by their education or possible success. I wondered aloud if I had missed my opportunity altogether. "It's not too late," Jim replied. "Yes, it is," I paused, "You're taken." We both laughed and then I cried again.

In retrospect, I realize I shouldn't have attributed any or all their success on their male counterparts. Why couldn't I simply celebrate them for their own talents? Was this the influence of my own upbringing and close-mindedness? Wagner-Martin says "Biography all too often works to link women with male patrons, as if responding to the unasked question, What man has been responsible for this woman's accomplishments?" (23) My reaction to these women's success reminded me of something Chicana author Ana Castillo once stated at a writing workshop. "There is no Mr. Castillo," she said, immediately eliminating the possibility of her success being attributed to a man.

I continued filling my mind with books and theorists' ideas concerning women's literature, the creation of genres, and reasons for writing. There was an unquenchable thirst I could not fill, so many topics and not enough time or eyes to read them with. I read Gioconda Belli's *The Country Under My Skin: A Memoir of Love and War* as a requisite for an undergraduate course and even though it wasn't related to my personal Mexican American upbringing, I immediately connected to Belli when I read the first line of her introduction. "Two things decided my life: my country and my sex" (Belli ix). This Sandinista revolutionary struggled with issues similar to mine. "I have been two women and I have lived two lives. One of these women wanted to do everything according to the classic feminine code: get married, have children, be supportive, docile, and nurturing. The other woman yearned for the privileges men enjoyed: independence, self-reliance, a public life, mobility, lovers" (Belli x). I was Belli in another borderland. I too wanted to wage war on what was expected of me as a Mexican American woman by my culture and family and on the self-imposed limitations I had fallen victim to.

These women's stories came to me from different directions and again, I believe it was a sort of universal alignment. As this occurred, I continued to read about writing, keeping in mind my intent to write my own book or books one day. I wanted to know what I was up against in the literary world. Wagner-Martin wrote:

Genre divisions collapse under the weight of pervasive themes in women's writing. The problem of being recognized as someone's daughter, someone's wife, or someone's mother rather than oneself, is a recurrent motif; another is society's reaction to a woman's ambition—whether she is denigrated or applauded for it. A third is a woman's struggle to fit both into her family and her community and to avoid the restrictions those entities might create for her. Still another is a woman's attempt to balance the demands of loved ones against her individual needs (Wagner x).

Wagner discusses the works of several authors including Sandra Cisneros and Virginia Woolf in an attempt to “meld the forms of autobiography, biography, short story, novel, drama, and poem into a larger category of writing by women” (Wagner x). As I read, it became evident I not only had to face judgement, criticism and restrictions at home, but also in the literary world when it came to categorize my work. I realized, though, the concern with genre would have to be dealt with at a later time.

I read Rose Castillo Guilbault's memoir *Farmworker's Daughter: Growing Up Mexican in America*. Guilbault named what I had been growing up, a farmworker's daughter. I never thought of myself as such and when I began to relate to her life, I found myself quietly articulating it: ‘I too was a farmworker's daughter’, making it real for the first time. I could relate to Guilbault in various ways. Her mother and my mother were both descendants of the Yaqui

Indians from Sonora, Mexico. Guilbault's father worked for a rancher for many years as did mine. Both her family and mine were provided with rent-free housing and a vehicle while our fathers worked for these men. Guilbault and I both lived in the outskirts of town on small farms. Guilbault mentions the single men (*braceros* in her era) who worked for the rancher and lived down the street in barracks. In my childhood, these men were Los Modesto, the men who lived across the street from my father's boss's house.

Guilbault relates her experiences and tells of the workers who came from Texas, the ones they called *Los Tejanos*. She described my family when she writes they "spoke loudly, using expressions my mother and I didn't recognize. Words would start in English and end in Spanish. I wouldn't learn about 'Spanglish' until college, so back then I simply accepted what my mother said: '*Pobresitos*, they have their English and Spanish all mixed up!'" (Guilbault 65).

Guilbault's mother and mine were both raised to endure anything their husbands put forward. She migrated from Mexico to California as we did when we left our home in Texas. Both our families passed through the towns of Indio, Brawley, and El Centro in the Imperial Valley in southern California. We had family there and we stopped to visit them on our way back to Texas every year. My life and Guilbault's life could not have been more parallel if we tried. I found myself in the pages of her book and it thrilled me.

When Guilbault mentioned Spanglish, a concept I could relate to, it brought codeswitching to the forefront. Throughout the writing process, I struggled with the issue of language and whether or not I should incorporate Spanish in my narrative. In the end, I decided to do it. Spanish was my first language, a language that comes naturally to me, as Spanglish (a language born in the borderland) does now, even though it is not considered "proper language" by other cultures, Anglos and even Mexicans. I felt if I was going to be true to myself and the

telling of my life, there was no way I could ignore the Spanish language and exclude it as if it didn't exist. Code-switching is something that has become prevalent in this borderland among many of us and those who do it, do it without thinking about it. It just happens. I believe we mix Spanish words in when we speak because we feel we will get a point across a lot better or when we cannot find the right words in English to express ourselves with, which is most often the case with me. In the preface to the first edition of *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa makes reference to the dilemma of code switching and what she calls Chicano Spanish and makes no apology for it. She simply asks that we are met halfway. I felt the same way.

In my narrative, you will find that my parents' dialogue is completely in Spanish. It is their language. It didn't feel natural for me to do otherwise because my parents were not fluent in English. Sure, there were moments when my father would curse 'sonababiche' or he'd kid around with my mom to anger her and say 'dame un kiss en el dientes plis', but they only resorted to English when they had no choice and it was needed for work or when dealing with other serious issues. My dilemma with including Spanish was whether or not to add footnotes explaining the dialogue or simply allowing the reader to figure it out on their own. I discussed this with my thesis adviser, Dr. Braithwaite, on several occasions and finally decided I would incorporate Spanish dialogue and in some instances, simply make references in the sentences immediately following it to assist the reader in understanding what had just been said. I insisted on mothering the reader. I tried to keep the Spanish dialogue short, but in a few scenarios I noticed I couldn't shorten it much more because the exchange between characters happened in that manner.

As I continued reading memoirs, I began to wonder if these books would have influenced me in high school as much as Blume's had during my pre-adolescence. Would I have

broken free of the social, patriarchal, religious and cultural expectations and of the chains of self-subjugation? At the recommendation of my thesis adviser, Dr. Braithwaite, I read Elva Treviño Hart's memoir *Barefoot Heart: Stories of a Migrant Child*. Hart's narrative gave me a sense of empowerment as I read it at age 38. I learned I could acquire a higher education without feeling guilty for wanting more. Hart gave me permission to find my young, enthusiastic self again and become successful without apology. I learned I did not have to continue living in the past, regretting my choices like Esperanza's mother in Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street: A Smart Cookie*.

"I could have been somebody, you know? I was a smart cookie then" (Cisneros 91). I cried when I read that line. I told Jim that I felt I was the mother who would always look back at her life, and knowing she 'had brains' regretted not having done anything with them. As life would have it, shortly after reading the vignette, I ran into a former high school teacher who bluntly said to me: "I was disappointed in you. You were the smartest of the bunch and you didn't go to school." When I told her I was in graduate school now, she said "Finally!" She may be happy now, but her initial statement still hurt. I felt I had disappointed people left and right.

My youngest sister Maribel discovered Cisneros her first year in college, many years before I did, and often claimed Cisneros inspired her to keep moving forward. Maribel spoke of a connection to the writer that I did not quite understand at the time she shared it because Cisneros' work did not exist for me until a few years ago.

The day I read Cisneros for the very first time, I also met her in person at a University of Texas-Pan American sponsored event. While I listened to her speak, my contract with wanting to write began to seal. I began to feel courageous. "Find your spiritual writers. Sometimes your family doesn't want you to write. Become financially independent—you own your life. *No*

dependas del 'domingo' que te da tu marido. You have to have *ganas* to write. The most important thing is to do it. You have to use these stories or else they use you,” she said.

I drove home that evening crying the entire way while I shared her words with Jim over the phone. I felt everything Cisneros said that night pertained to me. I confessed to him how disgusted and angry I was with myself for waiting so long to continue my education. I cried myself to sleep that night, but the next morning I remembered her words during the meet and greet. Sandra asked me what I did. “I’m a student here at UTPA. I’m majoring in English,” I told her. “I’m also an aspiring writer,” I added. “Make us proud,” she said, and then she hugged me and posed for a picture.

Women’s memoirs were not the only material I read or discovered and felt a connection to. In 2012, I met Dr. Francisco Jiménez, author of *Breaking Through*, *The Circuit: Stories From the Life of a Migrant Child* and *Reaching Out*, all books I read as research for my own. In *Breaking Through*, I noticed Jiménez used the voice of his teenage self. It flowed very well and felt honest. He wrote it chronologically and recreated the dialogue when his memory failed him. I chose to recreate dialogue when crafting my own memoir as well.

Jiménez’ story reminded me of the houses we lived in at the labor camps and I kept thinking how crucial description of setting was. His housing conditions were much poorer than ours had been, but through the description, I was able to picture his family in the humble and run down homes. I became emotional when he tells of not wanting to leave his family to go to college and how his father reacted negatively about letting him go. Even though I knew Jiménez had become a professor, the initial struggle reminded me of my own. He included a quote by Thomas Mann at the beginning of his memoir that I liked.

“There is at bottom only one problem in the world...
How does one break through?
How does one get into the open?
How does one burst the cocoon and become a butterfly?”

Breaking out of a cocoon and becoming a butterfly seems to be the universal sign/theme of those who felt they were going nowhere due to circumstances imposed on them. I had been there at one point.

When I began as an undergraduate, I was frightened: frightened of failing, of having to return home and admitting I was wrong, that my ambitions were displaced and I never should have toyed with the idea of being a scholar. It took a lot of strength and self-motivation to not give up. After a successful first semester and a bit of gained confidence, I registered for a second term and began telling myself I was at the right place at the right time in my life. Everything I had lived through had been to get me here. A world of information was opening up for me and I was convinced I was worthy of it. I was beginning to set new goals. I felt I was experiencing a second coming of age, getting another chance to grow or perhaps it was the continuation of my first coming of age stage that had been interrupted. I remember Dr. Braithwaite calling it “an interruption of the intellectual mind.” We were workshoping my narrative in class, specifically the part where I tell the reader about not having permission or my parents’ blessing to leave home to acquire an education. Dr. Braithwaite said I had traded my birthright for a bedroom set the day I gave up my scholarship money. This saddened me, but I knew she was right. I felt my family had preferred I get married and lead a life they were more familiar with instead of me acquiring the means necessary to be independent and self-supporting.

My identity as a woman began to change. I was no longer just a mom, a wife, a homemaker and daughter. I had now taken on the role of a student, a scholar, a writer. I told new friends at school that I felt I wore different hats all the time--one at home with my family and friends and one at school with my professors and fellow classmates. I had taken on a new struggle, that of trying to survive in everyone's world.

In school, I discovered Chicanas who shared my ambitions and who were willing to help me, through their written word, to rise up and achieve my goals. Elva Treviño Hart, Sandra Cisneros, Rose Castillo Guilbault, among many others became (unbeknownst to them) members of what I called my personal spiritual writers league. At workshops, I met Ana Castillo and Norma Elia Cantú, and Helena Maria Viramontes who encouraged me to tell my story. Cantú's *Canicula: Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera* showed me what life along the border was like. I could relate because I was a product of the borderland and I never had the courage to leave. My feet were deeply rooted by the time I met these ladies. I was a first generation Mexican American who struggled to fit in with the Tejanos my age who could not relate to my family and the regular trips we made to Mexico because their grandparents and great-grandparents were not Mexico-born. They did not speak Spanish at home like I did as a child. I could not understand why they felt no connection to Mexico or its people. They pronounced their names differently too, anglicizing them. We occupied the same space but were disconnected in many ways. Growing up, I straddled two different worlds.

A few years ago, I happened to run into a fellow high school alum who was also working on her bachelor's degree at the time and she was adamant about not needing to know or speak Spanish. We were both enrolled in Fundamentals of Language Development that semester and during a discussion, we butted heads on the subject of family roots and language. She anglicized

her last name pronouncing it Gaar-zee-a and said she didn't need to justify her reasons for it to anybody. She wasn't born in Mexico and didn't feel she needed to learn or speak Spanish, much less hold any reverence to the country. Even though it upset me, I couldn't hold it against her. She was not a first generation Mexican American like I was, so her ties to Mexico weren't as strong as mine. Interestingly though, I found out through the grapevine that Ms. Gaarzee was complaining about the difficulty she was having trying to pass a Bilingual State Exam she needed in order to get her teaching certification. She was asking for assistance left and right. I wondered if she remembered our conversation back in class.

Frances Esquibel Tywoniak's memoir *Migrant Daughter: Coming of age as a Mexican American Woman*, based on an oral history by Mario T. Garcia, was one I could relate to like the others I had discovered before it. It described her struggle to negotiate with her ethnic background and cultural expectations. Even though she was coming of age at a very different time period than I had, we both faced the same adversities and challenges dealing with education. She, like me, knew acquiring an education was vital if we were to break free of working in the fields. Both of us were moving between two cultural worlds and learning to adjust in order to succeed. Her memoir read like an academic paper, perhaps because the narrative was delivered through a second person and it was originally meant to be an oral history project to fulfill a university assignment. Of all the memoirs I read, this one was the one whose style I did not want to mimic, except for the linear style it followed.

During writing workshops with my new spiritual writers, I learned to see things from a different perspective. Because I never left, I never experienced life outside the Rio Grande Valley as an adult. Two semesters into graduate school, I toyed with the idea of taking a study abroad course one summer, I mentioned it to my husband and he replied: “¿Quién te dio

permiso?” I couldn’t believe my ears. “I’m a fucking forty-year old woman,” I raised my voice at him and tried to not cry from anger. “I don’t think I need to ask anyone for permission anymore,” I told him. It had taken others, like scholars or visiting authors who had traveled extensively, to open my eyes. These women who had taught me to embrace my identity and celebrate the culture I was born into had also taught me not to be ashamed or afraid to speak up and to write about it, even if it meant breaking a taboo and I was now determined to do it.

In the early stages of my research, I found a book that had been given to me by my high school sophomore English teacher. I had misplaced it somehow and forgotten about it, leaving it unread. When I found it again and read its contents, I remembered Mrs. Barnes’s words the day she handed it to me. She said she hoped it would help me. I didn’t know what she meant until I read it twenty years later. *Chiquita’s Cocoon* by Bettina R. Flores was a guide tailored especially for Latina women to help them break from their cultural cocoon. It described typical scenarios in a patriarchal home where women were taught to put others first, to not question religion, to accept their place and continue oppressed. It mentioned in detail how, at home, the men were served their meals first and then the children and women were left for last. She described my paternal grandfather’s mealtime to a tee.

Flores encouraged women, from high school age on, to think for themselves, to welcome success, happiness, wealth and all things empowering. I wondered what Mrs. Barnes saw in me over twenty years ago to prompt her to give me such a book. The book’s dust jacket said ‘Unrevised and unpublished proofs. Confidential. Please do not quote until verified with finished book. This copy is not for distribution to the public’. It seemed to be a draft still. I learned the book became popular among women of all ethnicities. It was referred to as ‘Everywoman’s Cocoon’. I now knew I wasn’t alone.

As a first generation Mexican American, I could relate to the idea of trying to survive, perhaps even living in limbo in a borderland that challenges you on a daily basis. It is not just a physical borderland but an emotional and mental one where you want to conserve your ancestors' history while at the same time form a new one for yourself and your children, a history that will define you for generations to come. Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* speaks of this state many of us find ourselves in and I found myself intrigued and relating to her work in this sense.

Anzaldúa focuses on the female experience and how a male-dominated culture determines the behavior of women, how we are supposed to behave and what roles we are limited to. She doesn't blame men entirely though. "Culture is made by those in power—men. Males make the rules and laws; women transmit them" (38). She says mothers and mothers-in-law encourage macho behavior in their sons. I agreed with Anzaldúa and felt older Mexican and Mexican American women, from generations past, were afraid to think for themselves or did not hold themselves in high esteem, high enough to believe they had a right and a voice. They allowed machismo ideologies to rule over them. Sadly, these ideologies had crossed over from Mexico and took shape in the United States as well, transmitted to younger generations.

Anzaldúa writes "The culture expects women to show greater acceptance of, and commitment to, the value system of men. The culture and the Church insist that women are subservient to males. If a woman rebels she is a *mujer mala*. If a woman does not renounce herself in favor of the male, she is selfish. If a woman remains a virgin until she marries, she is a good woman" (39). When I was 39, Gloria taught me I didn't have to live by these expectations anymore and I slowly began to break free.

...our cultures take away our ability to act—shackle us in the name of protection. We do not engage fully. We do not make full use of our faculties. We abnegate. And there in front of us is the crossroads and choice: to feel a victim where someone else is in control and therefore responsible and to blame (being a victim and transferring the blame on culture, mother, father, ex-lover, friend, absolves me of responsibility), or to feel strong, and, for the most part, in control (43).

Anzaldúa was describing my life and exactly how I felt.

I believe *Borderlands/La Frontera* opens the door for dialogue, dialogue especially important for women of Mexican descent entering the world of academia. We need to educate ourselves, to understand the factors that kept our mothers and grandmothers in the dark for long. It took me a while to accept that, like women before me, I could relate to Anzaldúa. That little voice in my head wouldn't set me free. I wasn't ready to rebel against my culture. If I accepted her theories, it would mean denouncing my father. I would be denouncing my husband too. As eager as I was to find the place where I belonged, I still found myself fighting that invisible divide I felt was created, by my culture, my family and my fears, to keep me subjugated.

These new literary discoveries, writing workshops, and conversations in and out of the classroom with professors and fellow students made me realize I had arrived at an unexpected intersection where my old self met the adult me. All the external influences that had existed up to this point in my life danced around me as I tried to make sense of this intersectionality of my identity, my self and my culture's self. Who was I? Were my ideas my own or was I a copy of my mother, my father, my culture? I thought of my childhood again, of my upbringing, my parents' teachings and the harsh lessons I learned from being a farmworker's daughter, how living on limited means added to the existing problems between my parents. My past was

coming to the forefront and I was needing to face it in order to understand this awakening I was experiencing. I accepted I had stayed in a comfort zone all these years after graduating high school because it felt safer, easier. As a result I believed in and transmitted stereotypes to others because I did not see things from an outside perspective.

I reflected on my relationship with literature and even music. My father's songs had become my songs. *Corridos* of love gone wrong and women being punished for it had taught me how females were viewed in my culture. I recalled a bible verse we heard every morning on our way to the fields one summer that told of the risk of losing our souls if we accumulated riches. I shared this memory with Dr. Braithwaite and she posed a question I didn't expect. She wondered if it wasn't the world's way of saying we belonged in those fields, in that low income household, and we were not supposed to be achieving more than that. That was our place. Could it have been?

As my professor offered her opinion, I began to see things differently. She shared her upbringing with me and said there was never any doubt she would go to college, earn a degree and stand to achieve more than her parents had before her. I wondered if the messages I received as a teenager were part of the crab mentality. I knew this wasn't the whole of it though. As a first generation American (and first generation college student I had tried to become when younger), I believe I faced greater obstacles than those who were born with privileges afforded to them at birth because of class, race, or immigration status.

I struggled for so many years to break out of the cocoon I was living in. There were many factors that kept me trapped and afraid to venture out to discover who I was, what my likes were. As a parent, I can understand wanting to protect my children, but cutting their wings off before they begin to grow is not the way to do it. I finally admitted I too was afraid of leaving the

borderland and venturing out on my own that I gave in and went from the protection and laws of my father's house to the protection and laws of my husband's house. I had at one time made my parents' music, literature, and likes my own. Then my husband's interests became my own as well. Now that I am gradually discovering myself again and being more vocal about it, I am finding my interests are incompatible with my parents' or my spouse's. The quest to stay true to myself has begun.

In *Chicana Without Apology*, Eden E. Torres discusses our search for identity and self and says it is not about questioning who we are as much as questioning how we fit in within the dominant culture and our 'home' culture which can be both 'foreign and familiar to us'. She writes "[we are] looking for a way to express or articulate our reality, our worldview, and our experience. We want to talk about what it means to feel constantly off center and to express the extent of which this disequilibrium is a hard way to live" (Torres 131). Torres does admit that this type of life can be exciting and strong at the same time.

Not only have I struggled with fitting in to my culture's expectations, but I have also worried about fitting in with others. If we allow it, our background and history and the color of our skin affect us wherever we go. Even in conversations with other women, we are threatened like Torres says. We are afraid of seeing ourselves in other women, especially Chicanas and seeing our fears and shortcomings looking back at us. If we do not acknowledge them, we can pretend they do not exist. This may be the reason my own mother was against my writing. She wanted me to kill her off in my memoir, to say she died after giving birth to me. "*Si va ha escribir de mi, díganle que escriba que morí despues de darle luz a ella.*" Perhaps she was afraid of seeing her shortcomings as a woman, as a mother, in my writing. I told my sister "if I kill Mom off, how am I going to explain the three kids that came after me?"

My mother's opposition to my writing angered me and made me want to go against her will even more. I was reminded of *Seducing the Demon: Writing for My Life* when Jong says "There is in writing—or any creative work—a kind of fuck-you impulse. Part of the energy comes from sheer rebelliousness. *I'll show you!* a writer says. *I am not who you think I am.* Sometimes you have to get mad just to begin. You think you are all alone in this—but battalions of dead writers who faced the same challenges are shouting in your ears" (239). Jong's own mother claimed her daughter was writing her obituary every time she wrote. "Any writer has to be tough enough to take on the condemnation of family" (242). She said "Criticism can be found everywhere. The one place you don't need it is at home" (267). Jong too had given me permission to write and reminded me of one of the many struggles I faced as a writer, that of censoring myself to keep others happy.

I believe we all have a desire to feel connected. We need to have our own space, something Anzaldúa writes about as well as Virginia Woolf and countless others. This space needs to be both physical and imagined where we can express ourselves freely, where we can be ourselves. For those who have lived under the restraints of a patriarchal hegemony, this space is eagerly welcomed and gives a sense of freedom and personal liberty. I always knew I was multi-faceted, multi-dimensional. There were times when I felt I had the best of both worlds because of my strong connection to family in my ancestral Mexico and as a first generation American. I lived through the building of a strong foundation in the United States my parents were trying to achieve. Even though it has taken me many years to finally find others I can identify with in literature, I am content in saying that it happened when it should have. Otherwise, what would I be writing about? What stories would I share with the young Rosas of today if I had not lived and experienced what I did?

My complicated self is one I welcome. No doubt exists that I will continue evolving and growing as a woman, a writer, a scholar. I want to believe I have found a possible niche among Chicana writers, but it has not been easy. I experienced the Imposter Syndrome many times while sitting in a classroom or a writer's home. It occurred once at a faculty/graduate workshop I participated in at Dr. Braithwaite's suggestion. I looked around the room as the participants introduced themselves and stated what they were working on, i.e. doctoral dissertations, master's thesis, art portfolios, et cetera. I sat there wondering what I was doing in that conference room. Did I belong? How could I belong? These were scholars, intellectuals. I wasn't smart like them. I was unaware this feeling had a name. I had been experiencing it since my youth when I found myself in situations I did not think myself worthy of. Dr. Braithwaite told me I wasn't alone. She gave this feeling a name, Imposter Syndrome, and it all made sense after that day. I realized I was worthy.

Experiences like these awakened the intellectual in me and reminded me of my colorful identity that was constructed by the good and the bad experiences of yesteryear. I am slowly becoming more comfortable with myself and my past, but I admit—I still have a long way to go. For now, I try to keep Anzaldúa's words in mind when she speaks of the *Coatlicue* state. "Our greatest disappointments and painful experiences—if we can make meaning out of them—can lead us toward becoming more of who we are. Or they can remain meaningless. The *Coatlicue* state can be a way station or it can be a way of life" (68). I believe I can afford to enjoy standing tall on the shoulders of these spiritual writers, and rely on my professors' teachings and guidance so that I may continue on my journey as a writer. I feel confident knowing I can take these scholars' and authors' words and encouragement and begin to feel a sense of peace in this borderland.

My narrative is still a work in progress. I plan to develop it further by fleshing out moments where I was curious about sex and relationships and the secret fantasies I had growing up. One of the dilemmas I have struggled with since I first put pen to paper has been: how honest do I want to be? How much do I want to divulge? Not only do I want to protect myself, but also those I love, my children especially, to keep them from feeling hurt. When I first voiced how unhappy and angry I felt about getting my first degree at age 37 and how I felt I had missed out on experiences such as dorm life, traveling, supporting myself and living on my own before getting married, I was judged harshly by my oldest daughter. She thought I was regretting my entire life. I want to avoid going through that again. She was young and felt hurt. "You are judging me as your mother, but one day you'll understand me as a woman," I told her. I know they will hurt for their father too if he feels betrayed by my story. After all, I'm not supposed to write intimacies, I'm supposed to be a good woman. My husband and I have had problems with the issue of trust and respecting each other's privacy, so this adds to my struggle of how honest I want to be as I worry of the repercussions that will come of it. As previously mentioned, self-censorship has been a huge struggle for me during the writing process. It limits me. I need to stop allowing my mother's voice to haunt me, and allowing others to have that power over me as well, dictating how my life should be lived or be told.

I am aware my manuscript is several edits away from being ready for publication. It needs to be reshaped, fleshed out in some areas and pruned in others in order to provide a stronger and clearer through line. I need to make the theme of sexuality more prominent than it is in this draft; therefore I will rearrange chapters, add to the narrative and delete scenes that are not significant to this theme. Several chapters can afford to stand alone as vignettes, so I will take those out and develop them further for separate publication. I realize my narrative covers several

themes which provides me the liberty to experiment with the chapters I do remove. The ending of this version is not an ending, it is merely the beginning of another period of my life, which I hope to put forth in a separate memoir to come.

I hope to always remember Bettina R. Flores's encouragement as I go forward in life:

Change is the essence of life. Have you ever seen a butterfly come forth from its cocoon? It doesn't simply leap free and fly. It struggles slowly, pausing time after time. And when it emerges, its body is still in the shape of the cocoon. Gradually the wings unfold and the butterfly moves them, drying them in the sunlight and fluttering them tentatively until it startles itself with momentary flight. Hastily it grabs the cocoon again, clinging and waiting. And then, miraculously, there comes the moment it knows it can fly and it lets go of its cocoon and floats away in the sunny fresh air.

And you, too, Chiquita,

Can emerge from your cocoon,

Trust your wings,

And fly....”



PROLOGUE

“If you don't see the book you want on the shelves, write it.”

--Beverly Cleary

Do we ever stop coming of age? My life has taken so many twists and turns these past ten years that I feel I am still coming of age or experiencing a second one. Perhaps we never really stop learning and growing. The Rosa I am now is different from the Rosa that was indoctrinated into womanhood by family, cultural expectations and other entities in between. Unfortunately, this new Rosa still holds on to some of the old one for fear of losing that safety she felt in her old cocoon.

You see. I never left the borderland. I never lived alone or knew other places except those I traveled to outside the Rio Grande Valley as a migrant child from 1970 to the mid-80s. I have carried this longing for many years and didn't realize, until recently, how strong it was.

My original story was supposed to be about a migrant girl who traveled every year since her birth until she was sixteen years old to California. It was supposed to tell of the hardships and the family dynamics that molded this brown-skinned girl with sad eyes; but as I began writing, I began living, doing things I enjoyed, independent of my husband, children or extended family. At first I questioned my story. Why does it matter? I hadn't done anything amazing. Then, as I kept pushing through, my questioning took a turn and became: how can I write a coming of age story if I feel I am still coming of age now? I felt as if an interruption had occurred somewhere in my evolvment into womanhood and it was beginning to take place again. My thirst to do the

things my siblings, friends and others did after high school, such as living on their own, rooming with others, traveling, and even partying, was filling me with a sense of loss. I didn't set foot inside a nightclub until I was 38 years old, and I wasn't even alone. I was with my husband and three siblings which made the experience different from what I imagine my friends had lived. I felt I had missed out on things like this because I was too afraid to pave my own way and this anger and sense of loss began to take me in another direction while writing young Rosa's story.

I had been a mother and housewife for eighteen years when this writing journey began. I was a submissive wife to a certain extent, doing what I felt was expected of me by my parents, my husband, church, family, culture and kids. That was the only life I knew, but deep down in my core, it wasn't enough. I always felt that something was missing, that I was meant for more and that it was slowly slipping away from me as the years passed by. Something lay dormant inside me and it wanted out, reminding me from time to time that it was still there, brewing inside of me. I just didn't know what it was.

Motivational speakers I happened to catch on television or at sales conventions when I was in my late twenties would have me completely engrossed in their speeches, and I'd always tell myself I wanted to be like them. I wanted to motivate others through speech and inspire them to follow their dreams. As a mother, the closest I came to having an audience was talking to my kids and telling my daughters how important it was for them to pace themselves and not rush into anything, especially marriage. I wanted them to experience things I hadn't been able to, like earn a degree after high school, get a job, learn to support myself and live on my own. I'd always tell my girls "the boy you meet in high school is going to be different from the one you meet in college and different from the one you meet at your workplace. Pace yourselves." My daughters

didn't know how important this was for me, and like most kids will do with a parent's advice, they shrugged it off.

When I was young and wanted to leave to college and experience the world outside the borderland, I was told I couldn't. It wasn't said aloud. It wasn't entirely articulated, but it was understood and insinuated by actions. My parents couldn't understand why I wanted to go to another university if there was one close to home. It didn't matter if the one five hours away was offering a scholarship and recognizing the effort I had put into being deemed worthy of it.

I felt it was constantly implied that my life after high school (I graduated in 1989) would be that of a wife and mother. I told my oldest sister, just a few years ago, that I believed Mom and Dad saw me as a future housewife, a mother and nothing else when I was growing up. "I feel like I was handed down from one boss to another," I sobbed silently, "from Dad to Juan." "Don't blame them," she said, "you had choices." But I felt I didn't. The one time I broke up with Juan, my junior year in high school, my mom made me call him back and apologize. I had to tell him I had made a mistake.

Family members may argue that no one held me down or hostage, but disappointing, hurting or going against authority was not something I liked to do. I worried too much about what others thought and I didn't want to be the cause of anyone's hurt or anger. I began to doubt my capabilities because others were afraid to let me go. I thought to myself: maybe I'm not smart enough for college, maybe I'm fooling myself. To some extent, I was afraid and I gave into that fear that Erica Jong writes about. I accepted the route my parents believed was best for me.

This is by no means a blame game. I am just as responsible for how my life turned out and even though my marriage is suffering right now, I know it wasn't a complete

disappointment. I have learned to recognize how it all gradually came together and then slowly began to fall apart. My mistake was that I allowed fear to dictate my future when I was young and I took the 'safe' route into adulthood. Back then, I even decided I didn't need to drive, that my husband could take me wherever I needed to go, just like he had done with his mother before I came along. My parents had never bothered to teach me, and I was too dependent on them to ask for lessons. I never considered taking a driver's education course when I was in high school. I knew my parents couldn't afford it. I learned a few weeks into married life that knowing how to drive was a necessity. If I wanted to get anywhere on my own, I had to learn, even if it meant going the wrong way and into oncoming traffic a time or two, before I got it right.

I was so naïve and so sheltered for 37 years, that when I finally broke out, I was thirsty for knowledge and adventure. I began a journey of self-fulfillment that only I could provide, a fulfillment independent of everyone else. I have been accused of having changed, but that's not true. I simply found myself again. I began to grow. As I look back now, the borderland was all I knew and even within it, I was lost sometimes, feeling out of place. I felt that my parents had braved their way across the border for a chance at a better life and here I was not taking it a step further, not fighting for it. When I enrolled at a four-year institution at the age of 37, the odyssey I embarked on became one young Rosa would never have imagined. It was the beginning of another life, a life where eighteen year old Rosa, who had been quiet for so long, finally spoke up.

CHAPTER I

GROWING APART

I used to cry a lot when I first started this writing journey. I still do, but for different reasons now. I went through phases of hurt, anger, disappointment and joy. I didn't just hurt for me, but for my family who experienced so much. Lately, I hurt for how my actions have affected those I love.

"I may be unhappy now," I told my friend Jim. "But that doesn't mean my marriage was a bad one. Juan doesn't treat me like other men treat their wives," I said. "He doesn't hit me. He even tells me this when he sees I'm upset about something," I added. "Since when is not being hit a plus, Rosa?" He asked. "That shouldn't even be a standard," he said upset. "I suppose it has been for me and Juan knows it too, since my dad would hit my mom."

My husband is a good man. I won't deny it. He works hard to provide for his family and help others when he can. He's a doting father who will put his children before anyone else. This man tried his best to be a good husband to a woman who became distant with each passing year, and for the life of him, he can't figure out how to win her heart back. "I wish I knew at what point I lost you," he told me just a few months ago. "I would've tried to fix it." I felt so sad when I heard him say it. He can tell I'm distant and he doesn't know how to remedy it.

I had a huge void in my life for long time that no one could fill. Juan fell in love with a girl who was a people pleaser and who was afraid of failing. He thinks I have changed, but I

really haven't. I've just begun to voice how I feel and it scares him. He didn't mind me getting an education until he realized I wanted more liberty to do things I hadn't done before. After I returned to school, I found myself wearing different hats, one at home and one at school. The language I used with each was different too. I love learning. I get a rush from it. I don't want to go back to my 'perfect life' as others called it. That label was something others created for me. It wasn't perfect if it was missing the real protagonist, was it?

I had an epiphany not too long ago. I was telling a friend that for the longest time, I always thought of my mom was thirty-seven years old. Every time someone would ask me, that's the age I would assign her. It was the number that always came to mind. I did this for many years from grade school through high school. Then I had a thought. I reasoned that perhaps that was my mom's best year. She'd had a hard life. Maybe this was her best year, the year she was the thinnest, the happiest. But while I shared this with my friend, it occurred to me that it wasn't about my mom after all. It was about me. Maybe the universe was preparing me for what was to come. At 37, I was coming of age again. I discovered my voice and began investing in my 'self' and little by little, I got in contact with Rosa again. "Haven't you noticed that your name morphs," Jim told me once. In his email, he typed the different ways it could be spelled, ending the last one with: SOAR. I wanted to believe he was right.



“I sometimes hate the fact that I’m here, in school at this age,” I told an undergrad professor one day. We were discussing my writing and academic goals while exiting his classroom.

“Why didn’t I do this sooner? I went about it all wrong,” I told him.

“No. You didn’t,” Dr. Johnson said. “If you had done this when you were younger, what would you have written about?”

He stopped and looked at me.

“You had to live first in order to have a story to tell. That’s why you’re here now.”

CHAPTER II

NINETEEN YEAR OLD BRIDE

I always believed my mom fell in love with Juan before I did. I got married December 15, 1989, five days after turning 19. My mom and I had been planning the wedding for a year while I was still in high school. I don't remember Juan proposing. I remember riding in his family's pickup truck and we just seemed to agree that we would get married. I first met Juan when I was sixteen. It was at a dance in Mexico. He dated my cousin Maricela for a month before he broke it off and asked me to dance. I thought he was good looking and accepted his invitation. "Do you like him?" Araceli asked me one night as we walked back with my cousins to their house in Las Flores, Mexico. Mom let us spend the night every Saturday after the dances and would pick us up the next morning. "Because if you don't, I'm going to make a move," she said. We weren't officially dating yet, but I told Araceli I was interested. "He's the kind of guy I like," she still says to this day.

Now, almost twenty-five years later, I wonder if I was really interested or did I commit to something for the sake of winning. What did I know about love at sixteen anyway?

The year I met Juan, we had just returned from our last migration to California. Araceli was getting ready to graduate, with Bherta and me following close behind. They didn't want to graduate from a school they rarely knew in California so Mom and Dad agreed we'd stay in Texas. As soon as I had the chance I joined several clubs in high school. I knew my parents couldn't afford for me to join extracurricular activities that required money out of pocket, so I

aimed at the Journalism club, National Honor Society and lastly Future Homemakers of America, at the insistence of my future sister-in-law Lisa, who was already a member of that club. I spent most of my time in the library doing homework and shying away from everybody since I hadn't become close to any of my classmates the previous years. My siblings and I had been active in our church youth group but after I met Juan, we stopped attending church altogether. Araceli would accompany me to Mexico to go see Juan and his male relatives play baseball every Sunday. He had a big family and everybody would gather at his grandparents' ranch on the outskirts of Nuevo Progreso, Tamaulipas. We would go to the games and then the women would get busy afterwards in the small kitchen preparing a late lunch for everyone.

Juan was five and half years my senior. I was showered with attention from him and his family, and I enjoyed it. Araceli, meanwhile, flirted with his cousins and friends of his family. While we dated, I continued to make plans for after high school. He gave me an engagement ring my junior year, it had a tiny solitary diamond on it. I kept telling myself I could do it all once I graduated: attend college, return to Weslaco, get married and go on from there. Even though they would later have some issues between them, Dad said he approved of Juan since he first shook his hand. "*Tiene callos en las manos. Son manos trabajadoras,*" he observed. Mom and Dad must have figured I would be well taken care of.

More than anything, I was in love with the idea of love and having a wedding. I didn't realize my college plans weren't important to anybody else but me. After I gave up my scholarship, mom drove me to our local university and waited for me in the car while I attempted to register. I had such a difficult time figuring out what classes were still available and where I was supposed to go to complete all the necessary paperwork. This was before the internet and

online registration. I felt frustrated and finally joined my mom several hours later, still feeling lost.

On our way home, Mom told she had run into Juan's mom who happened to be waiting outside for his sister Lisa who had graduated with me and was also registering for class. My mother-in-law didn't know how to drive but she accompanied her kids everywhere in case they needed her. She was in her late thirties and a new widow at the time. According to Mom, my future mother-in-law told her she didn't want Juan to get married. Mom said she claimed to have too many bills and wasn't able to pay them without Juan's help. My mom was angry as she was telling me this and my head was still spinning from the chaos at registration. I listened to my mother and allowed myself to hate too. How could I let that woman win, I thought.

The following morning, I called the Pan American University and cancelled my enrollment. I began to look for work. "*Voy a trabajar para poder ayudarle a Juan a pagar la boda,*" I told my parents. They didn't argue against it. When my mother-in-law heard what I'd done, she seemed more concerned about it.

The wedding was a big to-do. My father's family traveled many hours from different ranches and towns in Mexico to attend. We got married in my parents' house in Weslaco by a justice of the peace and the reception was held across the border in the same place I had met Juan, La Terraza Casino Palmeras, an open air dance hall with a concrete floor and cinder block fence. I was the first granddaughter to get married and my paternal grandparents were my godparents too. They had baptized me in a Catholic church when I was one year old.

Most of Dad's family didn't have passports to cross the border so we had to cater to their needs with the wedding location. For my wedding gift, my grandmother took wool from sheep at

the ranch and made a large quilt for Juan and me. My aunts and cousins were bothered by it because of all the trouble Welita went through to sew it together, but Welita said “*Es la primer nieta que se casa. Y es me ahijada también.*” They stopped complaining after that. We used the quilt a couple of times until the thorns Welita missed would poke us from time to time and it became too much to bear.

My aunts and uncles cooked the wedding dinner. Dad bought some meat, and family and friends gave us additional farm animals to kill for the feast. He purchased cartons of beer to give to the guests, which ended up causing a problem at the bar, between my uncles who were giving it out and Juan’s male relatives who were asking for it. After the reception, Dad’s family went back to the house my parents owned in Nuevo Progreso to continue with the festivities. The men had dug a pit in the ground and were preparing to leave a pig’s head in there to cook over night for *barbacoa* the next morning. Juan and I made our way back across the border to spend our first night at a hotel in Weslaco. We left our gifts in Mexico with the intention of coming back in the morning. Mom expected us to open them in front of everybody. I felt like if I was on exhibition the following morning, everyone hinting at what I wasn’t anymore, a virgin.

At my wedding, I had six bridesmaids and two maids of honor. One of the maids of honor was my oldest sister Araceli, because I was supposed to have a sister in the wedding party and she was the oldest, so she was selected. The other maid of honor was Letty, my best friend from high school. She was the only person I got to choose to be in the wedding party. The rest of the bridesmaids were cousins and a couple of friends of the family. They ranged from age 11 to 16. Mom wanted everyone to get a chance at being involved. I had to beg to have Letty in the wedding party.

My family admired Juan. My aunts and cousins praised his good looks. “*Qué guapo está tu novio,*” my aunts would say. Everybody wanted a chance to dance the traditional *baile del dolar* with him. After the wedding, Mom had 8x10 portraits of Juan and I in our wedding attire printed, and she gave one to each aunt in Mexico. “*¡Se ven bien guapos! ¡Y Rosita bien chula! ¡Igual que su papá!*” my *tia* Virginia exclaimed when she was given the portrait.



Before the wedding, Mom and I had gone to different stores in the valley looking for a wedding dress. I couldn't decide on one and they all seemed so expensive. I had a job as a waitress and was working for a small, family owned restaurant named Arzola's in Weslaco. I earned \$2.00 an hour plus tips, but the owner's wife waited tables with me, and we had to split the tips at the end of the day. It didn't matter if I had more tables than her or not. Her husband would sit by the kitchen, supervising the kitchen staff and the main floor, and if he didn't want her to tend to a certain table, he'd keep her back. He was a very jealous man and this made her a nervous and fidgety woman.

When I told Mom how unfair I thought it was, she made an apron for me with a hidden pocket so I could slip my tips in there. I would drop the change in the cup by the register and keep the dollar bills. I used the little I earned to pay for some wedding items I had on layaway at a bridal shop next door. The owner of Casa Lucy set my *lazo*, *arras*, guest book and other small items aside and I paid on a weekly basis until I was done. What I earned at the restaurant didn't help much compared to what my parents, Juan and his family were contributing, but that was all I could do. I can't blame Mom for being excited about the wedding. It gave her a purpose, something new to talk about with family and friends. I was excited too, thinking of the wedding dress, losing my virginity, having babies and playing house.

When I couldn't find a reasonably priced dress in the valley, my parents took me to Mexico to look in nearby border towns. Then we drove three hours to finally buy one in General Teran where my dad had family. My aunts accompanied Mom and me to several shops, giving endless advice and compliments and excited to see what the shop owners were willing to throw in for 'free'. I ended up with a headpiece that resembled one my dad's sister Rosy wore on her wedding day. Mine was situated a little differently on my head, otherwise we would've looked exactly the same. I was named after her too, Rosa Elia, the aunt my mother would come to hate the most. My mother could not stand any of them, but because her wedding, I mean my wedding, she was willing to put all differences aside. I sometimes wonder who was more excited about getting married.

The fact that we didn't have a lot of money did not pose a problem for my parents. We would rely on *padrinos* to help cover the cost. My parents hoped those they had given money to in the past as wedding or *quinceañera* godparents would remember and step up to return the favor. Mom and I spent a couple of weeks driving to different people's homes, chatting and

catching up before pulling out the spiral notebook we had where they could choose what area they wanted to contribute to. We listed the cost of music, cake, hall décor, etc., and then divided each amount separately so each person who signed up would only pay fifty dollars or so. We also had a list for those who wanted to be sole *padrinos* for items such as the veil, headpiece, and invitations. In return, these contributors were promised to be announced as *padrinos* during the intermission, when the wedding cake would be served.

Mom used credit cards to cover wedding expenses too. She wanted to make sure early on what Juan's family was going to cover. She was assured they would pay their half of the food, provide the band and a cake. Mom purchased a second cake 'just in case'. At the end of the night, criticisms would be flung around. "Their cake wasn't as moist as ours. They bought theirs in Mexico." By then, I was a married woman, which meant I commanded respect. I felt I was expected to be pregnant by morning.



Maybe I doomed my sister Araceli into married life too. She was two years older than me and no one made it a secret at how they saw her at risk of being an old maid someday. "*No tienes, novio, Chelito?*" My aunts would ask. "*Sigues tú, Araceli. No te vayas a quedar atrás,*" was heard often. Araceli attended Pan American University her first year after graduating high

school and worked part-time at a grocery store. She didn't drive either so my parents had her take a bus to and from the university, which by car took thirty minutes to get to, and much longer if you traveled by bus. After her first year, she didn't return. She concentrated at working full time as a cashier at Carl's Supermarket and helping my parents with money instead. That's where she met her future husband, whom she'd marry less than a year later and divorced three years after that. She fled the state of Washington in the early morning hours with her toddler son and twin baby boys. Bhera and her girlfriend made the trek from Texas to bring her back home. Araceli was leaving an abusive relationship that had robbed her of her spirit.

CHAPTER III

MIGRANT COUNSELORS' SECRETARY

Almost two years after getting married, I was hired to work for the migrant counselors at Weslaco High School. Dan De Los Santos was a kind and caring man. His sister was the teacher who had killed her husband in the early eighties after years of domestic abuse. Dan's concern for migrant students seemed genuine. Linda Taormina, the other counselor, was a bit more domineering. She hustled in and out of the office, hollering instructions, demanding I drop what I was doing to tend to her needs. She was six feet tall if not taller and wasn't afraid to voice her opinion. She felt she was being assertive but many times, I saw her as aggressive. As their secretary, in charge of purchase orders, I began ordering a surplus of office supplies and when migrant kids came in asking for help, I'd slip a few items their way.

"Don't let them tell you there's no money," Taormina told me once. I don't recall why she said it, but it gave me the courage to give the migrant kids a helping hand. The Title I clerk at Central Office, who over saw our share of the Migrant Education Program's funding, noticed my multiple purchases and questioned me about it.

"Why are you ordering so many school supplies?"

"The counselors approved it," I lied. "We need them for retreats and for the office," I added.

I had seen how migrant funding was being used for conventions at South Padre Island, providing mariachi entertainment and rooms for district employees, and I did not think it fair. So when Taormina said “There’s always money,” I knew buying a few hundred dollars in school supplies for the kids would not hurt the district.

I enjoyed my years as the migrant counselors’ secretary up until my last months there. Taormina was hired as the new Migrant Specialist, a position that had been created at Central Office, and she was to relocate to their premises. I sensed that something was not right between her and campus officials. She was leaving bad blood, and when it came time for her to clear her office, she asked me to transfer her office equipment in my personal vehicle. I moved it all, not knowing it was against district rules. I don’t recall who approached me, but I was told “Don’t you know that can be considered stealing? Even if it’s staying within the district, you’re not supposed to move equipment. You could get into trouble.” I began to worry and dislike Taormina even more for putting my job at risk. I was more than happy when she moved, even though we would still be in contact with her once in a while.

I began to detest her when I came across an old email between her and a friend of hers. Taormina had asked me to clear her computer of anything that was outdated as I looked for a certain file and I opened an email where she was upset because her daughter, according to her, had lost a scholarship to a migrant student. She was hateful in her email and it made me sick. “She’s supposed to be an advocate for migrant students,” I mistakenly confided in Mr. Casas, a teacher whose classroom was across our office. “She was probably just venting, a moment of anger,” he shrugged. I came to find out later that he considered her a best friend.

I worked for Dan until the end of that school year and began with Mrs. Barnes the following fall semester. My second year at the library, I ran into Taormina at the front office and

in her loud and overbearing way she asked: “So how many kids do you have now? Six?” She was a real bitch and I couldn’t believe how many people she still managed to fool. Jim had done more for me as a migrant than she had when I was still a student there. I was unaware we even had migrant counselors or what services they rendered to migrant students. When my youngest sister, Maribel, was a senior at Weslaco High School, I used my position to help her gain information about colleges and scholarships and helped her fill out the necessary paperwork. I tried to help as many kids as I possibly could to help them have a stronger fighting chance.

Taormina had pushed to have the Migrant Specialist position created because it is a well-known fact that those who got promoted to Central Office could coast their way to a profitable retirement from there. I was excited to become a library aide, but I felt sad leaving Mr. De Los Santos. The new position provided a bit more income for me and was less stressful. When I left Dan, two ladies were hired to do the job I had been doing, and there was just one migrant counselor left. “That’s how much work you were doing, Rosa,” Mrs. Barnes told me. “They needed two people to replace you.”

CHAPTER IV

MY ANGEL, MRS. BARNES

When I started first started taking college courses back in 1994, I was pregnant with my second child, Kayla. I was twenty-three and working full-time at Weslaco High School as the secretary for the migrant counselors. I had been there three years. The day before the start of my fourth year, my home phone rang.

“Rosa?”

“Yes.”

“This is Vera Barnes.”

“Oh. Hi,” I answered nervously.

“Hi. Listen. When you report to work tomorrow, come by the library. You’re going to be working with me.”

“What? Are you sure? You finally succeeded? I can’t believe it, Mrs. Barnes.”

Trying to contain her joy, “I did it! I finally took you away from them. Mr. Rivera said I would never leave him alone if he didn’t let me have you. And he was right. I’ll see you in the morning,” she sounded giddy.

“But, Mrs. Barnes,” I paused.

“Yes?”

“I’m pregnant,” I said, feeling like I was letting her down after all she’d done for me.

“It’s okay. It’s happens. It’s a fact of life. I’ll see you tomorrow,” she encouraged.

Mrs. Barnes had been my 10th grade English Honors teacher. She was now the head librarian at the high school and had been making occasional trips throughout the school years to check up on me at the counselor’s office. I was twenty years old when I started working for the district. I didn’t know what she was up to until she confided that she was ‘fighting’ to get me into the library as a library aide. I thought she wanted me to have more pay for the work I was doing, but she had other intentions.



South Texas Community College was set to open its first campus in the valley and Mrs. Barnes was on top of her game. Excited to see me at the library, she handed me a brochure of the college the first day I clocked in. The main campus was still under construction, but college courses were being offered in various towns across the valley, some were strictly night classes. “Look at it and tell me what you think,” she said. I didn’t want to get too excited. I had a husband I’d have to convince if I wanted to take courses. Besides, I was pregnant with my

second child and I would have to ask my mom or mother-in-law to help me with Becky, my three year old.

I didn't see Mrs. Barnes letting me off the hook easily so I told her I would consider it. I went home that day but didn't mention it to Juan. I sweated over it for several days and avoided the topic at work. "We need to move on this so you don't miss the first day of class, Rosa. You can start with a biology course. It's once a week, for three hours, at the Mercedes Med High," she said. "It's the only course being offered in the mid-valley, but it's a requirement for a freshmen and you can start slowly. See if you like it." She gave me no more time to think.

I finally broke the news to Juan. "Mrs. Barnes won't drop it if I say no. She even offered to buy any books I need or pay for the class if my financial aid application gets denied," I told him. "*Pues, si crees que puedes. Hazlo,*" he said.

I rushed to fill out the necessary paperwork, Mrs. Barnes wrote a check for my course and the textbooks as I awaited to hear back from the financial aid office. A few weeks later, I was driving to my first night class. I continued to work full-time while Juan worked out of town in Austin. That fall in 1994, I received my first three college credits. I enrolled the following spring for the second part of biology and added a course during my lunch hour. Mrs. Barnes allowed me ten minutes extra to give me time to commute to class. I ate my lunch on the way there and never heard her complain if I was five or ten minutes late on my way back. When the spring semester was about to end, I found myself sitting sideways in the student desks. My belly didn't fit anymore, but I had notes and exams to take.

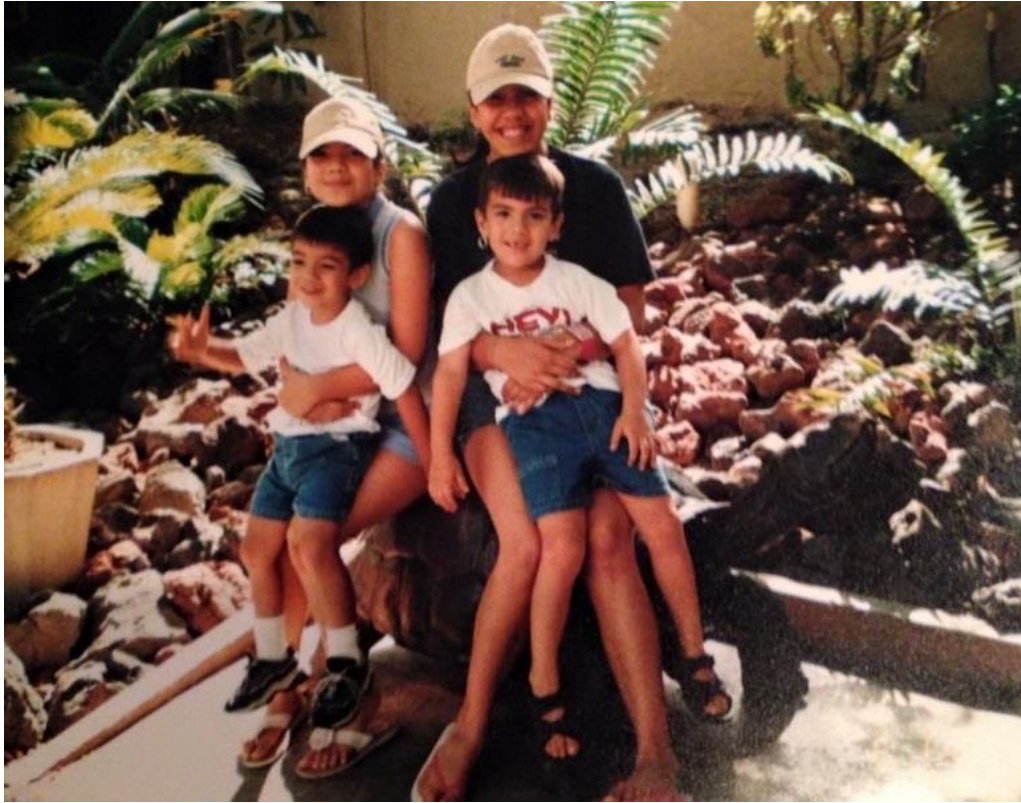
I continued accumulating college hours with my lunch time and night classes for the next four years. Juan had been working in Austin for three years and coming home every other

weekend. We were building a house in Mercedes and I was the sole contractor. Juan didn't see the men working when he was home on weekends. He didn't meet the brick layer until two weeks after the house was completed. "You should look into becoming a contractor," Mrs. Barnes joked. "I don't know how you do it. Working full-time, going to school and building that house." I was feeling burned out.

Mrs. Barnes decided she was ready to retire in 1998 and I decided to quit with the district the same year. I was afraid I wouldn't have the same support at work if she was no longer there. Juan was earning good money in Austin as the city grew and new roads went up, so I decided it was time for me to give myself a shot as a full-time student and see where it led. My mom and mother-in-law watched my girls while I went to school during the day or evenings. I was driving to the McAllen campus now, having exhausted all the courses available in the mid-valley.

I stopped going to school when Kayla started pre-school. She was in school half a day and I didn't think I could squeeze classes in in that short amount of time. Plus, I didn't want to bother anybody to take her and Becky to school and wait for Kayla's school bus four hours later. I was already feeling guilty for having someone else watch them and missing important milestones of theirs. I would alternate between my mother and Juan's mother to lighten the load for them and they weren't shy about making remarks when frustrated, even though I paid them for babysitting. Becky was three months old when I started working full-time. I cried one afternoon, feeling guilty, because I wasn't around them as much as I should have been. "*Estan bien,*" mom consoled me at first. "*No las estás dejando con cualquiera, en daycares,*" she said. I still felt guilty for limiting hers and my *suegra's* time. My mother-in-law had other grandkids at home and she always complained about being ill. Feeling tired and not knowing what to do, I became a stay-at-home mom. I had two more kids, Jonathan and Joshua, during the eight years I

was at home. The boys were eighteen months apart. “You don’t need to work,” Juan would tell me. “Just take care of me and the kids,” he would say.



CHAPTER V

BACK TO SCHOOL I GO

It was in 2008 when my brother Daniel showed up at my door and convinced me it was time to return to school. I was one of the older students in most of my classes. I tried to sit up front where I would not be tempted to get distracted. At first I was shy, holding back from asking questions or volunteering answers, but then I found courage and began participating. My professors learned my name before anyone else's in class. I was happy. I felt like I belonged.

When I started attending classes again, I decided it was time to go visit my mom and end the estrangement between us. I was afraid of how she would react so I took all four of my kids with me. When we arrived at her house, she lived the next town over, I told the kids to go in before me. I rang the doorbell but the front door was unlocked so I opened it and the kids rushed in. Mom was halfway down the long living room. She greeted each one of us with a kiss on the cheek and a hug. We started chatting about everything except the elephant in the room.

Two weeks before graduation, I started having doubts again. I was 37 years old and barely acquiring an Associate's degree. I began questioning whether or not to attend graduation. I felt embarrassed. I thought of not telling my family about it and hoping they wouldn't find out and want to go. I feared one of my siblings would make fun of my age and how long it took me to do this.

Then one night in my Social Welfare class, I discovered that I wasn't the only one feeling this way. A couple of ladies were discussing graduation. They were around my age, one was married with kids, the other, divorced with kids. The divorced lady, Natalia, told Janie "I'm thinking of skipping out on graduation." I scooted over to join them.

"Are you going?" Janie asked me.

"I signed up but I'm still not sure," I said.

"I feel ashamed, embarrassed. I don't know if I can make it across the stage without crying," I told them.

Deep down I knew it was an accomplishment to get this or any degree, but the feelings were so strong.

"You put into words exactly how I feel," Natalia told me. She started tearing up and unable to get more thoughts out, like me.

Luckily, Janie and another classmate, Frank, didn't let us break down. Frank was in his forties and getting his first college degree too.

"I don't want my family to go. I know they're going to embarrass me," he said.

"They'll want to start a *porra 'chiquiti boom a la bim bom ba!*" he cheered.

"What if they do the wave?" Janie added, laughing. "Or they bring beer?"

Natalia said she only had three members in her family but they were a rowdy bunch.

"I'm thinking of not wearing underwear," she said.

“Then I’ll be sure to take a mirror and look for you,” Frank added, hoping he could get a reflection from the floor upwards. We laughed until our sides hurt and managed to get over feeling sorry for ourselves.

My husband started asking about the date and the time graduation was set for. I told him I was unsure I even wanted to participate.

“I’m not required to do it. I can always pick my diploma up later on.”

“You need to do it,” he said. “Do it for the kids. They need to see their mom graduating.” I understood what he was telling me and knew he meant well, but I felt like I was sending my girls a message that it was okay to marry young, have kids and leave yourself and your education for last. I felt I hadn’t been a good example and I feared my daughters would follow in my footsteps.

During these months, I had been communicating back and forth with Jim. We had lost touch for many years but reconnected a few months prior to my returning to school. “Have I made you mentally angry at me?” he wrote in his first email. He was hoping I would remember the Martin Short character Bherta liked to imitate from the popular Saturday night show we watched as teens. She would say that line at church and sway her hips from side to side like the comedian did.

“Your message went into my SPAM folder which I never check. Had you sent emails before this date?” I replied.

“I was wondering when you were going to write. I was waiting for you to make the first move,” I joked.

It had been three months since we'd seen each other. My girls and I were running late to church that Sunday morning. It took me a while to notice him sitting two pews in front of me, to the right hand side. He was sitting with his daughter and granddaughters. I remember panicking, thinking: Oh no. I'm heavier now. Will he notice? Will he notice the gray hair I tried so hard to hide? I can't recall if he glanced back during the service, but I was very nervous as I approached him afterwards to say hello to him and his daughter. We hadn't seen each other in ten years.

Jim always had a nice air about him with his perfect posture and welcoming smile. When I heard him say my name, I remembered how much I liked listening to him roll the r. It seemed he enjoyed it too. There were so many people coming up to greet them and wanting a minute to catch up so I began to walk away. Without turning to look at me, he reached out, squeezed my hand and whispered "Don't go." I reassured him I'd remain close by.

After many greetings from other church members, we walked outside together and exchanged phone numbers and email addresses. We were intensely drawn to each other, but his daughter was ready to leave and so were my kids. Before I knew it, I got busy with a part-time job and he was back at his in the Austin area. My first emails to him began with formal greetings. I addressed him as Dr. He began his messages with a simple 'Rosa'. Within weeks, we had numerous emails going, communicating with each other in the middle of the night too. "I'm sure I'm growing roots on my chair," he wrote. "The teachers are here are wondering why I'm smiling so much lately."

I was both excited and nervous about the writing he was encouraging me to do. He always showed a genuine interest in my family and would ask how each member was doing. When he asked about Bherta, I felt I had to be honest if we were going to work on this book project together. "Let me tell you," I wrote. "Bherta is not one of your biggest fans. She's always

believed you had a perverted interest in me.” “I suppose contacting her is not a good idea then,” he replied back. “I hope this doesn’t stop you from writing with the same passion and honesty you had when you were younger,” he continued.

In one of his first emails, Jim made a brief mention about a feeling of jealousy he experienced when he heard I married right after high school. He said he was sad I did not explore the other side of me, the one he admired so much. He felt our conversation had been put on hold between us until the day I began to work at the high school. It seemed like we would run into each at least once a week when I worked with Dan and Taormina. I always enjoyed the surprise run-ins. We would embrace and he’d squeeze me a little tight. One day, I accidentally smeared lipstick on his collar. I kept apologizing, not wanting him to get in trouble at home. Now, many years later, he confessed he went to conduct business in person which he easily could’ve handled over the phone.

I didn’t want to hold anything back. I was 36 now. The excitement of the book, our email exchange and the honesty with which we shared things were overwhelming. Maybe the idea of using a medium like the Internet made it easier for me. “This shouldn’t be told through an email,” I wrote Jim one day, “but I kinda had a crush on you.” My trembling fingers alerted me of the seriousness of my actions. When he took long to respond, I began sending him one liners. “I hope I didn’t scare you.” “Is everything ok?”

Two days later he wrote “Rosa, you have caused me to explore things long buried. Some is uncomfortable. Some is plain good. As human beings, we are not held accountable for our feelings for others except hatred, at least not that I know of,” he wrote. “Once we make a commitment to another, we are held accountable to keep that commitment.” I was scared to

know where this was going. I stopped reading his message and began to wonder if I had made a mistake in confessing how I felt. Perhaps some things were best left unsaid.

My stomach was doing somersaults. I had told him! I had confessed! I wanted to disappear! I wanted to forget any of this had ever happened. Knowing that he was five hours away provided some comfort. If I had to, I would stop all communication between us. He had, after all, made no mention of still having my phone number, so I was safe.

But I continued reading. “Feelings are feelings. We all have them,” he wrote. “Sometimes we feel safe enough to share them, but mostly not. So, my dear, the real test is not whether we have feelings, it is what we allow them to cause us to do. That said, I have always had very deep feelings for you. You cannot help being lovable. Call it what you will, those feelings make you very special to me.” As I sat alone in my bedroom, I wondered how deep those feelings were. Were they as deep as mine? I couldn’t function. My life had taken a turn somewhere and I had missed all the signs, the signs that would take me back to the safety I’d been at, where I could live my life unnoticed. But what if I had seen the signs and chose to ignore them? The feelings that stirred inside me were real. This man was bringing me back to life. I realized I had been living for others and by their rules.

“I hope you will feel free to say anything to me that you need or want to express,” Jim said. “I sometimes feel like a needy little girl with something always missing,” I replied back. “I didn’t want to stir the waters, but thank you. I’m glad you understand,” I said. “Sometimes the waters need to be stirred. I’ll bet you did not see all this coming,” he typed. “Neither did I, but it is good.”

Ten days into our new journey, he wrote “If we make it through this one, well, we are on our way.” What followed next put me in a tailspin. My heart was racing and it felt like time had stopped altogether. I read his lengthy email, re-read it, and finally decided to print it so I could read it again. He confessed that his trip to church that Sunday had been planned. On an earlier visit that past summer, he had come by the church and had seen my daughters. He realized he might see me if he came back again. I was not at church that particular Sunday morning. In his email, he confessed how he had felt about me twenty-three years earlier but had decided to keep those feelings to himself. “To do otherwise,” he wrote, “would be to dishonor you.” He was married and I was just a kid. But things were different now, I thought. And maybe he did too. We realized we were risking getting hurt and hurting others, but the thought of not confiding in each other these long buried feelings was a heavier burden to bear. “I recall the first time I met you. I shook hands with you and I tingled. There was something very special about you that went right to my very core. At first it scared me, and then it fascinated me,” he wrote. “That little tingle continued to bother me every time I saw you. There began to grow a desire to be around you, Rosa. To talk to you, to hear your voice, to listen to you talk. There are more, but I don’t know how to say them and be understood,” he hesitated. “Are you turned off yet?” He wondered. “There were many times when I was under pressure at work and at home but seeing you and talking to you made me want to be a better man. You gave me the courage to go on.”

That night I cried into my pillow. My husband was on the road and the kids were asleep in their bedrooms. I didn’t want to think that I was regretting the choice I had made in the past. That would be like regretting my children and the special moments we’d had. Somehow I knew Jim was feeling the same way about his life. He began sending me one-liner emails asking to be forgiven if he had overstepped any boundaries. He was afraid he had gone too far. I realized then

that we were both hurting. He was hurting at home with his wife's bipolar illness that were taking a toll on him and the fact that she refused to admit she was ill made it even worse.

Twenty-three years of silence and now this. I knew there was no going back. I think he knew it too. We had reconnected and in ten days' time had confessed all this. The young woman in me wanted to see him, to feel him, to hear his voice. "I will never quit you, but are you sure that you want to have me be a part of project?" He wrote. "If Bherta reads this, she will say 'See there. I told you. He is a dirty old man'," he finished.

I never felt that way about him. I knew him differently and he knew me too.

I made time to see him in person in the middle of the semester at South Texas Community College. Some classmates and I took a trip to Austin. We were required to visit the state's mental hospital as part of an assignment and Jim agreed to meet me one night after I dropped my group off at the hotel. I told them I was going to visit my sister Bherta. Before I left them that night, I made sure they didn't need anything else. "We're tired," one said. "Go have fun. Enjoy your sister," Lori told me. I had volunteered my car for the trip and two younger girls had ridden with me. I had experienced my first all-female road trip, a bonding experience full of tears, laughter and support. They didn't see me as a mom.

I left in a hurry that night. It was dark out already and I wasn't sure how far Jim was from me, where we had agreed to meet. I hadn't seen him in over twenty years but I felt he was the only one who really understood me. We both admitted via emails how we felt about each other, the special connection we tried to hide since the day we first met. I always felt comfortable sharing my fears and dreams with him. It was an ease I never felt with anyone else. I could laugh and cry and be completely honest without fear of being judged. "After each victory, you will

look back and say that victory was not really much, but that is only in your eyes. You have to give yourself the advantage of seeing yourself through someone else's eyes that both love and expect great things from you," Jim told me when I shared how I felt about graduation. I knew he was right, but to say the least, this was very difficult to do. "Why couldn't you have been the one for me?" I asked him one day. "I needed someone supportive like you," I cried. "Because we were both born at the wrong time," he answered sadly.

At the end of that spring semester, I participated in the graduation ceremony which had evaded me for so long.

"I started with South Texas College the first year it opened," I told the President when she handed me my diploma that day.

"It took me fourteen years to get here," my voiced trembled as I took a few extra seconds of her time.

"Oh, honey. You did it," she said. "You're here. Congratulations."

I took my time walking off the stage that day, partly from shock and partly because of my high heels. When the traditional Pomp and Circumstance music began to play for the graduates to parade out of the Dodge Arena, I couldn't keep it together any longer. I felt my shoulders rise and fall as I tried hard to control the sobbing that was about to burst from within me. I was hiding my face with the program when, from two rows away, I heard a girl say in a sweet, compassionate voice: "Look. She's crying." And that's when I lost it. I looked at the floor the entire time as I exited the building with the South Texas Community College graduating class of 2008.



“We saw you crying on the jumbotron, Mom,” my oldest daughter, Becky, told me many years later.

“Everyone saw you. We started to cry too.”

Mrs. Barnes, my 10th grade English teacher, was in the audience that day. I had invited her. I wanted her to see what she was responsible for. She was smiling from ear to ear when she congratulated me outside the building. I have a picture to commemorate the moment.

CHAPTER VI

BARBIE VS. BABYDOLLS

I often wondered if our lives would've turned out differently had our upbringing been different, or the toys we played with were not the same. My sister Maribel grew up playing with Barbie dolls. She must've had at least twenty, if not more. They had cute outfits and Mom made more for them at my sister's request. She still remembers helping Maribel dress them. I didn't care much for Barbies. They weren't dolls I could cuddle, pretend to feed or be a mother to. The only thing they stirred in me was curiosity. I would undress them, run my fingers around their perfect breasts, tiny waists and long legs. They were very pretty with their makeup perfectly drawn on. When I handled them, I was always tempted to make the female dolls kiss the male ones. I'd have them lay together and hold conversations I thought adults had. I liked how their feet were tip-toed and the high heels made them look so feminine and sexy.

My dolls of choice were old fashioned baby dolls. I pretended to be their mother. When I was six, I saw a doll being advertised on television. It developed a rash on its butt after each feeding. "*¡Mira, Amá! ¡Yo la quiero!*" I begged Mom for her. Mom always said *no hay dinero*. Every time the commercial came on for the Baby Wet & Care doll, I yearned for it, but I remembered *no hay dinero*.

I had already forgotten about it when Christmas arrived and Mom surprised me with one. I couldn't believe she was mine to hold and feed. It was chubby with light colored skin, pink cheeks and perfectly shaped pink lips. When I laid her down, her eyelids would close and her

long lashes rested atop her cheeks. She had short, shiny blonde hair that became difficult to brush after I shampooed it the first time. It became coarse and lost its luster after that first bath, but I still loved her. My doll came with one milk bottle, and Mom bought a second one that came with an orange juice bottle. I would tilt them, pretending to feed her, and the liquid trapped inside would begin to empty. The bottles would fill back up once I stood them upright. Our dog Max grabbed her one day and tore her arm off. Mom bandaged it up and I continued to play with her until I eventually outgrew her.

Around 1979, when I was nine years old, I found myself wanting to take care of my own mother. She was sitting in our darkened living room in the middle of the day. It must have been the fall months because we were back in Weslaco. Mom was crying, drinking vino from Mexico and chain smoking, something I had never seen her do before. *Rancheras* from her vinyl records were playing full blast on the *consola*. Yolanda del Rio, Lucha Villa and Lola Beltran sang with my mom. She sat in a cloud of smoke, taking swigs from a bottle. She was angry at Dad. I don't know where everyone else was as I stood watching my mom from a distance. I was standing at the threshold of our hallway.

I wanted to comfort her, but I was afraid to approach her. Who knows how she would have reacted. "*Súbanse al carro,*" she instructed later that evening. We didn't know where we were going, but Mom was crying as she drove. We got to a bus station several towns away but Mom turned the car around once we got there. We were riding in her little brown Maverick, squeezed into the back seat. We ended up at the beach. "*Quería irme lejos con ustedes,*" Mom told me years later, "*pero no tenía dinero y ustedes todos estaban chiquitos.*" That was one of the many times I saw my mom look desperate and defeated.

She was not the type of mother that would hug us and tell us she loved us. I've rationalized that it's due to her own upbringing of abuse and neglect or maybe she was embarrassed to show affection, thinking it was a sign of weakness. Mom raised us with a hard hand.

A few years back, my siblings and I laughed at how she would discipline us. We thought it humorous now that we were adults, but it was scary as a child. "Mom mastered the art of the flying *chancla* technique," Bherta laughed. She is a year older than me. Mom would grab us by the hair if we tried to run away. "*Traeme el cinto,*" she'd demand. On top of getting whipped with Dad's belt, we had to bring it to her for the disciplining. "*Me duele más a mí que a ti!*" She'd huff and puff as she swung. "*No metas las manos porque te va ir peor!*" Bherta confronted her once and said "I never understood how it hurt you more. I would go to school with our last name branded on my butt from Dad's belt." We were more afraid of Mom than we ever were of Dad, so we always brought the belt when she demanded. "*Yo no me acuerdo,*" Mom claimed. "*Mentirosas. No era tan mala como ustedes dicen.*"

Even though I was four years older than Maribel, I played Barbies with her. At age 8, she was a very smart girl. She could talk nonstop and keep us entertained for many hours. At first, she had a speech impediment and couldn't pronounce words correctly. Through a migrant program of some kind, Mom got her the help she needed by taking her to speech therapy and Maribel took it from there. I wasn't surprised to see my sister earn several honors once she got to high school. Her junior year, she was selected from a nationwide contest to work alongside Lisa Ling who was a correspondent for Channel One, a network that aired in schools across the country. Maribel was flown to California to spend a week as an intern at the broadcast center. It turned out to be the week civil rights activist and farm laborer Cesar Chavez died and Maribel

got to film and edit a piece on him. Bherta had marched in one of his peaceful demonstrations as a child. “*Nos hizo que la siguiéramos por la orilla de la calle mientras ella caminaba gritando ‘VIVA CHAVEZ!’*” Mom told us. Years later, both of them would insist we boycott grapes because farmworkers were still struggling for better pay and fighting against the use of pesticides.

As a senior in high school, Maribel was flown to a couple of out of state conferences and paid to speak about her family’s migrant experience. My parents attended one of the conferences at South Padre Island and the three of them met actor Edward James Olmos there. I was still working as Dan De Los Santos’ secretary and seeing my sister have these opportunities made me feel proud. I always felt I was living vicariously through her.

After high school, Maribel attended Stanford University. Bherta was upset, saying the only reason Maribel was accepted was because the university was complying with the affirmative action policies the country was enforcing at the time. “Maribel is just filling their quota,” Bherta criticized. She didn’t think Maribel deserved it. “Maribel didn’t work in the fields as much as we did. She’s banking on something that she didn’t earn. She was too young to work back in the day.” I didn’t like what Bherta was saying. I thought she was being envious instead of happy for Maribel. At least someone would benefit from it, I thought. Maribel did work in the fields as a teenager.

What Bherta didn’t know was that Maribel looked up to her for having the courage to leave home. Bherta had set the precedent that Maribel could follow when her time came. I knew we all suffered from our days in the fields, the elements and all, but I didn’t know how emotionally unstable some of us were. Maribel confessed to me that she felt suicidal as a child. “I felt lonely and sad,” she said. We had not shared our feelings with one another before. This

came as news to me when we gathered one day after my parents' divorce. During those first weeks, my brothers, sisters and I made a pact to communicate with each other as much as possible via email or phone. We also agreed to not let our mother take us on guilt trips or turn us against each other. We were all tired of the drama. Unfortunately, the pact didn't last long.

After Stanford, Maribel took a bus cross country and found a job in New York City. Mom didn't find out until six months later. My sister has traveled to several countries for work and play and has become a real Career Barbie, brown version of course.

CHAPTER VII

MY FIRST KISS

I was thirteen the first year we went to live in a labor camp. That year, Bherta made a sign for our trip back West. She took one of Mom's white bed sheets and cut a rectangular strip out of it and in big letters wrote "California or Bust!" She included random sayings, peace signs, faces and money symbols on it. We took a picture of her holding it up in our bedroom before we left that summer. Bherta looked so proud.

Every time we traveled, Dad would fit a platform he constructed out of cheap plywood into the back of our pickup truck. He'd place a couple of studs on the bottom for support. It served two purposes: a bed on top and a storage area on the bottom. We would help him squeeze our clothes, appliances, and any other necessities into the far corners of the bottom area.



We didn't own suitcases, so Mom would pack our clothes and extra blankets in black garbage bags that were easier to fit into odd spaces. The cooler with cold cuts and drinks went in last for easy access. Mom would tell us to make sandwiches whenever we felt hungry. She always complained Dad didn't know how to pack because we could always fit more things in if he did it correctly. They would argue incessantly in the driveway until Mom made us take everything out after her inspection. She'd make us load up again, telling us exactly where to place things. We would still be crowded, but for some reason it made her feel better.

The ride to California was a tiring one. I would sleep most of the way there. Mom and Dad would let us take turns riding in the cab with them. We were five kids back then, so four of us would ride in the camper. If they didn't want to pull over so we could climb in, they'd simply open the two connecting windows, one on the pickup truck and one on the camper and we would squeeze through the opening. They used the windows to communicate with those of us in the back or to let us feel a bit of fresh air from the pickup truck's air conditioning.

When Bherta made the sign that spring, she'd order us to hold it up when we were on the long interstates and feeling bored. "Hold that end," she instructed. Mayin or I would hold the opposite end and peek through to see if drivers on the road were looking. Bherta would lower her end and signal to the truck drivers with her arm, hoping they would honk at us, and they did as they passed by. "Mom and Dad are freaking out," Mayin would warn. "They don't know why they're honking. They're gonna think something is wrong with the truck," he worried. We laughed about it until Mom knocked on the window, angry. "*Que chingados van haciendo?*" "*¡Nada, Amá!*" Bherta snickered back. We eventually stopped putting the sign up, afraid Mom would beat us.

We enrolled in school that year in French Camp, California just in time for me to finish my 8th grade year. It was 1983. That was also the year I had my first boyfriend. The girls at school said Joshua was the cutest boy on campus. I don't know what he saw in me. I felt awkward and far from pretty. He was not much taller than me, skinny with green eyes and dirty blond hair. He wore cutoff shirts that showed his bellybutton; most of his shirts were made of net material and you could see his chest through them.

"My grandfather is Mexican," Josh told me the first week we met.

"Really?" I said skeptically.

I sensed he was looking for some common ground between us. I knew he liked me for the simple reason that I was the new girl on campus. I agreed to 'go around' with him because he was the first boy who'd shown an interest in me and the girls were right, he was cute.

"You came just in time to participate in our graduation ceremony," the counselor told me.

"We're also having a dance for all the graduates afterwards," she added, as my mom signed registration papers.

"Can I stay, Mom?" I begged.

"*No. No sabes lo que pueda pasar,*" she said. She looked bothered.

After the formal ceremony, I begged my parents again to let me stay for the graduation dance. I had been in school a little over a month, had spent the first week taking English proficiency tests where I was shown pictures of people doing different activities in parks and neighborhoods, and I was supposed to describe the setting and their actions. It felt like I was back in kindergarten or first grade. After the counselor decided I was fluent enough to attend

class, I completed two weeks of minimal instruction. The teachers were already wrapping up the school year. Then I joined the 8th grade class for graduation practice. Mom didn't want me to stay for the dance but to her dismay, Dad said I could.

"No se hace nada, Lucifer. Ándale. Deja que se quede," my father interceded for me. He liked to change her name from Lucia to Lucifer.

"A ti se te hace fácil todo, Mario," Mom said, trying to stand her ground.

She made my white lace dress while all the other girls wore store-bought ones with fancy hats and pearls. She refused to buy me new shoes to match since we had just arrived in California and work was slow to start. I danced to Madonna songs and had my first kiss that night. It was a wet, teeth bumping one. I thought Josh was going to eat my face. I'm still surprised no adult chaperon stepped onto that dance floor to pull us apart between Depeche Mode and Scorpions.

When summer break started, my boyfriend Joshua came to visit me at the labor camp. It was the first week of June. Even though we lived in what was known as *'el campo nuevo'*, I was embarrassed by his visit. I didn't know what to make of it. Did he really like me or was he just curious about us migrants and the way we lived?

Josh rode his bike from town and we talked through my bedroom's window screen. I shared the room with my sisters and they weren't keen on giving me privacy. I had to hide him from my parents, or I would never hear the end of it. Every time someone opened the bedroom door, which my siblings did often and on purpose to see me panic, Josh would step away from the window. The screen prevented us from kissing or holding hands. My nose kept getting a film of dust on it every time I leaned out too far. I kept rubbing it, thinking I had little squares of dust

on my face. Joshua's bike ride to the labor camp took longer than the time he spent talking to me. I don't know why he came in the middle of the day when the sun was at its hottest but after that visit, he never came to see me again.

CHAPTER VIII

LEAVING AZEVEDO

I don't know how Dad found work for us once we moved into the camps, but he did. It was the first year we were living in a different town in California. It wasn't far from where we lived before. We moved from Manteca to French Camp, which was less than ten miles away. French Camp is where the county hospital is located, where four of my siblings and I were born.

Second in size to the three labor camps that sat next to each other was the county jail, which was one gate down from the new camp. Dad had worked for a Portuguese rancher named John Azevedo for seventeen years. Mom signed up for housing at this labor camp against my father's wishes. He was still hopeful Azevedo would have a change of heart and things would go back to the way they were before.

Azevedo had a bushy unkempt auburn mustache. He always secured a cigar in the corner of his mouth, and held it between his fingers when he spoke to Dad in his choppy Spanish. "*¡Mario! El agua? Que dice?*" He always raised his voice at Dad. Maybe he thought Dad would understand his Spanish better if he was yelled at. Azevedo came by the house occasionally in his huge burgundy pickup truck; he would roll down the driver side window, lean out to ask about his properties and see how irrigation was going. He gave us a place to live and provided Dad and other workers with small, light green company trucks. My dad always said he was Azevedo's number one man, and we believed him, up until 1982.

Dad had decided we wouldn't go to California that summer. He was building a cinder block fence around our house in Weslaco and wanted to finish. He was irrigating for different ranchers in South Texas and figured it paid enough to get us by that year. When we returned to Manteca, California the following spring, things had changed. Azevedo put us up in a run-down mobile home another family had vacated. It had water leaks, faulty electricity and a floor that looked like it would give out any minute. Mom said it was an accident waiting to happen.

"Peligro y se quedan pegados los huercos cuando se bañen." She kept telling Dad Azevedo was punishing him. It was rumored his watermelon harvest had not done well the previous year, and Mom figured he was blaming Dad for it. Dad was religiously loyal to Azevedo, but all that didn't matter anymore. The only house we knew and had grown up in now belonged to a newcomer from Michoacan, Mexico, who according to Mom, Azevedo claimed was now his number one man. Ironically though, Dad was having to teach him how to irrigate.

As far as I know, Dad never complained to Azevedo. *"Tanto que te chingaste para nada. No es justo, Mario,"* Mom complained. She insisted they file some sort of lawsuit against him, but Dad refused. We moved out of the mobile home a couple of months later and Azevedo never saw it coming. Dad too was caught off guard right before the move, when Mom told him he had to quit his job. She had already made up her mind, giving Dad no chance of changing it.

CHAPTER IX

WORKING AS A FAMILY

One of the first jobs we did once we ventured on our own was cleaning fields. The ranchers had let the weeds get so out of hand in some of their properties that the stalks were taller than us. We had to use our bare hands, because hoes were useless, and we had to salvage as much of the crop as we could. When we weren't cleaning fields, we were picking grapes, apples, apricots, or gathering almonds. My husband asked me once, as we passed by an almond orchard, how they were harvested.

"A machine is used to shake them off the tree," I explained.

"It grabs the tree trunk and shakes it violently. Then workers go by and gather them with large rakes and pile them up in the center of the rows. When all the stacks are done, another machine comes goes by and vacuums them up," I added.

"You can tell when the vacuum is being used by the large cloud of dust coming out of the orchards," I said.

Before we knew it, work became steady while we lived in the labor camps. We worked six days of the week and rested on Sundays. "*¡Apureense que se hace tarde. ¡Rocio! ¡Araceli, ponganse los tennis. Andale, Bherta!*" Mom and Dad would hurry us every morning, telling us to get dressed so we could leave early. My brother Mayin, sisters Araceli, Bherta and I would stall as much as we could, exhausted and sore from the previous day. Mom would be busy in the

kitchen, making breakfast tacos and filling our thermos containers with our meal for lunch. We'd slip a flour tortilla away when we could and spread butter on it to calm our hunger until lunch time. My youngest sister, Maribel, liked to add sugar to hers. She was seven years old, too young to work, but tagged along behind Mom in the fields. Dad tried to get her to pick fruit, but Maribel didn't care for it. She'd sit under the trees or wait in the car if Mom allowed it and only if we had a clear view of the car from the fields.

We wore the same clothes two days in a row so our loads of laundry wouldn't be so many. During grape season, my shirt and pants had a pungent scent after the second day of work and were stiff from the dried grape juice. Our shoes were the dirtiest and the thing that disgusted me the most. They were full of dirt and uncomfortable after a couple of days in the fields and the smell of grape juice lingered on them as well. If we tried washing them, we risked them still being wet in the morning when we had to wear them again, and that would make the scent even worse. We wore the same shoes all summer long. They were the same tennis shoes we used during the school year, and we didn't get new ones until it was time to head back to Texas in the fall. If we did buy some, we tried not to wear them often so they'd look new when we arrived back in Weslaco. After work, my siblings and I would run around in sandals or barefoot at the labor camp. Today I own 130 pairs of shoes. Some things just stay with you.

Like clockwork, on our way to the fields, my parents would tune in to the same radio station where at exactly 5:30 a.m. a deejay would play the song *Un Dia a La Vez* by Los Tigres del Norte. That summer, Mom had bought a used white Buick from an old couple and my siblings and I rode in the back seat every morning, huddled together, seeking warmth and hoping to get one last nap in before arriving at the fields. The dark of the night still blanketed the road as we heard the song through the car's muffled speakers. Immediately after, a man's deep voice

would announce: *'de que le sirve al hombre ganarse el mundo entero si se pierde a si mismo?'* It was Matthew 16:26 and I imagined it was meant to be inspirational, but I secretly hated hearing the song and the Bible verse at that ungodly hour. It reminded me that we were headed to the fields every morning like clockwork and needed to be there before sun up. I wasn't getting the message it intended to get across, that of winning the world over, acquiring riches and losing ourselves doing it.

Picking grapes took a lot of strength, especially when it came time to lift the containers. We girls tried using rubber gloves in the beginning to protect our hands but they wouldn't last long. We tore the gloves as we cut the grape clusters with our hooked knives. Dad eventually got us thicker cloth gloves that protected our hands but left them stiff and sticky from the sweat and grape juice. We had to move quickly and sometimes made thin cuts on our wrists with the knife as our hand held the clusters while we cut them off the vines. We'd guide the clusters to the box on the ground and push the rectangular box with our feet as we made our way down the long rows of grapevines. When the grapes were on trees, we could pick and move much faster around them than when they were on a wire.

Once full, the boxes weighed around 50 pounds. We carried them to large bins called gondolas that were chin high for me. We'd lift the box from the ground to our stomach and then up to our shoulders to empty them. Dad would walk around sometimes and empty them for us, switching his out so we could continue picking. *"Muevanse. Que el sol esta calentando y no rinde la uva. ¡Ándenles! ¡Despues piensan!"* He kept telling us to work faster, to talk less. Even our thinking bothered him if he thought it was slowing us down.

The hotter it got in the day, the faster the grapes sunk into the gondolas. They had to be filled over the top so the boss would figure they weighed a ton. *"¡Muevete, Rocio! ¡Hay que*

copetiar las gondolas! ¡No rinde con este pinche calorón!” We were six and it took us an hour and a half to fill two of them up. These were pulled by a tractor that stayed running while we picked. Dad didn’t want to risk the engine not starting up when needed. We breathed in diesel fumes all day long. My sisters complained that Dad got a break every time he drove off to empty them. Bherta was the angriest and demanded to drive, but Dad taught my brother Joe instead. He was only allowed to move the tractor down the row though, to the next section of grapevines we were getting to. “Why does Fat Man get to rest every time he goes to dump the grapes?” Bherta complained. “It’s not fair. He should let us drive the tractor too.”

We started picking grapes before the sun came up and the vines were still wet with dew. By ten o’clock, our clothes were dry and we would begin to sweat. We wore handkerchiefs on our heads, held in place with a cap, to protect the back of our necks from the sun. When we didn’t have handkerchiefs, Mom would cut the cloth from the flour bags she saved, stitch the sides and let us use those as kerchiefs. We used the same cloths to wipe sweat and dirt off our faces and eyes. Every time we lifted the grapevines, dust would rise with them. If we didn’t have dust in our face, we had gnats trying to get into our nose, mouth or eyes. Trying to cough up a gnat was always disgusting.

One morning, a small convertible came down the road while I was trying not to eat gnats. I could hear the teenagers laughing and having a good time. As they got closer and saw us working, they slowed down and waved, yelling something inaudible at us. I glanced up quickly, not wanting them to see my face. I felt a sudden sadness. My clothes were filthy and I looked like a boy. I saw them speed away and I felt left behind. The car quickly became a dot in the horizon. I lifted the leaves and continued fighting the gnats as I cut grape clusters off the vines.

The novelty of eating grapes when the season began lasted a couple of days. One day, my dad, to break the monotony of our job, spit into the gondolas after emptying his box. “*¡Pa los winos!*” he exclaimed. We thought it was disgusting but we laughed anyway. My mom never said much while we picked, and she was always quiet during lunch time. I figured she was busy doing calculations in her head of how much we were getting paid that week and what bills she was going to try and clear. Our oldest sister Araceli would sit quietly too. I spent my time daydreaming about boys I liked at the camp and imagined myself dating and maybe marrying one day. I even planned out where I was going to live. I thought mobile homes were luxurious, and I wanted to own a double-wide.



CHAPTER X

LOS MATADOS

The summer of 1984, we worked for a Greek rancher named John Aretakis. His wife's name was Olympia which I thought was cool. They had two sons and Araceli and I had a crush on the oldest one. He was tall, fit and handsome. The youngest was scrawny but he was the one who actually talked to us. The oldest must have been high school age. He rode around on a four-wheeler while we were picking in the fields surrounding his house. I always thought he was showing off. The boss and his wife were nice people and towards the end of the day, they would send the younger son on the four wheeler with a cooler filled with cold sodas for us. He would make small talk and Dad would try and joke around with him before he rode off again. Sometimes Dad would slip away and bring back a six pack of beer and let us have one each.

"No les des, Mario," Mom would complain.

"No se hacen nada. Pa que se les quite lo asoliado," Dad would retort.



It seemed like our family was always the last to exit the fields. Dad kept saying we would do one more load and then go home. “What do you mean another load, fat man?” Bherta griped between clenched teeth. She would curse him under her breath. The rest of us would laugh from seeing her motioning at him from behind the grapevines with her knife.

“Apasíguate, Bherta,” Mom would scold her. *“Muévanse. Ya mero nos vamos.”*

Our day would end after we filled a plastic tarp that Dad spread out on the ground. We’d fill it with enough grapes to fill the first gondola at least half way the following morning. Dad liked to get a head start and Mom never complained.

If it wasn’t for Don Chava, the foreman for Aretakis, we wouldn’t hear anyone else’s voice in the grape fields. All we’d hear all day would be the sound of our feet pushing the box around on the hard ground and the leaves moving as we parted them to pick. Don Chava would stay and work alongside Mom some afternoons. He’d walk around all day checking on the crews. Mom always had conversation and jokes to share with him. He had a cataract in one eye which looked like a white cloud and took some getting used to. Dad may not agree, but we owe

Don Chava for a lot of labor. Dad would pretend he was jealous and would tell Mom mean things when Don Chava wasn't around, but we knew he liked the extra help in the fields. Don Chava was always dirty and smelling of sweat, his white shirts were yellow. I think he wore the same clothes all week long. He was living in the states by himself. His entire family was in Mexico.

One morning, when we got to the stopping point from the previous day, we discovered someone had taken the grapes we left on the ground. Mom became very angry. She stomped over to the rows next to us, where another family was picking and demanded they return the grapes. They were the only ones working next to us so she figured it was them who had taken our stash. We had secretly christened the father of that family Mr. Magoo because he looked like the cartoon character: short, stout, and with a funny-looking hat. Mom didn't budge from where they were picking until they started coming over to fill our gondola. I could hear her arguing from where I was picking. After a while, I felt sorry for the family. It was hard enough carrying a 50 pound box from our own rows but even harder bringing them from several rows away. The family's teenage boys rushed to fill our gondolas and shyly sneak a smile as they ran by. Dad kept picking in our designated area, never saying anything so as not to be the bad guy, but when it came time to go dump the grapes, we could hear him whistling as he took off. Our tractor was the first one out of the field most mornings.

And so we earned the name *los matados* by others in the grape fields. They said we were killing ourselves because we were the first ones in and the last ones out. We did the required quota (at least that's what Dad had us believe) of six trips (12 tons) by 2 or 3 in the afternoon. The other families would do their quota and leave and my dad would get their empty tractor with the two one ton gondolas attached and we'd use them to make more loads. We would stay late

and Dad would line the tractors up for early dumping the next morning, since the boss wasn't there late in the day to dump them. When the other crews would clock in the following morning, they would see everything we had done. Needless to say, they didn't like us very much. Dad joked "*Que van hacer en la casa? Estar aburridos?*" He thought it was better for us to be working than to be bored back at the camp. We weren't fans of his logic.

CHAPTER XI

LEISURE SUNDAYS

Most every Sunday, without fail, my parents would take us to eat lunch at a restaurant named *Mi Ranchito Café*. It was in Stockton, which was a few miles away from French Camp. We had been going to that restaurant ever since we lived in Azevedo's house. I think the waitresses knew my parents by the way they greeted us. We were familiar faces. We always sat in main dining room, where we could see the other patrons eating at the counter in the middle of the restaurant. The walls next to us were covered with murals depicting landscapes, houses and people from Mexico. The front of the restaurant had windows on the top half of the wall and we could keep an eye on our pickup truck from where we sat. I was always curious about the other dining area off to one side. There were curtains at the entrance to it and the lighting in there was dim. I wondered why we couldn't sit there to eat. Mom and Dad never asked for a table there. I imagined lovers sat there, whispering to each other as they eat.

Every time we ate at *Mi Ranchito Café*, Mom would get after me. She didn't like that I always ordered rice when I was little. "*Quielo aloz,*" my dad would mimic me years later.

"*Si sabía que nomas ibas a pedir arroz, te lo hacía en la casa y allí te quedabas,*" Mom would complain. I didn't start ordering bigger items off the menu until many years later.

The waitresses at *Mi Ranchito Café* were older Mexican women who sported big hairdos and lots of makeup. They wore white, puffy blouses and black skirts, like some of the ladies in

the paintings on the wall. After lunch, our next stop was the Stockton flea market. I loved going there. A *mariachi* would be playing at the bar which was at the back end of the building. It was an indoor market, and Mom never let us wander in the direction of the bar. She didn't want us near the smelly restrooms or to be gawked at by the old men that stood against the wall. I liked browsing through the new clothes like jeans and blouses that vendors had under tarps outside or if they secured a spot inside the building, they would have more selection and they'd be in the air conditioned area. Mom gave us money every Sunday, usually twenty dollars each and let us spend it however we wanted. I always gravitated towards the vendor in a far right-hand corner of the building. The old man had all sorts of school supplies, paper products and candy.

High school kids back home in Texas didn't know I bought most of my pants at the flea market. They were new though, and one year I got lucky and found some named Emmanuel's that were similar in style to what the girls in California were wearing that year. I knew it would take some time before the style reached Weslaco, so I was excited to find them. They were baggy and went down mid-calf. I folded the ends up to create a cuff. They cost \$12.00 each so Mom had me pay for them. I also leaned towards the *Carrera* brand jeans. They had designs on the back pockets and were tight fitting. I couldn't afford the Jordache or Gloria Vanderbilt jeans the girls back home were wearing.

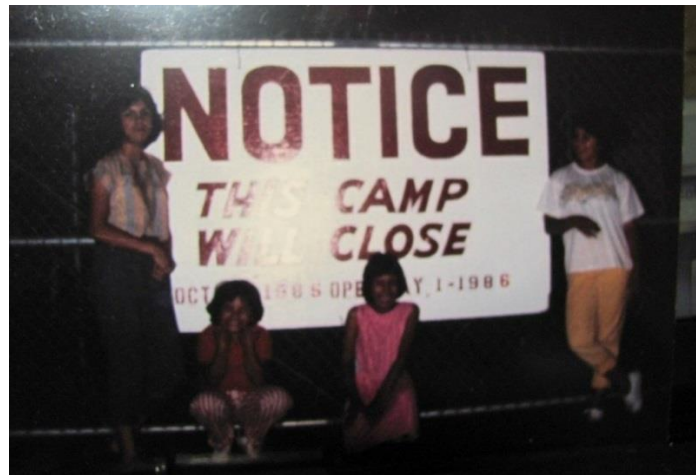
Mom said we had to pay for whatever clothes we wanted. She wasn't going to spend money on them when she could easily save money by buying a sewing pattern and making the outfits for us like she always did. For a long time, I had a hard time figuring out my pant and dress size because Mom always used McCall's and Butterick patterns to make our clothes. She said I was inexpensive to dress. "*Te visto con dos retazos de uno cincuenta cada uno.*" I was

thin and it didn't take much material to dress me. She said three dollars was enough for a homemade outfit, usually a top and a mini skirt.

CHAPTER XII

EL CAMPO NUEVO

If you didn't miss a summer and you arrived on time when they opened every year, the camp officials would assign the same apartment unit to each family. We were lucky to get the same unit two years in a row. Mom and Dad didn't allow us to go outside after work until the dishes were washed and the kitchen was clean. My sisters and I would fix ourselves up as best we could with the little that we had. A little lip-gloss went a long way and made our tans look like they were on purpose. The guys would cruise around the labor camp listening to romantic Spanish music and trying to get the girls' attention. Most of the families at the camps came from Mexico. I never met anyone who came from other states like we did.



Those two summers, 1984 and 85, Araceli and I swooned over a boy we had as a front door neighbor. We didn't waste time nicknaming him Bubbles based on his big butt. I later found out his real name was Alejandro Marcopolo Cuevas Perez. He was a good looking guy, but we

got the impression he thought he was better than us because he never bothered saying hi. None of his family did. Mom suspected they weren't really migrant workers because we never saw them leaving to or coming from work. We never saw them in work clothes either. Bubbles was always dressed nicely. He lived with an older sister, who was pregnant the first summer we were there, her husband, and what looked like Bubbles' grandmother. Bubbles would ride off on his 10 speed bike and Araceli and I would stare at him as he made his way down the curving sidewalk. He looked very fancy in his slacks. By the time our second summer at *el campo nuevo* rolled around, I wasn't as flat chested and I had curves where none had existed before. Bubbles began coming over to where I was with the girls to chat. He was letting his beard grow that summer and kept the stubble neatly trimmed, allowing it to connect with his mustache in what is known as a padlock style. It made him look much older than he actually was.

Bubbles tried to kiss me one night as we sat on a bench by the side of our apartment. My brother and sisters had gone indoors already. It was dark out, the only light came from a light post off in the distance and the dim yellow lights outside the apartments nearby. Sounds of last minute play and teens' laughter, as they waited to be called in for the night, could also be heard. Alejandro and I sat nervously on the bench. When he moved in to kiss my lips, I panicked, thinking we were being watched. I turned my head, and he planted the kiss on my cheek. I heard him breathe out in frustration, and I knew he was disappointed. I don't know what I was thinking, moving and missing out on such an anticipated kiss! I had waited a whole year for it! I immediately felt sad afterwards, more so when he never looked for me again. I was fourteen.

El campo nuevo had been recently constructed and we were lucky to be assigned an apartment there. The apartment units were air conditioned, but Mom and Dad always had us open the windows during dinner time. Behind the units were clotheslines that we shared with

other tenants. “*Cuelguen los calzones de una orquilla,*” Mom would instruct. We hung our underwear and bras using one clothespin, so the boys wouldn’t see them spread out on the line. Sometimes, we’d hang them indoor to dry, in the shower or at the foot of our beds, if Mom let us.

One night, I looked out our bedroom window and noticed a couple of boys standing on the rooftop across our unit.

“What are they doing?” I asked Araceli and Bherta. We turned our bedroom light off so we could move closer to the window to spy. The boys were trying to lie flat on their stomach to look into the bathroom window.

“Jerks, they’re trying to look at whoever is in the bathroom,” Bherta said angrily.

“The light is on in there. Look at them, laughing,” she said in disgust.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if whoever is in there knows they’re being watched,” Araceli chimed in.

“Girls are dirty like that.”

We began closing our bathroom window after that night, but I began to panic, remembering how I’d go into the bathroom before bed and touch myself. I was beginning to feel things and learning what my body looked like down below, thanks to a Cover Girl compact mirror. I wondered if anyone had seen me rubbing myself until I squirmed with pleasure. Sometimes I didn’t want to close the window.

It was at this camp that we met David Wrinkles. He was light skinned, which made him look wrinkly around the eyes when he was barely twenty years old. David was always trying to get the girls’ attention, but we laughed at him for being so awkward and trying so hard. He

would come by on his 10 speed bike, wearing *botines* which were short cowboy boots that made him look funny when he was trying to look suave. “*Hola, muchachas,*” he’d say as he shook his head nervously from side to side. He seemed clumsy or maybe he was just nervous around girls. When he wasn’t on his bike, he was selling cassette tapes, of both English and Spanish bands, out of the trunk of his compact car. He’d park it between the two apartment units across from ours. From there, he had a clear view of the benches and sidewalk where we hung out with the girls my dad called *las Cabbage Patchas*. Other guys would gather around his car to chat, buy, or try to slip cassette tapes into their pockets without paying. My brother Mayin, who was around eleven at the time, figured he could get free music tapes from David if he convinced him he would intercede on his behalf and get us to talk to him. David agreed. Mayin carried messages back and forth, mainly from David to us. When David realized it was going nowhere, he cut my brother off.

CHAPTER XIII

FRUITS, HOES AND BOYS

We picked apples and pears up by Lodi, California the second summer we lived in the new camp. We had to get up even earlier to make it to the orchards on time. Sometimes we would see the inmates walking alongside the gate in the jail grounds next to our parking spots. They'd call out to us as we jumped into the back of the camper in the mornings or when we'd arrive in the afternoons. "*No volteen a verlos. Subanse rápido,*" Mom commanded. The only thing that kept the prisoners away from us were two chain-link fences, one taller than the other. Dad said the first one had an electrical current running through it. Behind the jail was the county hospital where we were born and next to that was a crematorium where we could see black smoke rising some days.

The ride to Lodi in the back of the pickup truck seemed to last forever on our way to and from work back then, when in reality it was only thirty miles away from where we lived in French Camp. The foreman at the apple orchard was a short Filipino man named Pedro Católico. Mom said he bathed in Brut cologne. We always knew when he was coming because his scent arrived before he did. He spoke Spanish and was a huge help to us. Especially for my mom. She always started conversations with the *mayordomos* and they would hang around for a while picking the fruit of the day with her. Dad would play the jealous game with Pedro too. This job was the most frightening for me. We had to use long aluminum ladders in order to reach the fruit

at the top. Pedro would grab a ladder and move it from branch to branch with such ease. He'd run up the rungs real fast, stand on the last one and start picking. He was not afraid of falling.

From our neck hung a long sack that covered our chest and stomach and weighed heavy as it filled up. If I wasn't careful, the apples or pears would hurt my boobs as I threw them into the sack in hurry. I didn't mind them hitting my stomach but my boobs were a different story. When Pedro came by, he would pick the highest fruit. Unfortunately, he couldn't stay long and we had to brave the ladders ourselves. Mom never climbed one. She made excuses about not being able to and she picked all the fruit from the bottom, leaving us no choice but to go up the trees. We never argued with Mom. She reeked more authority than Pedro Católico. Bhertha wasn't afraid. She wanted to show Pedro that she could do it too, so up she went.

"Nadamas vamos y venemos, vamos y venemos, vamos y venemos y nos vamos," our foreman Don Luis would say. He tried to encourage the younger ones in the *cuadrilla*, telling us we'd go back and forth three times down each row before going home. He joked as we stood there in the early morning hours, looking at the field before us. I studied the rows of crops that stretched out into what looked like an unattainable horizon. He was right. It would take us at least three trips down each row to clean one field up. I tried not to dwell on the distance in front of us. Instead, I'd secretly hope a boy would have the courage to work in the row next to me instead of it being my parents or one of my siblings. I didn't want to be talking to them all day.

The first days were always the hardest. It took a few damaged crops and my dad lashing out at us before we figured out how to work the hoe. *"Mira, Durcal."* That was his pet name for me. If he wasn't calling me Rocio, he was calling me Durcal after Rocio Durcal, the famous Spanish singer who was very popular at the time in Mexico. *"Asi se hace,"* he instructed under his breath. *"Si los ve el mayordomo que mochan las matas, no las va dejar trabajar. Ándeles."*

Háganlo bien.” Dad had lied about some of our ages and was afraid we would get fired if we pulled the plants out instead of the weeds. He couldn’t afford to have us sit in the car waiting for him and Mom to finish working. Little by little, the blisters would begin to form on the palms of our hands. *“Ustedes tienen la culpa. Dejan que se les resvale el azadon entre las manos. Ahora se aguantan.”* Mom wasn’t sympathetic and blamed us for allowing the blisters to form. At the end of the day, our hands were sore and wanting to cramp up. The next morning would be worse, but we had to keep going. No one was allowed to stay home. The blisters would eventually turn to calluses and by then our complaints would be about other things like the heat, our aching backs or the stinging of sweat in our eyes.

There were times when the young men in the crews would glance over at my sisters and me. When we finished a row and were walking over to start new ones, we could see them scurrying to get a section next to us so they could make conversation while we worked. Having someone to talk to made the hours go by faster. I was fourteen but the layers of clothing and the baseball cap made me look older. I don’t know if it bothered Mom when boys would talk to us. She wouldn’t say anything unless we started falling behind the crew and out of earshot.

“¡Apureense, muchachas! ¡No se queden! ¡Despues platican!” She’d yell. As soon as Dad would hear her, he’d head back toward us, cleaning our rows as he came to meet us. I would see him moving rapidly but I wouldn’t rush. He’d demand we run and catch up to Mom. He always embarrassed us and the guys working in the rows nearby. Mom and Dad contradicted themselves constantly. *“Llvensela despacio, nos estan pagando por horas,”* they’d take turns telling us. Then they’d change their mind and tell us to hurry and not fall behind.

“C’mon, Araceli!” Juanio would shout. He had a crush on her and would call her out when he’d see her straggling. Araceli didn’t like to be embarrassed. Juanio was the son of Juan

Bustamante, who had also worked for Azevedo for many years. He was Araceli's age, tall, dark, and would make us laugh when he danced like a *cholo* at family parties. I would laugh at them, seeing him coming down her row to help her, pulling out the tall stalks of *quelite* in a hurry, exaggerating every movement and laughing out loud. Araceli would complain. "Leave me alone. Don't be yelling my name," she'd hiss at him. "C'mon, Celi! You can do it!" Juanio was not one to be quieted. He would pronounce her name in English and elongate the vowel sounds, embarrassing her every time.

We all knew he had always liked Araceli, they were close in age, so I was very surprised when we were visiting them one day at the apartment his dad and stepmom moved them to when they left Azevedo and Juanio cornered me in the kitchen when no one was looking. "Hey, Rosy," he breathed. He was taller than me and had lost the pudginess from his younger years. He tried to kiss me, but I slipped away from him and went back to the living room where everyone else was. He followed me out, chuckling, as if we had a secret between us now. I never told anyone. I didn't want to get him in trouble or worse, have Mom thinking I asked for it.

CHAPTER XIV

THE RAIDS

“¡Ay viene la migra! Raza!” We heard the shouts break the silence. I was cleaning a row next to Mom when I heard someone holler. I turned around and saw four green and white border patrol vans rushing down the dirt road where our cars were parked. They were lifting clouds of dust behind them. All of a sudden, there was a scrambling of bodies, workers running everywhere, officers trying to keep their footing as they ran in the narrow rows of crops to get to us. I stopped working, frozen in my tracks. I was panicking. I looked over at the young man who was working one row away. He looked at me and suddenly dropped flat on his stomach and rolled away row by row. I followed him with my eyes as he moved further and further away from the crew. The crops were high enough to hide him, but I could see them shake in the distance as he rolled through them.

“Amá,” I could barely speak, almost giving him away and feeling like I wanted to cry.

She was working ahead of me and didn't look back.

“Siguele, no te pares.”

I kept moving, hoping the officers wouldn't notice the plants stirring in the distance.

That day, we saw Don Luis' own nephew get handcuffed and escorted away. I'm sure other workers were taken too, but he's the one whose face and hands I remember the most. As he was being guided back to the border patrol units, he turned around mid-field and yelled: *“¡Aquí*

nos vemos en una semana!” He was confident he would be back the following week. I don’t know how true that was. I think he was just as embarrassed as the rest of us who were watching him being taken away. Don Luis looked sullen after that raid. We worked in silence when *la migra* left. The young man who rolled away to safety resurfaced after someone whistled, letting him know it was okay to come out. He had been lying between the plants for almost an hour, afraid to stand up. Dad always said the border patrol counted the people in the fields as soon as they drove in to make sure no one got away, but I don’t know how true that was. Dad lied a lot.

My dad didn’t like the raids because they slowed us down. We couldn’t afford to waste time if we were picking fruits and vegetables that paid by the load. “Are you a U.S. citizen?” the officer had asked me. “Yes, Yes, sir.” I stuttered. I always looked to Mom for support. We never carried our birth certificates with us and I don’t remember if Mom had them in her purse which always stayed hidden and locked up in the trunk of our car. I know it helped that we answered in English and could name the town we were born in, but Mom and Dad were resident aliens at the time, so they had more questions to answer than we kids did. The officers moved from person to person as we continued cleaning the fields. The raids occurred often and it was always sad to see people being led away in handcuffs or plastic ties. Our foremen would try to liven us up by talking about work and pay day.

It must have been around two in the afternoon when *la migra* raided the grape field we were working in one day. The sun was high and I could see the heat from the tractor’s engine forming squiggly lines above the hood. I was concentrating on the grape clusters and pushing the heavy box with my feet when I heard someone yelling at me. I turned and saw a man in a green uniform standing to my right. The tractor was immediately behind me, its engine roaring. The officer must have seen the startled look in my eyes.

“¡Amá!” I tried to move away from him and the noise of the engine. He reached out, thinking I was going to run.

“Are you a U.S. citizen?” He hollered at me.

“Yes, I am.”

“Where were you born?”

“French Camp, California.”

By this time, Mom was standing next to me, trying to explain in her broken English that all of her kids were citizens. Dad came over to see what the yelling was about. The officer then asked Mom and Dad about their legal status. I went back to picking, eyeing the officer from underneath my dirty cap.

CHAPTER XV

MRS. WARREN AND MR. CHAVEZ

In 1985, we returned to Weslaco in the fall. I was a freshman in high school, attempting to disguise my migrant self by wearing Madonna-like jewelry and clothing. I layered several necklaces with crucifixes, filled my wrists with bracelets and sported a funky haircut. I thought I could distract from the fact that my skin was darker from the fields and I was registering six weeks late. After I went through the necessary enrollment process, I walked to my first English honors class and knocked on the door.

“I’m supposed to be in your class,” I told the teacher, Mrs. Warren. She looked at my schedule then back at me, surveying me up and down. She took my schedule and wrote something on the backside. “Go to the office,” she said dryly. As I walked back down the hall, I looked at what she had written and felt confused and hurt. “Does she really belong in my class?” Mrs. Warren wanted to know.

“What did you need?” the secretary at the front desk asked.

“I have a note from my teacher,” I told her. “I just finished registering.” I handed her my schedule and she read the message.

“Wait here,” she said as she went looking for someone.

Mr. Chavez, the assistant principal in charge of the ninth grade, came out to meet me. “Come with me,” he said. I tried to keep up with him as we headed back out of the office and

down the hall to Mrs. Warren's classroom. Mr. Chavez was tall and slender, walked kind of pigeon toed but had a towering presence. He opened Mrs. Warren's classroom door and motioned with his hand for her to come outside. "Go grab a seat, Rosa," he said. I walked in, and not knowing where to sit, ended up at an empty desk in the front row. I don't know what Mr. Chavez told Mrs. Warren but when she came back in, her rosacea was more visible than before. She said nothing to me.

A couple of days later, Mr. Chavez called me into his office.

"How are you doing, California girl?" he smiled. "Have a seat. I have something for you." I sat down in a chair across his desk, placing my books on my lap.

"Is something wrong?" I asked.

I had never been called to the principal's office and didn't know what to expect. Mr. Chavez reached under his desk.

"I have something for you," he repeated, as he handed me a stack of spiral notebooks, packages of loose-leaf paper, folders and pens.

"It's a little something to help you this year." His gift was completely unexpected and I didn't know whether to accept it or not.

"Go ahead," he said. "It's just something I thought you'd need," he insisted.

"Thank you, sir. You didn't have to do this. I'm ok," I could barely get the words out.

"It's nothing. Go get educated," he smiled.

I walked out of his office, went to the nearest restroom and cried. After Mrs. Warren had made me feel unwanted and unworthy, receiving a gift as simple as this made me think that perhaps I did matter.

My junior and senior year, Mr. Chavez asked that I be his office practice student. I went to his office every day and filed reports in the cabinet next to his desk while he made calls or did paperwork. I ran messages to teachers and listened to his banter with the office staff. When he was in a pleasant mood, he'd make conversation and joke around, but when he had to discipline kids he was someone else. "Please step outside, Rosa," he commanded one morning as a couple of boys were being ushered in to his office." I had barely stepped past the threshold when I felt the door slam behind me. My hair moved forward and I thought: he could've hit me! The attendance clerks looked at me in shock. "What happened?" one of them asked. "I don't know. He has two students in there."

I thought Mr. Chavez was the friendliest of all the principals at school. He always smiled at me when he was on hall duty between class times.

"I'm running late to class, sir," I told him one day. "Can you give me an excuse?" I asked.

"Do you have a piece of paper?" He asked as he pulled his pen out of his shirt's front pocket. "Turn around," he said as I handed him a piece of scrap paper.

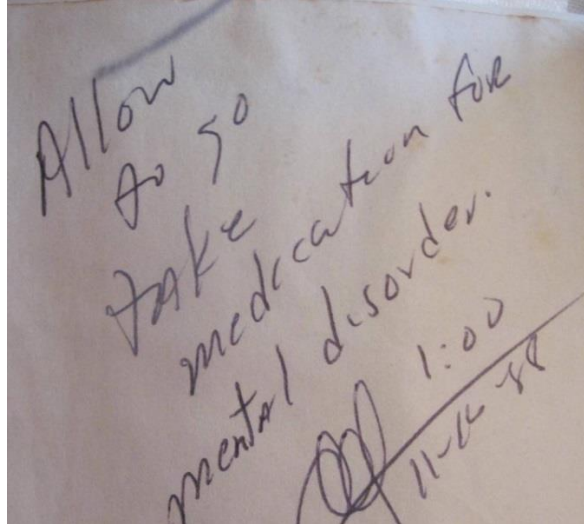
I could feel him pressing lightly on my shoulder as he wrote.

"There you go," he said and sent me off.

I looked at the note as I walked away. It said I needed medication for a mental disorder.

“Hey, California girl,” he stopped me in the hall later that day.

“Did my note help?” he asked, still smiling. I shook my head at him and smiled back.



“Mensa,” a friend told me one time. “*Te quiere allí para verte las piernas. Siempre andas en minifalda,*” he laughed. My friend could’ve been right, but I didn’t mind. I liked Mr. Chavez.

CHAPTER XVI

BEING GIFTED & TALENTED

When Jim Douglas became the director of the Gifted & Talented Program for the Weslaco Independent School district, a program that had not existed until he moved to town, he began testing my siblings and me to see if we qualified to be in it. School districts didn't pay attention to migrant students when it came time to enroll them in honors classes, so what this man was doing was unheard of. Araceli qualified but was upset it was her senior year in high school and too late to make a difference. Bherta, Maribel and I were accepted into the Honors Program and allowed to catch up even though we returned almost six weeks into the new school years.

The summer before my freshman year, Dr. Douglas vouched for me, convincing the school district to let me take textbooks with me to California. Jim wanted me to work independently on chapter readings and assignments. "You won't be so far behind if you read over the summer. Do as many of the quizzes at the end of each chapter and take notes as you go along. Try not to damage the books, so we don't get in trouble," he said. I took my studies seriously, not wanting to disappoint and read most afternoons that summer until I felt I would be more than ready for school when we returned to Texas. That was the year I was going to meet Mrs. Warren.

Dad didn't understand why I hauled textbooks with me from so far away. "*Nomas van ocupar más lugar en la troka,*" he fussed. "*Aver si no te los cobran cuando regreses.*" It was

the summer before my freshman year when I meticulously filled out chapter questionnaires and shared my progress with Jim via letters. I loved letter writing and had previously sustained a lengthy letter writing relationship with a former English teacher when I was fresh out of fifth grade. Mrs. Davis and I would communicate on a weekly basis when we lived in Azevedo's house. She told me who got awards at the end of the school year after I left and said she'd hold mine for when I returned from California. She encouraged me to read and write to her every week. Her penmanship was beautiful, and I wanted to write like her when I was older.

Meslaco, Texas 78576
June 1, 1982

Dear Rosa,

Hi - I hope this finds you and your parents and all the family fine. We're okay here. We have really missed you a lot, plus Acaci, Berta, Marivel, and Maria.

Rosa, you received a lot of awards at the end of school. I have 2 of them - one is for achieving best citizen of 5-5-7, and the other is for outstanding accomplishment in English. Mrs. Neilman has some more for you, but I don't remember exactly what they all were for - I believe one was for Reading. I could send you what I have, but I just wondered if you wanted me to wait and give them to you this fall when you return to Meslaco. Let me know which way you want me to do, and I'll be glad to do it.

Everyone was happy for school to be out, including the teachers. By the end of school, most everybody's getting tired and needing a vacation. I gave away all the books (paperbacks) I had & raffled off the Uno game, the Scrabble game, Checkers Game and the

Spell and Spell Game. Elia got the Checkers + Martin the Spell and Spell + I can't recall who got the others. They were all so excited. Only one person in 5-2-7 failed + that was Marcia. I felt sorry for him, but he wouldn't try or work. Melissa Suarez + Frank Agala had 2 subjects failing, but you could do that + pass if you were reading in a 5th grade book. We had an end-of-the-year party at noon on Wednesday - the day before school was out for the kids. It was a good party but we had only enough sandwiches for everyone to have 1/2 sandwich. Amy forgot to bring her sandwiches - also we ran out of dip early but had plenty of sweets. Maggie made a cake + Kristi made cupcakes, plus we had cookies + candies. Melissa Suarez brought a gallon of Kool-aid Mrs. Ybarra brought a gallon, + I took 2 gallons, so we had enough to drink, but it was all drunk. I guess everyone was really thirsty.

Hope it's cool over there where you are. It's been pretty hot Monday here. We had a big rain on ~~Monday~~ of the last week of school. It rained

3

almost 5 inches that day in Meslaco. The kids were so excited, but our lights didn't go out in the Open Concept or D-Wing. I had duty the next day at noon & the football field was like a lake, so I went over near the playground equipment to do my ^{part} duty.

Jodie brought home some beets yesterday. I cooked them. He helped me peel them & cut them up. I made beet pickles out of them. We got 5 quarts & 7 pints. We like them with beans & vegetables. We had company tonight for supper - Barney & Irene Fields. We had corn on the cob (boiled), red beans, hot rolls, lettuce and tomato salad, fried chicken, ~~and~~ lemon pie, and iced tea.

Jodie & I went to Corpus ~~Sunday~~ ^{Saturday} afternoon & came back Sunday afternoon. We attended our oldest grandson's graduation from high school. Mrs. Jones took my Sunday morning class - you know Larry's mom.

Well, I'll close for now. Let us hear from you soon. Are you working any? I'm sure your Dad is.

Love - Mrs. Davis

Mrs. Davis knew me outside of school too. She was a member of the Bridge Avenue Church of Christ Jim and I attended. My mom accepted the invitation to let us attend this church when a group of people came to our front door in the late seventies, asking if we would like to ride the Joy Bus to church. My mom saw us off every Sunday morning and Wednesday night and used the time to clean house and rest from having five kids around. "Ride the joy bus. What kind of kids ride the joy? Fat kids, skinny kids, kids with dirty socks," we'd laugh and sing out loud as we made our way to church with all the others kids Mr. McKinney picked up. When the big brown Joy Bus was no longer operating, the Davises and the Browns took it upon themselves to give us a ride. We went to church up until the time I started dating Juan.

Mr. and Mrs. Brown would give us a ride to church on Wednesday evenings. One day, Mrs. Brown came by herself to pick us up. She started crying on the way to church.

“What’s wrong?” Araceli asked her. She was older and the only one allowed to ride in the front seat.

“Oh, sweetheart,” Mrs. Brown wiped her cheeks. “Just grownup things.”

“But you’re sad,” Araceli insisted.

Needing to tell someone, I suppose, Mrs. Brown finally said “Doug got up this morning and said he wanted a divorce. No explanation. Nothing,” she said, heartbroken.

I was still in grade school. I didn’t know what a divorce was back then, but I knew it was a sad thing. Mr. Brown stopped going to church after that.

CHAPTER XVII

TOPOYIYO AND THE BEE

There was nothing glamorous about working in the fields. Others who have done the work will agree that it is backbreaking and exhausting. We did have some fun moments when someone would say something and the crew would break out in hysterics, but those were far and few between. We had a friend named Manuel, who was known as Meño to everyone, but I christened him *Topoyiyo* because he walked like the chubby mouse who was a popular television character at the time. He was an older man, probably the same age as my dad. He and I got along well. He helped my parents keep an eye on me. One afternoon, while we were coming up to the end of a row and allowed to get a water and bathroom break, Meño fell as he tried jumping the ditch that separated the field from the water thermos. His legs were too short and didn't make it across. I started laughing, almost in tears from seeing him go down, his big belly sliding into the dirt. Mom turned around.

“*¿Que paso?*” She asked.

“*Se cayo Topoyiyo*” I said breathlessly as I laughed harder.

Meño, trying to climb out of the ditch “*Vas a ver, cabrona. Sigue riendote.*”

I'm sure others wanted to laugh too when they heard me call him that. He didn't know I had a pet name for him. It was the first time I had said it out loud. He giggled as he crawled his way out of the ditch, shaking his fist at me. Dad tried hushing me with his stare. Meño kept trying to

get me back the rest of the afternoon for laughing. I just laughed harder, motioning to him how he went down. I thought I would pee myself that day.

The day Bherta got stung by a bee was the day we realized working in the fields could be dangerous too. Her cheek got so swollen that it deformed her face. We teased her, calling her Dr. Butriago after a villain from a *telenovela* that was popular that summer, *Topacio*. Its theme music could be heard every evening coming from all the apartments in the labor camp. I imagined everyone was watching *Topacio* as they ate dinner and relaxed after work. We could smell the different foods and the scent of tortillas cooking on the stoves. Bherta's face had gone back to normal by the time we got home that afternoon, so no one found out about the scare.

CHAPTER XVIII

LUIS, DANCES AND OLD LABOR CAMP

In 1986, the last summer we went to the labor camps, I agreed to be Luis Ozuna's girlfriend. My mom did not approve of him. She thought his younger brother Manuel, '*el de la alita quebrada*' as she called him, was nicer or gentler looking because he had a broken arm. Luis was suntanned, thin, with black hair that he slicked back. I always thought he looked like a young Elvis Presley. There was something about his lips. I was fifteen that summer and Luis was 19. He lived with family members in a housing unit a short distance from ours. His older sister Alicia lived right behind us with her family. My sisters and I befriended Maribel and Jessica, Alicia's daughters. We'd hang out with them after work and listen to music or talk about the boys at the camp. As teenage girls, we also had our disagreements and sometimes went days not speaking to each other. "*¡Te vas arrepentir!*" Jessica shouted at Araceli at one of our gatherings under the clotheslines. I don't remember what the anger was about, but we made fun of Araceli for months afterwards, remembering how Jessica had threatened her.

The camp we lived in that year was the oldest of the three. The houses were wood frame and had no insulation. You could hear the noise from the other homes if you paid close attention. When Mom and Dad were gone to town, we would play music full blast on our small radio/cassette player that we'd place in the window. The Fregosos told us they learned every song on our Los Archies del Control cassette tape. It was one of the few Araceli had taken from

Texas. She had just discovered the group the spring before we left to California, and she was in love with the lead singer Ernesto Lugo.

I don't remember the exact moment it became formal but Luis and I ended up 'going around' that summer. His family was preparing for a *quinceañera* for Claudia, his cousin, and Luis was excited to take me as his date. He wasn't one to show his emotions and I was okay with that. I enjoyed watching him walk away, with a sort of confident strut.

The day of the *quinceañera*, Mom let Araceli and me leave early with Alicia and her family to attend the church service. Luis' family insisted Luis and I have our picture taken afterwards with Claudia at the entrance to the small Catholic Church. His little nephew stood next to him and I stood shyly on the other end, holding my dress. When we got to the hall, the band was setting up and we ate dinner while we waited. Luis was a good dancer. He held me close as we moved smoothly with the crowd in circles, dancing to cumbias. My favorite part of the night was dancing *La Najayita* by *Los Bukis*. I could hear Luis singing in my ear. His warm breath felt good. After Mom and Dad arrived, Luis stayed away and I sat down for the rest of the night. Luis wasn't 21 yet but his older brother and uncles let him have a beer at the party and even if they hadn't allowed it, he probably would've drunk some anyway. That was the reason Manuel had broken his arm. It was the beginning of summer and the two were coming back to the labor camp in the middle of night when they crashed. I hadn't met Luis yet when we heard what happened. They left the car in a ditch and walked home. Mom said they were drunk. She didn't want me talking to either of them, but I still did.



Every night before going inside to bed, Luis would take my hand and have me follow him to the back of his sister's house, where he thought my parents or anyone from my family couldn't see us. He'd kiss me under the yellow light from the single lightbulb that illuminated the area. It was here that he started reaching under my blouse, touching my bra. Then one night, he lifted it, pulled my bra cup down slowly and sucked on my small breast. He was taller than me and had to hunch over. I was embarrassed as I felt my nipples harden. I worried that someone would see, but he continued to take me to that spot to kiss me goodnight. I even kept a calendar where I jotted down our kisses.

We should have been more careful. The house he lived in had a straight view to the spot where we stood. Someone could see us making out if they really tried to look, but Luis didn't care. He wanted to touch me and touch me often. I liked how grown up he seemed, so serious all the time and demanding respect from teenage nieces. The girls would joke and call me *tia*.

One Saturday, his nieces invited my sisters and me to go with them on an outing. Their family was going to spend the day at a river and the girls wanted us to go. I figured Luis was going so I was excited to have a chance to see him outside the camp, away from my parents. I

don't remember where the river was located, but the Fregosos took food and drinks, a barbecue pit and chairs. There was plenty of shade to set camp at. The adults let us go off exploring. I wore blue plaid shorts and matching top mom had made for me. It was one of my favorite outfits. The blouse had a ruffle around the bottom and I felt very feminine in it. Claudia, who had just turned 15, went to the river that day too. Bherta later admitted having a crush on her. I don't know how true it was, but Claudia said she had a condition where her period would not stop for weeks. I didn't know that was possible. I thought surely she'd die soon.

Luis held my hand as we made our way across the river and down the length of it too. The water was extremely cold and the rocks lining the floor were slippery, we had a difficult time walking on them. Luis had a firm grip on my hand, he'd hold my waist when he felt me wanting to fall. We laughed nervously, partly from the cold water and partly from the excitement of being together. He didn't kiss me that day at the river, but he didn't have to. I felt cared for next to him. My sisters and his nieces had to brave the river alone. Claudia slipped while holding the girls' hands and the current almost pulled her shorts and underwear off. We all started laughing and trying not to lose our footing as we made fun of her. Luis never left my side. He didn't care that his uncles and brother were making fun of him for being with his girlfriend whole time we were there.

My parents let Araceli and me go to dances in Stockton some Friday nights. Stockton was two to three miles north of French Camp where we lived. If my parents liked the group that was playing, they would stay and dance too. If it was music Araceli and I liked, for example *Los Bukis*, *Los Yonics*, or *Bondadosos*, Mom would have Dad take us and she'd stay home with my brother and sisters.

She depended on Dad to chaperon Araceli and me, but Dad always had other plans. One night, before I was Luis' girlfriend, he dropped us off and told us to have fun. We were too excited to care where he went, so we entered the Civic Center alone and went searching for a place to sit. There was a bar in another room off the main dance floor and we knew it was off limits to us. *Los Bukis* were playing that night. I was wearing a hot pink skirt, matching blouse, pearl necklace, and white high heels. People in California danced differently than people in Texas and Northern Mexico where we danced as teens too. In California, everyone stayed in one spot or close to it. In Texas and Mexico, everyone traveled in a circle. It was more uniform and easier to navigate.

Los Bukis were always a favorite in California. They played romantic music, so it didn't really matter that we danced in one spot, it was actually appropriate. Araceli and I didn't panic when we realized we were unchaperoned. We knew other people from the labor camp would be there, and we hoped the guys would find us and ask us to dance. This was one of the rare places we got to see each other dressed up and looking pretty. The boys would come over shyly, but mustering the courage to ask us to dance. They'd hold their hand out, asking you to take it if you agreed to dance. "*¿Bailamos?*" I didn't need to answer. I'd simply nod a yes and stand to take their hand as they led me to dance floor. Most of them would place their hand in the small of my back and lead me away as the music played. I liked how it felt to have my hand in theirs as we walked side by side to and from the dance floor. I was fifteen and feeling grown up.

My left arm would go directly to their shoulder and my right hand would make itself comfortable in theirs. We'd start swaying, trying to figure out each other's steps, the boys trying to set the pace to lead. We'd leave a space between our bodies until we felt comfortable enough to move in closer. Having someone hold me close as I stepped side to side and unknowingly

allowing me to breathe in their subtle musk scent made me fall in love with love. I knew most of the boys I danced with were eighteen and over. I rarely said no to anyone, unless they were drunk or too old to dance with. It didn't feel right to turn the boys down after they walked over to take a chance on me. I could almost see them smile faintly as I accepted.

As the dance was about to end that particular night, my sister and I couldn't find my dad. We waited for almost everyone to exit the hall before we dared step outside. Luis's aunt and nieces saw us and waited with us by the stairs that led down to the parking lot. They wanted to make sure Dad was coming to pick us up. The waiting seemed to drag on, the parking lot becoming emptier and still no sign of him. The neighbors decided to give us a ride back to the labor camp, and being left with no other option, we accepted the offer. We didn't have a phone at the labor camp and cell phones were not around yet. The dance hall had closed and Stockton was not a safe place at night. We got home around 2 in the morning. Mom was up waiting for us.

When we walked in without Dad, she became livid.

“Apá nos dejó en el baile y se fue. No lo vimos en toda la noche,” I told mom.

Dad showed up shortly afterwards. My parents began arguing.

“¡Allí estaba toda la noche, Lucy!” My dad yelled. *“Estaba en la cantina, de allí las vigilaba.”*

We never saw my dad enter the hall but he claimed he was at the bar the entire time.

“No las ví cuando salieron. No sé porque no me esperaron.” He was angry that the neighbors had brought us home and would more than likely back up our story.

“¡De seguro la pinche güera ojos de coyote te paso el chisme!” Luis’s sister had green eyes and Dad was not about to change his story.

“Callate, Mario. Te van ha oír,” Mom whispered.

“¡Que me oiga! ¡No se va a dormir tan agusto despues de que me hecha a perder la noche!” he complained.

“¡Ha de estar con la oreja en la ventana!”

Alicia never spoke a word about that night with Mom. She simply got us home and retired to her apartment unit. Dad wanted the neighbors to hear and he was making himself the victim. We never did find out where he went that night, but he was not at the dance hall. Araceli and I knew he never stepped foot inside the place.

Before I became Luis’s girlfriend, the girls and I would walk around the labor camp in the afternoons to scope the boys out. It seemed like there was a rivalry between the kids from one labor camp and the others. One afternoon, the boys from our camp stole an old sofa from the middle camp. They crossed it through a hole in the hurricane fence, then sat on it and mocked the kids on the other side. When the boys from the other camp decided to come steal it back, our boys threw it over the fence and ran. These were younger kids who didn’t care about impressing the girls. They just wanted to cause trouble, but it was fun watching them misbehave.

The older boys would go to the weekly catholic mass that was held outside one of the apartment units every Wednesday evening at the middle camp. Everyone would get dressed up, girls in dresses, makeup and heels and boys in their slacks and dress shirts. The scent of perfumes and colognes would intermix in the air, intoxicating you from a distance. I only went

one time out of curiosity. I wasn't familiar with the prayers because my parents had been sending us to a Christian church since I was ten.

Whoever was in charge of the weekly mass had people set up rows of chairs across the lawns of the two apartment units. Those who showed up late had to stand behind everyone else. I don't remember what the service was about, I remember seeing the boys and girls checking each other out while the girls' mothers kept a close eye on their daughters. When it was time to put money in the collection plate, most everyone put change in or simply passed it on to the person next to them. The priest tried to keep an eye out as the collection plates went around. The boys in the back would try and make change for the bill they were giving and you could hear the giggling as they hid the collection plate.

In the middle of the old camp where we lived the last summer we went to California, there was an area with trees that gave a nice shade in the evenings. One day after work, the girls and I joined a group of boys and we all sat in a large circle, chatting. We were sitting close enough to hear each other, some boys lounging comfortably on the grass, others sitting Indian style, pulling blades of grass out as they listened or took turns talking. We were all teenagers, getting to know each other. Most of the boys didn't speak English. They were from Michoacan or Jalisco, Mexico. The only one who did was Pollo. I don't remember where he was from, but he dressed like a *cholo*, in white undershirts, Dickies pants, and black cloth moccasins. He was a dark, skinny boy, outgoing and funny. I never found out who his family was or where they worked, but he would come out and joke with us when he had a chance. That evening, in the circle, we started laughing and carrying on when a car came around the corner. "*Es Apá!*" I said aloud, warning my sisters.

As if on cue, without saying a word, everyone in the circle shifted their bodies in unison and made the circle wider than it was. We all started laughing when we realized what had just happened. I sensed the boys were afraid of my parents from the start and feared they'd get in trouble for talking to us. It's embarrassing to admit now, but months before we went to the camp that year, my cousin Flor had gotten married in Mexico. Mom told us how her boyfriend had to ask for permission to visit her at home, even if it was just to talk. If they went anywhere, they were to take a sibling as a chaperon. It was a custom males were supposed to abide by. Before I met Luis, there was another boy who'd hang around wanting to talk to me. His name was Fabrizio, which I thought was weird, but I decided I would give him a chance if he did something first. "*Necesitas pedirle permiso a mi papá,*" I told him. I hadn't told any of the other boys this before. I simply let them hang around. Fabrizio was nineteen or twenty and he must have been really interested in me because one evening he approached my dad and asked him if he had his permission to talk to me. It made Dad nervous, but he told Fabrizio he could. When Mom heard what I had done, she got after me. "*Eso nomas se hace cuando ya son novios y se piensan casar,*" she told me. I was fifteen and didn't even know Fabrizio's last name.

If the labor camp is still there and the trees haven't been cut down, our names may be in the same spot. Several couples drew hearts and engraved their names inside them that summer. Luis and I had a heart of our own. It was my last summer as a migrant. I wouldn't return to California until thirteen years later to visit family. I wouldn't be back in the French Camp/Stockton area until many years later, at the age of 36.



CHAPTER XIX

LIVING IN MANTECA

When we lived in Azevedo's house on Prescott Road, my siblings and I attended New Haven Elementary. It was a Kindergarten through 8th grade campus. Our bus driver was named Dee. All the bus drivers were women at that time and the buses were very different from the ones we rode in Texas. They were shiny, new and flat at the front. Dee arrived at the same time every morning, right after our favorite cartoons were over. Mom let us have a bowl of cereal as we sat on the floor watching The Beatles cartoon show. We'd easily squeeze in a half hour of shows before leaving for school. We didn't live far from campus, but Dee had to pick other kids up, so it took a while to get there.

Dee was a tall woman with long blonde hair. I really liked her. She was like a goddess, strong and loud in sunglasses. When she'd pick us up in the mornings, she would yell at the kids to behave. Then she'd exit the bus and wait for us to cross the street. She'd smile warmly and I was always happy to see her as she waved us onto the bus. "Good morning, kids." "Hi, Dee!"



Where Prescott road ended, there lived three brothers. Lex, Leigh, and Luther were always causing problems on the bus. They had messy hair and wore dark t-shirts and dirty jeans. Dee had to raise her voice at them constantly. She'd keep an eye on them through the rearview mirror that hung above her head. The brothers liked to pick on other kids. "Not on my bus!" Dee would shout at them, as she strained her neck to look at them through the mirror. "You boys stop that!" I would huddle closer to my sisters, hoping we wouldn't get picked on. New Haven Elementary was on Austen Road and right before we'd get there, Dee would pick up two sisters, Honeybee and Venus. Araceli said their parents were hippies, but I didn't know what that meant at the time. I just knew they had weird names and dressed funny.

Even though we arrived so late in the school year, the ladies in the school office were always happy to see us. "The Ledezma kids are here!" I heard one of them exclaim one year. I think it made Mom feel good even though she wasn't fluent in English. The secretaries would ask her questions, tell her who our teachers would be and have her fill out forms while we waited behind her. None of the information ever changed, but Mom would comply anyway. When it was lunchtime, they made an exception for us. We ate for free and didn't have to pay the twenty-

five cents for the milk carton either. I didn't learn until years later that we had free lunch because we were migrants and Mom couldn't afford the dollar a day for our milk, much less the cost of an entire meal for her four kids attending school.

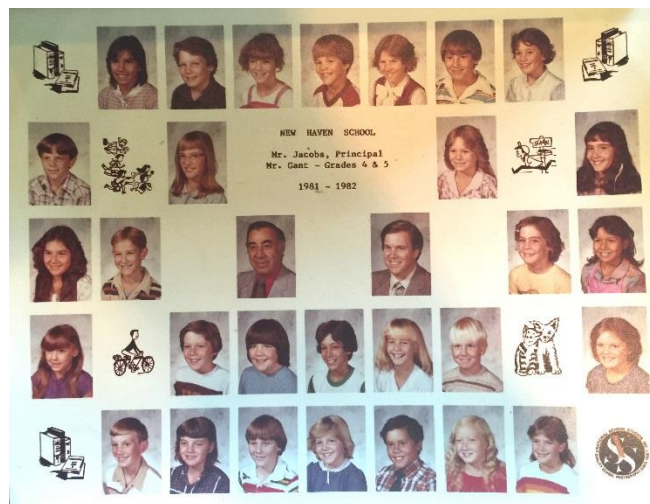


Mrs. Irwin, my kindergarten teacher, was a thin old lady with curly gray hair and glasses. I could see the blue veins in her hands when she'd come around to help us with our cursive. She would hold my hand as I practice writing the letters. Ms. Bingham, her aide, was tall, blonde and thick. She would hand out honey graham crackers and a pint of milk every day during our breaks. After our snack, Ms. Bingham would instruct us to pull our mats out for nap time. I didn't have a mat, so Mom packed a towel for me. This was my favorite part of the day.

The kids at New Haven were Anglo, Portuguese or Greek. We were the only Mexican-Americans on campus. Most everybody's parents worked in town or owned lands like Azevedo and my parents worked them. No one spoke Spanish. Mom used to say Araceli would come home in tears when she started kindergarten because she didn't know what the teacher was saying. Bhertha and the rest of us had it a bit easier because we learned English from Araceli and

from watching cartoons. In my 1976 kindergarten class picture, I am standing in a sea of blond heads. I look very serious in the picture, almost like I knew I was out of place. Kari Jacobi, one of the sweetest girls in class is smiling ear to ear, her hair shining like some of the other girls' in the picture. My hair was thick and dark and had been cut at home.

As we went from one grade level to another, arriving late became more difficult for me. I remember having to stand in front of the class, looking for a place to sit, not knowing if the desk was taken or not. Most of my teachers would introduce me to the class. Some kids knew who I was, others didn't. I was always relieved to recognize a face or two. My first day in Mr. Gant's class, I saw Rudy smiling back at me. He knew me from previous years. We were now in fourth grade.



One day, Mr. Gant told us to get out our scratch paper. We were going to work some math problems out. I was sitting next to Rudy when I saw him lift his desk top. He looked at me, smiling his big-toothed smile and whispered, "I need help. My scratchy won't scratch." I thought it was the funniest thing I ever heard. He kept picking his desk top up during class, hiding behind

it and repeating it over and over. I was in tears from trying to disguise my laughter. It was the silliest thing, but my giggles had gotten the best of me and Rudy knew it.

My best friend at New Haven Elementary was Elizabeth Ann Brownlee. We were the oddest pair. She was very light-skinned and I wasn't. You could see her veins too. Like the other girls in school, Elizabeth had blonde hair. Hers was almost waist-length though. She had a shy smile and a long forehead. During recess, we would play hopscotch or tetherball. We avoided the dodge ball courts to keep from getting hurt. When teachers forced us to play it for PE, we had to endure the hits from boys. We could never match their strength. I hated to see them smile at me as they ran up to me and threw the ball hard, attempting to eliminate me if we didn't catch it. I always flinched in fear and was one of the first to walk off the court with tiny square prints on my arms or legs. I never hated a red ball so much.

Sixth grade was my last year at New Haven. Seventh grade was spent in Texas and we returned to California in 1984 when I was thirteen years old.

CHAPTER XX

REVISITING OUR OLD HOUSE

In the spring of 2007, when my husband, a truck driver, called in for dispatch, he told me there was a trip to Rio Vista, California. He had not taken a load out West before. Most of his runs were eastbound or to the Midwest. I quickly grabbed his road atlas and looked Rio Vista up on the map. “Yes! Yes! Get it!” I told him. I had accompanied him on trips before and decided I would go on this one too. This was before he owned a GPS system, so I could serve as his guide.



After my husband delivered the load in Rio Vista, which was north of Manteca, we drove back down to Lodi and parked at a truck stop. I tried calling old family friends but couldn't get a hold of any of them. The operator wouldn't give me the information I needed. “All I can do is dial them for you and if they say they know you, I can give you their number,” she said. I felt heartbroken. We couldn't get through. I was antsy. I didn't want to be wasting time at a truck

stop. I begged Juan to drive down to Stockton and Manteca. After some hesitation, he gave in. We asked if we could leave the flatbed at the truck stop and were told we couldn't. Truckers weren't allowed to leave trailers behind after the 9/11 terrorist attack. Businesses were wary of everyone. My husband was tired and didn't really want to go. "*No conozco aqui y vamos a jalar la trailer por calles que no conozco.*" He was right. It was a hassle. He gave in when he saw it meant a lot to me.

The short trip from Lodi to Stockton and Manteca was something else. I talked all the way there, pointing areas out to him where we had been or where I remembered friends used to live. He couldn't relate or share in my excitement. These places didn't have the sentimental value they did with me. I knew he was more worried about going down a road he wasn't supposed to be on with an 18 wheeler. I was so overwhelmed when we were driving down Austen road, getting closer and closer to the house on Prescott Road. Although there were many disturbing memories from living there, I was concentrating on the positive ones, like the time Mom taught me how make flour tortillas. I was around ten years old and could barely reach over the stove. She made me flip them with my bare fingers as they cooked on the *comal*. She said the first ones I spread out with the rolling pin looked like states and *huaraches*, but she let me cook them like that anyway.

The sun was beginning to set as we pulled up to the wood frame house. I could hardly believe my eyes. It was the same one. It just seemed so small now. There was nice green landscaping where before all we had were patches of grass, mostly dirt, and a pomegranate and walnut tree. Juan didn't want to get down. "*Ve tú,*" he said. "*Aquí te espero.*"



The house still belonged to Azevedo. He was renting it out to a school teacher. She arrived from the store to find an 18 wheeler parked next to her home. I quickly approached the fence and introduced myself.

“Hi. I know this looks strange, but I used to live in this house as a child and came to see if it was still here. My name is Rosa and that’s my husband in the truck.”

“I’m sorry, but you’ll understand that this is scary for me,” she said.

“I was burglarized not too long ago,” she continued.

“I completely understand. I didn’t mean to scare you. It’s just that my husband got a trip to this area and I tagged along with the hope of revisiting. We came all the way from Texas. You don’t have to let me in. It’s weird. I know.”

She relented.

“Go ahead and come inside the gate. You sure you’re not going to hurt me?” She looked tremulous.

“No. Of course not,” I reassured her. “Thank you so much. You have no idea what this means to me,” I said.

I couldn’t believe I was there, standing on the grounds I used to play in as a child, where I used to make mud pies and play with pieces of wood and old batteries of all sizes, pretending they were people.

“My dad used to work for Azevedo many years ago. We stopped living here when I was thirteen.”

“Azevedo still owns the house,” she said as she unlocked the front door. I offered to help her with the grocery bags but she insisted she had it under control.

“I can’t believe how small the house looks now,” I told her. “It wasn’t this nice either.”

“I don’t know what it looked like when you lived here; I know it was remodeled. I’ve only been here the last two years,” she added.

“I recently divorced. My husband was abusive and Azevedo agreed to let me rent the house from him. He comes around once in a while to make sure I’m ok,” she added.

“I’m sorry you went through that. The house looks so new now. You’ve decorated it really nice too. Very homey.”

“Thank you. Would you like to see the rooms?”

“Yes. May I?”

We walked from room to room. All the original walls were still up, but light colored paint and wall to wall carpet made it look like new. She had nice furniture too, where before all we had were a mismatched sofa, a chair and a kitchen table with vinyl covered chairs.

“This used to be my room,” I told her as she opened a third door.

“My oldest sister, Araceli, had the front room and my parents had the room off the kitchen.”

“Well, the kitchen has new cabinets.”

“Yes. I noticed. It’s really nice. There was a sort of china cabinet with glass doors on this wall,” I pointed out.

“Mom used to sit on a sofa by this window and do needlework. I can’t get over how small the living room is.”

“You’re welcome to take pictures.” She noticed I had a camera in my hands.

“Just promise me you won’t come back and break in,” she laughed nervously.

“We won’t. I promise.”

I wasn’t offended by her words. I could see why she’d be scared. She seemed like a nice lady who had been through a lot already. We chatted as we made our way through the house. I mentioned how my siblings and I all attended New Haven Elementary. She knew what campus it was but said she taught at another elementary school.

I must have sounded silly, repeating how amazed I was at the size of the house. I realized after I left that I was expecting to see it through a child’s eyes. I snapped a picture of each bedroom and the living room but forgot to take a picture of the kitchen. She distracted me with questions of her own.

“Do you know what’s under this back room?” she asked as she opened the door to the washroom.

“When I go outside, I can see there’s a room down there. The sunlight hits it through an opening on the side of the house, but I can’t make out what’s down there.”

Excited to be able answer her I said “Yes! I do know. It’s a cellar.”

“How do we enter it?” she inquired.

“There was a door on the floor in this back room. This used to be a porch. The door opened this way,” I showed her “and stairs led down to it. There was a large, deep sink on this wall where my mom would wash our clothes,” I explained.

We were standing in the middle of the remodeled washroom.

“The door to the cellar is right underneath your washer and dryer. It looks like Azevedo had the door covered with new flooring too. No wonder you can’t tell how to get down there,” I said.

“Thank you for solving the mystery for me. I always wondered what that room was.”

“We used to go down there to play sometimes. Mom would store things too, like fruits she canned on her own. I wonder if there’s still things of ours down there,” I told her.

Before I left that evening, I wrote a short note to Azevedo, telling him who I was and that I had paid a visit to the house.

“I feel like we lived in the poor version,” I told the school teacher.

“It’s the same house, just looks so different now.”

The school teacher promised to deliver my note to Azevedo.

“Does he still live in the same house?” I asked her.

“Yes. Down the street. But he’s not in the country right now. He’s been gone a couple of weeks, somewhere in Hungary, hunting.”

“You know, my mom told us he wanted to adopt one of my sisters. He wanted Mom and Dad to give her to him and his wife Doris,” I shared with her.

“Really?” she couldn’t believe it.

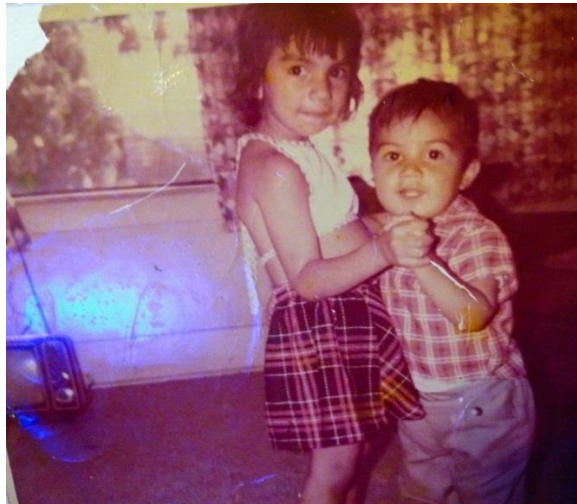
“Yes,” I laughed.

“When my sister found out, she told my mom ‘you should’ve given me away! I would’ve been banking!’” We both laughed.

With a grateful heart, I thanked her for allowing me to visit and for letting me take pictures. “You’re welcome. I’m going to share your visit with my students tomorrow,” she said, sounding more relaxed. “You’re going to be the topic of the day,” she smiled. I walked down the three short steps outside her front door and didn’t have the heart to look back. When I entered the cab of the truck, almost an hour after we arrived, Juan was slouched in the driver seat, half asleep. He looked tired and worn.

“You ready?” he asked.

“Yes, I’m ready.”



CHAPTER XXI

BACK IN MEXICO

Mom always complained that no one knew how hard we worked to make money. “*Nadie sabe la chinga que llevamos,*” she would say. No one meaning Dad’s family back in Mexico. Every year without fail, Dad would make the trip as soon as we returned to Texas to go see his family in Nuevo León.

In a picture I have, I’m standing between my grandparents at the entrance gate to their home. It was one of the few I could salvage from Mom’s old family albums. Welita and I were squinting. The rays of the sun bounced off the ground and we were caught in the glare. My grandpa always wore dark sunglasses, so I couldn’t tell if the sunshine bothered him like it did us. He only had one eye. “*Tu abuelo estaba protejiendo a una mujer en la plaza cuando se habrio una balacera.*” Dad told us Welito lost his eye during a gunfight in a plaza when Welito was 31 and an appointed police officer. He said a bullet grazed Welito’s face, taking the eye with it. According to Dad, Welito was attempting to shield a woman who was holding her child when she was caught in the crossfire. “*Ay, hombres! Me pegaron!*” he said the woman yelled. A bullet hit her child’s shoulder and entered the woman as well. I never understood why Grandpa spent years in jail if he was protecting somebody. Mom said Dad changed the story to make Welito a hero. She called him *viejo tuerto* every chance she got. “*Cómo no platican cuando llegaron los soldados y tu mamá andaba cortando la amapola,*” She tried ruining Dad’s story. She told us of the time my grandma and everyone at the ranch rushed to cut down illegal poppy plants they

were secretly growing to produce opium. Someone sent word that federal soldiers were headed to the ranch and everyone scrambled to clear the fields. Dad never clarified that story.

On our way to the ranch, we listened to the mesquite trees as they scratched the sides of the truck. Once we got off the main roads from Tamaulipas to Nuevo León, the dirt roads leading to the ranch were narrow and could barely accommodate one vehicle. Dad didn't care about the scratches but it bothered the hell out of Mom.

"El pinche rancho tiene que verse todo el tiempo," she'd complain.

"Ah. Pero ay va el hombre a la chichi," she'd ridicule Dad.

I think Dad would tune her out. I could tell he was anxious to arrive and see his parents. At Dad's insistence, Mom took a picture of him one day on our way to Welita's. He stopped the truck and stood in front of it, making sure his gold rings and thick bracelet were showing. In the picture, you can see the road has been newly paved with *caliche*. It was all the talk in those early days because it made the trip easier and vehicles wouldn't get stuck when it rained. The thick brush behind Dad goes as far as the eyes can see.



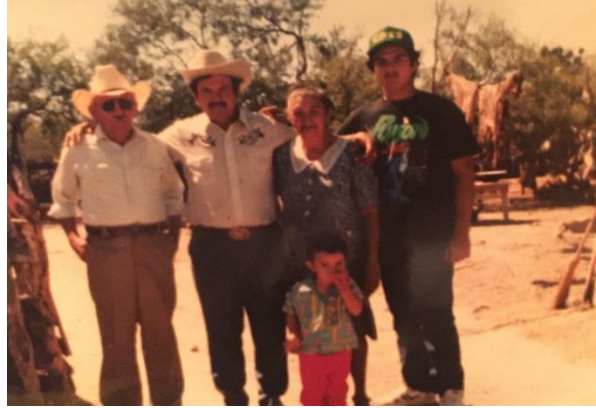
As for us kids riding in the back, the layers of blankets Mom spread out for us in a makeshift bed did not cushion the ride. After the first hour, the blankets and pillows were tangled

up, hot, dusty and uncomfortable. We'd anxiously jump out of the back and stretch any chance we got, holding the camper's lid for each other as we climbed out. The trip usually lasted three and half hours so we needed a break once in a while, especially to pee in the brush.

"¡No apachurren el pan!" Mom would yell through the cab window. The loaves of bread always arrived at Welita's house half squashed. Then we'd get to the ranch, our grandparents trotting out to meet us.

"¡Mijo! ¡Es Mario y Lucy! ¡Ya llegaron de California!"

Welita's hands would immediately go to her cheeks as she walked up to the truck, still in disbelief. They never knew we were coming until the pickup truck entered the clearing around their property. Welita had a strange way of knowing when people were coming to visit. I remember seeing her stand in the doorway to her kitchen and say *"Alli viene el lechero."* We could hear a vehicle approaching in the distance but we couldn't see it because of the heavy brush. Sure enough, minutes later, the old milkman's truck would enter the clearing. He not only picked up milk to sell to others, he'd also carry news from ranch to ranch or deliver goods like batteries for radios, sugar, lard, Welita's cigarettes and other miscellaneous things for those who couldn't make it out to the town stores. The sound of his truck was familiar to Welita, but ours wasn't, since we wouldn't be seen for months at a time.



Every weekday, Welita would tune in to her *novelas* on her faded brown transistor radio. The narrator would dramatize the scenes and keep Welita glued for a good half hour or more. We had to be very quiet when it was time for the *novela*. No one dared ask her for something during that time.

The days at the ranch were hot and after a day full of work or play, we'd fall asleep from exhaustion. There was no running water or electricity at the ranch. Falling asleep was easy if you were tired, but you had to fend off mosquitos and sleep in light clothing to survive the heat. The beds were limited, so some of us had to sleep on the floor. Welita and Welito always slept in the last room of the main house. I could hear them whispering sometimes, talking about things needing to get done the following day. Their iron wrought bed would creak as they made themselves comfortable. We'd all eventually doze off and in the early morning hours start feeling a chill from the new day.

CHAPTER XXII

FAMILY, MONEY AND DISPUTES

My *tio* Abel lived a short distance from Welita's house and us kids would make our way there several times during the day to play with our cousins. Besides the sound of farm animals, it was quiet at the ranch, a tranquility that allowed us to hear our own footsteps as we walked from house to house. If we weren't careful, we'd get mesquite thorns stuck to the bottom of our shoes and the pain would bother us for days. My *tia* Sylvia would come to her door when she'd hear someone approaching. Wiping her hands on her apron she'd ask "*¿Que paso? ¿Los mandaron?*" She always asked if there was a reason for our coming over. She never understood when we'd say we were bored and just wanted to come hang out. It wouldn't be long before we'd get bored at their house and head back to Welita's again. This is how we passed most days.

Our cousins were always curious to hear how we lived in the United States. They'd ask a lot of questions in a sing-song accent they all had. We'd pick it up too if we weren't careful. Once in a while, they would encourage us to go hiking to the nearest *cerro* by *la presa nueva*. Mom said the new waterhole had been excavated with Dad's funds. It quickly became a piece of land his brothers and sisters would fight over for many years, even after my grandparents' death. Mom always said Dad was the one who invested to have it dug up and he was always getting the short end of the stick when it came to money and investments at the ranch.

Dad set up an outdoor movie theatre one year. At his insistence, Mom sewed white bedsheets together to use as a screen and the men tied them up against the side of Welita's house.

Dad purchased a used projector and practiced threading the film through it several times before we left to the ranch. It got jammed a couple of times and we would crowd around him, trying to figure out how to get it running again. It made a clicking noise as the black and white film reels ran, and everyone had to be very quiet in order to hear. I don't remember what kind of movies they were but the novelty of seeing them at the ranch was what everyone was excited about. Most everyone there had never been inside a movie theater. Mom was upset because Dad invested in a gas-powered generator to get it all going. The generator was loud so the speaker he bought for sound was pretty useless.

When word got out that we were having a movie night, people from different ranches came to Welita's house. They brought their own homemade benches to sit on. Dad only had two movies with him and he played them both several nights in a row, to the same audience. He thought he could make money if people paid a few pesos to attend. He figured they'd be excited to have a 'theatre' near them. He was mistaken. Welito was not about to charge anyone. Mom said he enjoyed boasting that his son was living and working in the United States and this was something his son could afford to bring to Mexico. Mom was upset. She constantly reminded dad he was throwing away good money.

"A tu papá se le llena la boca con decir 'mijo viene del otro lado'," she'd complain.

"Si supiera la chinga que llevamos para que metas todo esto al rancho."

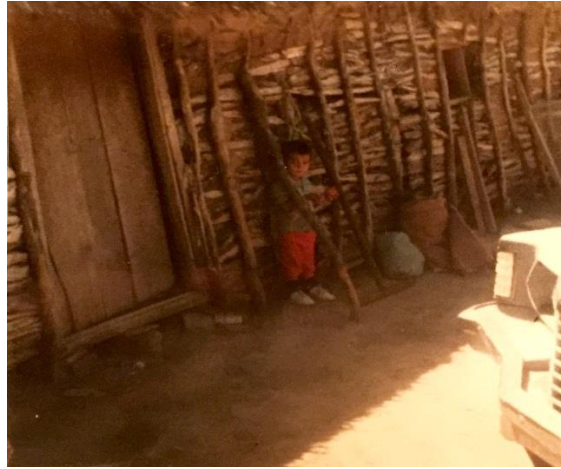
After that week of movie nights, the projector was put away somewhere in Welita's house and we never saw it again. Mom suspected Welito sold it to make a buck. Dad wasn't about to ask him, much less tell Welito to give him the money.

My mother was convinced Dad's family was cheating him. The animals he brought to the ranch, for instance, "*vacas, cabras, y gallinas*" Dad purchased for himself ended up dying, according to my grandparents, Mom said. "*Todos salieron con cabras y hasta las nueras con gallinas,*" she claimed. Mom refused to believe what they told my dad, that all his animals had died. Mom said my uncles and grandpa were quick to brand the newborn animals before Dad went to visit, so they could say they were born from their share and not his. Mom would mourn every investment dad made at the ranch for many years. She still does.

Welito always had lots of goats and sheep in the corrals surrounding the main house. It took me a couple of days after we arrived to get used to life there and then I would be walking around barefoot, not caring about the mesquite thorns or the chicken poop on the ground. Welita's chickens roamed freely but never came close to us unless we threw kernels for them to eat. We heard the bleating of goats all day long. If my uncles or the shepherds Welito hired took them out to graze in the brush, the faint sound of bells would be heard in the distance. My dad was six years old when he first went to work as a shepherd. He told us Welito went looking for him one day and gave him a bag of hard candy balls. It was his birthday and he was far from home in the brush. Mom chimed in "*Si, tu papá los mandaba a trabajar ajeno y el se quedaba a dormir con la vieja. Tu mamá nunca fue madre para ustedes.*" Perhaps my mom had good reason to hate them, but sometimes I think she went too far. She was bitter and hurting.

My grandparents' house was made of mud and mesquite branches. It had a thatch roof supported by thick wooden beams. The sleeping area had a concrete floor that always had a thin film of dirt on it. It could never stay clean and was separate from the kitchen. The kitchen didn't have a concrete floor. Welita sprinkled water on the hard-packed dirt floor every morning and

afternoon to settle the dust. Dad said the kitchens in the ranches were always built separate in case a fire broke out, which happened once.



According to Dad, my tia Rosy was a baby and asleep in a basket that hung from the kitchen rafters. He confessed he and another brother started the fire accidentally when he was around eight years old. He got so scared he ran into the monte and hid for days until Welita convinced him to come out. He said he could hear her calling out to him “*¡Regresa, Mario! ¡No te voy a pegar!*” He was sleeping in mesquite trees but keeping an eye on the house.

A thatch-covered corridor connected the kitchen with the sleeping quarters so if a fire broke out, all roofs would still be lost. The immediate property was surrounded by a corral that was very primitive looking but very sturdy. As kids we’d stick clothes, soda cans and trash between the mesquite limbs that formed it. It was easier than putting them in the right place where Welita could burn them later. If we needed to relieve ourselves, we’d climb over the corral and search for an inconspicuous spot in the brush and squat. We always made sure someone heard us holler “*¡Voy pa fuera!*” as we took off. We didn’t want to run the risk of someone running into us from behind as we were squatting. When we’d return, we’d place the roll of toilet

paper back on the wall behind the main house, so it'd be easy to grab again for the next outing. I always begged someone to come with me so I wouldn't get lost in the monte.

Welita had clotheslines that hung from one mesquite tree to another in the far end of the property, by the entrance. When the lines got too heavy, she'd use a tree limb to hold them up. The clotheslines weren't always used to hang the clean wash. Sometimes they had goatskins drying on them. Welito always killed a goat when Dad paid a visit. The adults always looked forward to eating *cabrito* and *guisado de sangre*, all of them except us kids. We preferred our bologna sandwiches and canned food.



Welita never understood what we liked about it. Mom knew we wouldn't eat anything else except farm eggs, so she always went prepared with groceries. She would buy extra items like cinnamon rolls knowing my uncle Beto, who was still a child when she married my dad, liked them. She began taking bottled water when she realized I was getting sick from the water Welita hauled in aluminum pails from the nearest water hole. Grandma made three consecutive

trips in the morning to the *presa*, bringing enough water to last the day. She was very strong and carried two buckets, balancing them on a branch that rested across her shoulders.

I began making several trips to the monte when the water started making me sick. Mom was afraid I would get dehydrated and die. My grandparents relied on rainwater but my grandfather never helped Welita carry it. She walked briskly to and from, hunched to keep the water from spilling on the way back. When we were younger, we'd sometimes walk alongside her and keep her company. She never broke her stride. Sometimes she'd hold a cigarette between her dark purple lips, never dropping it when she spoke. She'd stop halfway on the trail to take a few puffs before reaching the house and sometimes use the time to ask us about living in the U.S. When we weren't shy, we'd ask her questions about the ranch too. Welita felt offended when Mom began taking bottled water.

"Nosotros nunca nos hemos enfermado," she told my mom.

I never complained about its taste or murky color. The *jarrones* of clay they kept it in made the water cool. I still sneaked a drink when Mom wasn't looking until someone told me it had worms that were making me ill.

On one of our visits, an old lady named Chana happened to be at the ranch. She had been a nanny to some of dad's cousins for many years. Mom said she was a *muchacha vieja*. Chana never married and everyone thought she was still a virgin. She was old, thin and wrinkly with a childish innocence about her. For some reason she was put in charge of me when I was sick with diarrhea for a whole week. She'd walk with me to the *monte* and tell me to squat wherever I felt comfortable. She carried the roll of toilet paper for me. I must've been nine or ten years old. I felt so sick and kept going, wanting to poop. Chana would talk to me while I did my business.

“Pujele, hija. No se hace nada,” she’d encourage me as she stood watch. She was worried about me as much as Mom was. When we got back from the outing, she told everyone. *“Hice aguado aguado la niña.”* It was then that Mom decided they had to take me to town and look for a doctor. The ride through the *monte* would take another three hours and it irked Mom that my grandparents would want to go along, just for the ride.

CHAPTER XXIII

CURIOSITY

We didn't take baths often when we went to the ranch. Taking a bath meant hauling the water ourselves and making sure we had enough to rinse. There was no splashing and wasting time during a bath. Mom always made fun of Dad's younger brothers, saying they would bathe with half a bucket of water and still have some left over. She said they only wet behind their ears. My dad's youngest sister Alma insisted I bathe with her one day. She must have been in her mid-twenties at the time.

"Rosita. Vamos a bañarnos."

She carried the water for me and filled several buckets. I was 11 or 12. We went into the old kitchen that was located at a distance from the other houses. Once there, I stood inside the small room, moving my hands through the rays of light coming in through the walls. My *tia* undressed and climbed into the round tub. I stood still. I didn't want to bathe anymore. She told me to hurry or there wouldn't be any water left. She was already washing with soap when I climbed in. I remember flinching and wishing I could get through it quickly. I grabbed one of the pewter cups, filled it with water and poured it over my head. I shivered and felt my skin contract. I didn't want to look up.

My aunt was naked and her large, dark brown nipples were staring me in the face. I got the soap, washed where I could and rinsed in a hurry. My hair felt thick and stiff afterwards,

from the Zest soap they used. I noticed my aunt never took her eyes off of me. She asked lots of questions about life across the border while we got dressed. I pretended to care but I really wanted to be done, dress and leave. When we came back to the main house, I heard her tell everyone how my nipples were beginning to grow. I couldn't believe she had told them. I didn't like her very much after that. Maybe Mom was right, and they did think we were different because we were born in the United States.

CHAPTER XXIV

WITCHCRAFT AND ENVY

I think mom disliked going to the ranch because she never got the rest she needed. Dad would haul us off as soon as we unloaded everything from our return to Texas. Mom barely had a chance to put her house in order before going to the ranch to do chores for Welita. Welita expected mom to be in the kitchen with her very early in the morning. Mom hated having to wake up at four or five to start making tortillas and meals for the men. They always sat down to eat before anyone else did. “*¡Lola! La sal!*” Welito would yell from the table. Mom hated how he treated Welita. The salt dispenser could be sitting right in front of him and he demanded Welita hand it to him. “*¡Ama! Mas té!*” My uncles would holler too. They were learning from Welito. Dad had nine brothers and sisters and Welita still had little ones when my parents were newly married. She was pregnant with her last child, my youngest uncle Fermin, at the same time Mom was pregnant with Araceli, her first child.

There were many afternoons when we’d sit under the thatch corridor, shelling corn. Welita would empty large sacks of dry corncobs on a table in the center of the *corredor* and we’d begin scraping one cob against another. The chickens would come near and peck at whatever fell to the floor. There was a *molino* attached to the edge of the table and Welita would fill it with kernels and water. She’d turn the handle until she became tired then someone else would take a turn. As they worked the grinder, the *masa* would spill out through the side and Welita would gather it and take it to the kitchen. She used a large *metate* to finish preparing it. The flat stone

sat next to her chimney and she and Mom would hand spread the tortillas and cook them on the dark *comal* atop the firewood. We'd stand around waiting to be given a tortilla with melted lard on it. Mom would pinch the top to make little holes that would hold the lard in place. We'd sprinkle salt, roll them up and eat in a hurry. Welita would stoke the fire and add more pieces of mesquite to keep it going. She lit her cigarettes up with the fire as she cooked. The women cooked for a lot of us so the fire was never put out.

I have fond memories of that kitchen but I know Mom doesn't.

"Pinches brujas. Alla estan secretiándose en la chimenea," she would say.

Mom didn't trust my aunts or Welita when they were alone in the kitchen. We could hear them whispering by the fire and immediately hush when someone entered the room. Mom had her reasons for not trusting them, and some of them had to do with knowing they practiced *brujeria*. Rumor had it my youngest aunt Alma got married after Welita cut strands of her hair while Alma slept. Sometime during the night, she did witchcraft with. They say my aunt woke up and began crying when she saw herself in the mirror. When she asked what had happened, everyone kept quiet and acted surprised. Alma's boyfriend Jorge had already broken up with her and suddenly reappeared months later, asking for her hand in marriage. Mom said Welita miscalculated the *embrujo* because Jorge became an extremely jealous husband who didn't let Alma out of his sight.

Mom wasn't completely off in her suspicions and feelings towards Dad's family. I started realizing there was envy between them and us when we went to the ranch for my uncle Cesar's wedding and Araceli's dress was ruined. Cesar was forty and his bride was eighteen. My *tia* Noelia (who was married to another uncle) was doing the women's hair in the sleeping quarters

of Welita's house. Araceli walked in for something, already wearing her lilac colored dress for the party. When she walked out a few minutes later, she noticed an oil handprint on the skirt of the dress Mom had made her for. On the verge of tears, she went to my mom and showed her. "No te apures," Mom tried to calm her down. "Ponte el otro." Mom had packed an extra dress for her and didn't let my aunts and cousins have the satisfaction of thinking they had ruined the day. Everyone knew my *tia* Noelia was the only one handling oils and hairsprays that day but no one confronted her about the stain.

The days at the ranch didn't end until close to midnight for everyone. When the grownups were in a good mood, we would gather in the kitchen and play *chalupa*. The two kerosene lamps on the table were the only source of light, besides the fire dwindling in the chimney that illuminated the room. Welita and Mom would make *té de limón* and we would eat *gorditas de azúcar* to calm our late night hunger.

I was never afraid of Welito's missing eye during the day. His dark sunglasses hid it from us, but at night, when he took them off, I tried not to stare. I could never tell if he was looking at me or past me when we sat in the dark. Every time he spoke, his eyebrows would move up and down and he looked angry. There were times I thought he was crying because he'd pull his handkerchief out and wipe the corner of his empty eye socket. His skin always looked shiny and taut across the deep hole. It looked a bit creepy. I often wondered if it hurt him.

Mom will never admit it, but I knew she was slowly turning us against Dad's family. We used to go to the ranch several times during the year but as time passed and we grew older, the trips to Mexico became less frequent. Mom decided early on that she no longer wanted to visit our grandparents. She and Dad would argue about it all the time. If we dared show a slight interest in going with Dad, she'd start giving us a guilt trip.

“Tu abuela nunca me quiso. Ha ustedes no los quieren, quieren mas a los otros nietos.”

Mom said Welita didn't love us as much as she loved her other grandchildren and that she doubted if we were good girls because we were born in the U.S. and being raised across the border. Mom had many stories for us. She'd tell us how Dad's family didn't like her because she wasn't from their ranch. *“Sabra Dios de donde saco Mario a Lucy,”* she claims Welita said once. She said Welita hinted that perhaps Dad had picked her up at a bar. She relived every moment of hatred between my grandparents and herself and eventually we began to take sides. The few times I argued with Dad, I used Mom's words verbatim. I had become her puppet.

My parents divorced almost ten years ago and Mom told Dad's relatives that they didn't lose just one family member (her) with the divorce, but thirteen. She had decided for us all, her grandchildren included, that we were no longer their family. We had to choose.

Even though mom stopped going to the ranch many years before their divorce, Dad never stopped his yearly treks. I know it was hard for him to go alone, but even if I had wanted to go, I was too afraid to go against my mother's wishes. My dad would pace back and forth when he was preparing to leave. He'd walk to his truck and back to the house like he forgot to load something but couldn't remember what. I imagine he made excuses to my grandparents about why we didn't go anymore. I doubt he told them the truth. Dad and I were alike in that sense. We both hated to disappoint. *“Tu abuela los quiere ver,”* my dad would plead. *“No le hagan caso a tu mamá. Está loca.”*

Part of me wanted to go but I was afraid of going against my mother. As a middle child for many years, I felt burdened. I wasn't old enough for some things, and I wasn't a kid anymore. I wanted to keep our family together and it was a self-imposed cross I carried for many years.

Jim, my first writing mentor, once told me: “You were the only one with a heart for that drudgery.” He knew how much I cared for everyone and how it hurt me to see my parents fight.

When I was growing up, I felt picked on and ridiculed. It hurt to hear my mom call me Dad’s *consentida*, his favorite. Even my brothers and sisters would echo her sentiment when they were mad at me. I believed Mom hated that I looked like Dad and his side of the family. When she was mad at Dad, she’d mimick Welita and say with false enthusiasm: “*¡Mija Rosita! ¡Igualita a Mario!*” It hurt to hear my mom pick on me too. Dad always thought she was closer to Araceli than any of us.



Eventually, Dad told Mom that neither she nor anyone else could keep him from going to the ranch. Mom said she didn’t care. “*Yo descanso cuando se va tu papá,*” she claimed. I didn’t believe her. I think she spent most of her time worrying about how much he was spending and if he’d bring the family pickup truck back in one piece. For me, going to the ranch was always an

adventure, but after a week or two there, I too looked forward to returning to a house with indoor plumbing and hot showers.

CHAPTER XXV

BACK IN CALIFORNIA

Dad purchased two goats when we lived in the house Azevedo provided for us. He taught Bherta, Mayin and me how to milk them because he wanted freshly squeezed milk in the morning. Mom always said Dad could never leave the ranch behind, even thousands of miles away in California. I was eight years old at the time. We had to be careful or he'd get mad if we spilled milk on the ground. The goats were smelly but I enjoyed milking them once I got the hang of it. Bherta and Mayin did too. Araceli wasn't one to deal with animals.



My brother was a few years younger than me but he thought it was fun to grab the goats by the horns. He'd begin to panic once he realized they could easily head-butt him IF he let go. In a Polaroid picture my mom has of him, he's smiling and holding on to one.



The house in Manteca seemed huge. It was wood frame with a spacious living room, kitchen, three bedrooms, one bath, a front and back porch. It sat on an acre of land surrounded by orchards of pecan trees. There was a fig tree right outside the back door which mom would pick from to make preserves. She enjoyed canning the fruits and vegetables that Dad brought from Azevedo's lands and that she could take back home to Texas. Figs were one of her favorite fruits and she was glad we had a tree of our own.

Some mornings, Dad would slip away to the makeshift corral he built for the goats and milk them. He never hesitated to take gulps from the bucket as soon as he was done, the foam covering his black mustache. He'd wipe it off with the back of his hand, sigh deeply.

"Ah. Que rica leche. Pruébala, Rocio," he'd say, urging me to try it.

"Wacala, Apá. Sabe feo."

Mom didn't like that he did that. She knew it was best to boil it before drinking.

“*Te vas a enfermar, Mario. Te va dar una fiebre que no te la vas a quitar,*” she warned, but Dad ignored her.

Between the barn and the house, there was a large open area where my parents would park our cars and where we would play ball. In the middle of summer, the wind would pick up and dust tornadoes would dance around the lot. Dad would tell us it was the devil and if we didn't behave, he would come after us. Our house was out in the country, a couple of miles away from Azevedo's pink and white brick home. His house had beautiful rose bushes framing the entire front lawn. His vicious looking black dogs protected the entryway to the front door. Dad would fuel up the company truck at the pumps next to Azevedo's house. Other workers would be fixing tractors in the sheds or moving machinery around. *Los Modesto* were a group of brothers who lived across the street from Azevedo in one of the many bunkers he had for male workers. They were from Mexico and were invited to our parties and the parties the Bustamantes had. Two of the men played instruments, accordion and guitar, and they sang. Araceli and Bustamante's daughter *La Prieta* had a crush on Israel, the younger of the Modestos. When he'd sit in our living room, strumming his guitar, my sister and *La Prieta* would sit together, giggling and whispering. They made it obvious.



CHAPTER XXVI

DAD'S TRICKS

I didn't understand what it meant to be a migrant until I was a teenager. I thought it referred only to people who worked in the fields and that my siblings and I were being categorized wrongly since my parents were the only ones who did that when we lived with Azevedo. Dad would irrigate while Mom worked with *cuadrillas* cleaning fields before going to work the night shift at the tomato packing sheds. Sometimes she'd be on the machines out in the middle of the fields, sorting tomatoes as they came by on conveyor belts. We would work occasionally in Texas, picking citrus and onions with my parents, before we started going to the labor camps. Dad said I wasn't a lot of help when I was little, that I spent most of the time fending ants off. "*Tenias una suerte. Vivías parándote en los hormigueros.*"

We were still very young when Dad would take us during the summer months to help him in Azevedo's lands. Bherta, Mayin and I would help him collect the aluminum or plastic irrigation pipes he had irrigating the crops. He'd tell us to play races. "*A ver? Quien es la más chingona? Rosy o Bherta?*" He'd say. Bherta and I would take off running, jumping ditches, rushing to grab as many pipes as we could while he sat in Azevedo's company truck and watched us. We'd get muddy if the pipes were still wet and if we weren't careful, they would pinch our skin as we gathered them in our skinny arms. Some days, we would grab as many pipes as we could from his pickup truck and run to throw one in each row so Dad could get the water running through them. If Dad was nursing a hangover, he'd tell us to get them going too.

My hands could barely cover the opening to the pipe but I still did my best, dipping the pipes into the ditch water twice to create suction at the top end before placing the pipe down to let the water run into the row of crops. The days I managed to beat Bherta at races, she would get furious with everyone. I thought she would cry from the anger. “*Ejele, ganó Rosy,*” Dad would tease her. Afterwards, he would take us to a store and buy a huge round lollipop called Big Mouths for each one of us. We rode back home quietly, saliva dripping from the corners of our mouths.



During those summer months in California, Dad would take us to work with him so we wouldn't be alone at home because Mom was working too. Sometimes he'd take us to *el dompe*, a dumping ground that Mom didn't like because it smelled awful, was dirty of course, but full of treasures as far as we were concerned. You never knew what you would find. Dad let us scavenge through the mess. I found a music box one day. Its lid was missing but it still worked. I wound it up and I could see all the little contraptions taking turns moving to create a melody. It played Beethoven's *Fur Elise*. Of course I didn't learn this until I was older. Some sounds, like scents, just stay with you. I was amazed at how those tiny little bumps that looked like braille

produced such a beautiful sound. When I'd listen to it at home, I felt grown up and sophisticated. On a trip to England a few years ago for a graduate study abroad class, I found a music box with the same melody for sale in a souvenir shop. I purchased it without hesitation. It is one of my prized possessions.

On another visit to *el dompe*, we found a large collection of LP records. Dad let us take them home. The covers were a little dirty and beat up but the records played like new. This was in the late 70s and the music ranged back to the 50s, Dad said. We didn't appreciate the music that much but we were happy to have found such a big treasure. Mom called it junk. "*Ya no dejes que traigan ese mugrero, Mario,*" she'd scorn. Dad didn't care. As long as he kept us occupied with something, he was happy.

Without Mom's consent, Dad would take us to this man's house and leave us there for a few hours while he went to work. I don't know how Dad knew the man, but he trusted him enough to let us stay there. It was usually Bhertha, Mayin and me who would go. The man was Anglo so we could communicate easily with him, a lot better than dad could anyway. We liked going to his house because he owned a fish farm and would show us around, allowing us to feed the fish. He had huge concrete pools full of newly born guppies and goldfish. Next to his own fish pond, he had a sunroom where he had a refrigerator stocked full with soft drinks for us. We were allowed to have anything we wanted. He also let us get bags of fish food that he had ready and he'd show us how to feed the fish.

His personal fish pond had a waterfall. We'd lie on our tummies as we fed the fish. They would swim up to us and eat out of our hands. I felt nervous at first, afraid the fish would hurt me, but after braving it out a couple of times, I'd soon get used to their mouths suctioning the palm of my hands. The fish were all big and colorful. It was like seeing rainbows underwater.

Dad said they were expensive and we needed to be careful, as some were exotic too. We never met the man's wife but we could see her sitting at a window looking out at us from the second story of their house. We were left alone most of the time we were there and we made sure we behaved ourselves. The couple of times Dad left us there, the lady would send a tray of sandwiches down to the sunroom for us to enjoy. I used to pretend it was my house and I would lay in the sunroom and daydream. There were other buildings on the property, but we never wandered off. The front of it had a tall fence covered in greenery that provided privacy. If Dad took long in coming for us, we'd take turns napping in the sunroom. He usually had a treat for us when he picked us up. We knew not to tell mom how long we'd been there, if we told her at all.

CHAPTER XXVII

MAYIN

Mom always said Dad wanted his first-born son to be tough and macho. Mom had delivered four girls by the time a son came along, so when my brother was born, my dad didn't believe the doctor. "It's a boy," the doctor announced in the hallway. "*No. Esa no es mi vieja,*" Dad argued. "*Mi vieja nomas tiene mujeres,*" he explained. Mom says when Dad reached into Mayin's cloth diaper to see if he was in fact a boy, my brother pooped on his fingers. Mom thought Dad deserved it for being an ass.

At Dad's insistence, Mayin learned to irrigate fields at a very young age. He continued to work with Dad when we returned to Texas in the fall. He worked weekends until he graduated high school and went off to college. I always thought his dark, sun-burned skin gave him away at school and feared the kids would make fun of him. Maybe others never paid attention to that, but I worried for him. My brother kept to himself a lot so I never knew how he felt.

"*Tengo esperanzas de que un día me mantengan,*" Dad would tell us. He believed kids were supposed to support their parents in their old age, repay them for being fed and clothed. "*Ellos necesitan de ti,*" Mom told him one day. "*Yo soy la que siempre anda en todo. No son puerquitos que nomas les das de comer y ya.*" She tried to make him see that we needed his presence and love, not just food and shelter. My mom was the one who attended all our school functions, awards assemblies and open houses. Some people at school wondered if we even had a dad.

One fall, when we were back in Weslaco, Dad took Mayin to work during school breaks. My cousin Lalo was working with Dad and Mom always said Lalo was Dad's favorite nephew. After hearing her say it repeatedly, we started believing it and accused Dad of loving Lalo more than he loved us. Mom claimed Dad bent over backwards to help his family. *Candil de la calle, obscuridad de tu casa.*

Even though Lalo was years older, in his early twenties, I believe Mayin worked harder than him because we all knew how much Dad pushed him to. My parents argued one day when Mom found out Dad was not paying my brother for the work he was doing. My brother must have asked Mom for money or something, otherwise she would not have found out. He had been putting in a lot of hours with Dad and Dad's paychecks were good that season. Mom discovered he was sharing his earnings with Lalo but not with his own son. She knew Lalo was lazy. I began to hate Lalo and Dad too for choosing him over Mayin.

CHAPTER XXVIII

SISTERS, SEXUALITY AND PUBERTY

Bherta doesn't know what all went on at home after she left for college. She cut herself off and only contacted our parents when she needed something or when her career was going well and she could boast about it. She didn't have the same love for our youngest brother Daniel like I did. I was sixteen years old when he was born and Daniel practically saw me as a second mother. He was born June 1987, the same month Bherta left to college. Mom was pregnant with him when we left California the previous year. He was the only one born in Texas.

“Daniel had it easy. He didn't have to work for what he got. None of us got braces or guitars or shit for free,” Bherta would complain. “All he had to do was ask,” she'd say upset. “And what is wrong with that?” I'd defend Daniel. “We were all older by then, most of us out of the house already. Mom and Dad didn't have to support us anymore.” Any argument was useless. She still felt cheated. “*¡Trabajaste tres veranos, Bherta! ¡Tres! ¡Y hablas como si hubiera sido toda una vida!*” Mom finally told her in anger.

I noticed that Bherta was the one who liked to test Mom's patience the most. We weren't allowed to cuss at home, so if a word slipped out, Mom would yell at us and threaten to wash our mouths out with soap. Bherta must've forgotten and didn't believe Mom that she would go through with her threat, so she cussed. My mom took her into the bathroom and literally made her put the bar of soap inside her mouth. I saw Bherta wanting to gag. It must have tasted something awful.

Years later, when she was a teenager, Mom was making tacos for dinner and said “*Bherta, ráyame el queso.*” Without hesitating, Bherta stood up and yelled “*¡Chinga tu madre, pinche queso pendejo!*” She even did hand gestures to emphasize the cursing. We all stood there in shock for a second or two before busting out laughing. Even mom laughed. If anyone could think of doing something like that, it was definitely Bherta. She even told my mom to go to hell one day when Mom got after her for something. Bherta had barely set foot inside Mom’s house after a two year absence and turned on her heels and left, walking back to the nearest bus station. She was that temperamental.

One evening, a family we knew from Texas came to visit us at Azevedo’s house. They had a teenage boy and Bherta and Hector went exploring in the barn where Dad kept his goats. The rest of us were inside the house, playing while the adults visited.

Then Mom realized Bherta was not with us. She sent Mayin out to get her. After the family left that day, Mom whipped Bherta with Dad’s belt. “*¡Una mujer no debe estar sola con un fulano!*” Between sobs and trying to cover her butt Bherta yelled “*¡No estábamos haciendo nada, Amá!*” I felt so sorry for Bherta. Mom hit her real hard that day and then to find out years later that Bherta was and never would be interested in boys was heartbreaking after what she endured.

My sister didn’t have the courage to tell us she was gay until years after graduating college. She would come home to visit and always had a ‘friend’ with her. Mom and Dad pretended they didn’t know what was going on, but they knew. None of us had the courage to say it out loud.

Then one year, Bherta, perhaps thinking we still didn't know, decided to shock us into it. She bragged about the many girlfriends she'd had.

"I don't need to know," I told her. "It's your life, you can do whatever you want as long as you're not hurting anyone," I said.

"But listen," she insisted.

"What? What do you want me to know that I haven't guessed already," I tried to stop her, "You don't have to give me details."

She was being explicit, telling me how she pleased a woman sexually.

"What are a tongue and ten fingers good for," she laughed.

She continued to do this with several of us for a while until she noticed we weren't reacting how she wanted. She stopped being explicit and began bragging about how attracted women of all ages were to her. *"Las viejas esas nomás la están usando. Les compra todo por eso andan allí."* Mom said Bherta was just like Dad and wasted hard earned money on women. *"Cuando ya no tiene que darles, la mandan a chingar su madre,"* Mom complained. I too saw more and more of Dad's personality in Bherta as the years passed by. Of course, I wouldn't dare tell her. She hated Dad.

Araceli, the oldest, was different. Mom still gets sad when she remembers taking Araceli to work with her when she was just twelve years old. Araceli was tall for her age, so the foreman thought she was older. I learned what a period stain looked like because of Araceli. I went to the front bedroom in the house Azevedo lent us and rummaged through her trash can when I heard she was on her period. I must have been nine years old at the time. I didn't get my period until

my thirteenth birthday. My sisters and brother wanted to spank me fourteen times that morning as was tradition for every year we completed, adding an extra spanking for the year that was to come, but Mom didn't let them. "*Apasíguense. No le van a pegar a Rosy,*" she told them. I had woken her up with the news of my blood earlier that morning. "*No puedes comer nada que tenga semillas,*" she warned. I didn't know why eating seeds was bad, but that's what Mom told me. My sisters, especially Bherta, were upset that I wasn't going to get spanked like they all had been on their birthday. I didn't tell them why, maybe Mom did later that day. "*Ya tenemos otra señorita en casa,*" Mom was quick to share with our adult relatives. My aunts and friends of the family would smile at me like we shared a secret and would reach out to squeeze my hand or arm like some kind of accepting ritual.

If I hadn't been nosey about Araceli's menstruation, I wouldn't have known what to do with the pads. I wasn't surprised with the amount of blood we shed. I was more concerned about hiding it between pad changes. Mom told us to wrap them up in toilet paper and to never leave them where they could be seen. "*Nadie debe saber cuando andan en sus dias,*" she lectured. I would learn later that year in physical education class that menstruation was how our bodies prepared us for childbirth. I felt embarrassed with a survey I filled out in class that day asking about my hygiene habits. When I got home that day, to our house in Weslaco, I slipped it behind the wood paneling of our bedroom walls. I found a crack and hid it there, hoping it would never be found. My mom sleeps in that bedroom now.

Araceli was the first to experience all these milestones and we learned what to do from observing her and from the little that Mom was willing to share. We never got the birds and bees talk either. It wasn't something we were supposed to learn about at home. If I knew then what I

know now, things would've been very different. My girls get embarrassed when I speak bluntly about sex.

When Araceli turned fifteen, Mom bought her a stereo sound system. I remember how she said she felt bad that Araceli had to go work on her fifteenth birthday, especially because other girls got a *quinceañera* on that day instead of a day in the fields. Araceli was very happy with her stereo and the few LP records Mom bought to accompany it. That summer, a young man named Juvenal Sandoval tried courting my sister. He worked cleaning fields even though his parents had a fruit stand in town. He would cruise by our house on Prescott Road in the evenings, and Araceli would literally hit the ground when she'd see his Camaro crossing the railroad tracks down the road. Mom seemed to enjoy seeing her daughter get this attention and felt he was a good kid. He would bring bags of produce from his parents' fruit stand as an excuse to stop by the house, hoping to catch a glimpse of Araceli. Bhertha and I used to laugh and make fun of her and how she would hide. Dad accepted the sacks of beans, berries and whatever Juvenal brought but he wouldn't let Juvenal inside the house. I thought Araceli liked him but was too shy to say anything.

One afternoon, when my uncle Cesar and Dad's cousin were living in the trailer behind our house, Juvenal came cruising down the road. Araceli was sitting on her bed by the window. I could tell she was happy to see him making an effort to see her outside of the fields. She let out a nervous giggle and moved away from the window, nudging closer to the one that faced the road. When Cesar learned what was happening, he went out the front door, stood there and threw his chest out, mouthing something as Juvenal cruised slowly by. Juvenal never returned after that day. Mom cursed Cesar's actions for many years. "*Por culpa de ese cabrón, Araceli ya no tuvo suerte con los hombres.*" My sister married and divorced and is still single to this day. She raised

three kids, all with special needs, on her own. *“El hijo de su pinche madre le espanto la suerte a miya. Pero todo se paga en esta vida y yo nomas le pido a Dios que me de vida para verlo,”* mom lamented.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE LONG ROAD TO UNIVERSITY

When I enrolled at the University of Texas-Pan American the fall of 2008, I decided to use it as an excuse to not visit Mom often. If and when she looked for me, I would say I was at school or busy with homework. I chose to stay away from her. She never really sought me out. It was my third attempt at a four-year institution and I was determined to concentrate on my studies as best I could and staying away from Mom's drama was best anyway. The second time I had enrolled at UTPA was a semester I planned to transfer from the community college and take on university courses. This was in the years before my boys were born. I was assigned an advisor whom I needed to see before registration. "The valley doesn't need any more Spanish teachers. Choose another subject," he said coldheartedly. I didn't have a backup plan and he wasn't providing one either. He seemed to be upset he was asked to advise students. I wasn't even sure he was from my same educational track. I walked into his office excited and nervous about being a university student, and he shot down all my plans. I left his office in tears, feeling defeated. That was the semester I went home, dialed the school and cancelled everything.

My senior year in high school, I had been accepted at St. Edward's University in Austin, Texas through their CAMP program aimed at recruiting migrant students. I was preparing to graduate high school like everyone else and thought I could go away to school like Bherta had. She left the summer following her graduation and never looked back. She graduated two years before me in 1987.

I thought I could get my degree, come back and get married, but my parents didn't see things the way I did. My mom feared something would happen to me or that I would become a wild child, get pregnant or end up raped. It wasn't right for a young girl to leave home unless she was married. I heard this many times from extended family and my parents' friends and it angered me to know how backwards their thinking was. They also wondered why I wanted to go away to school if we had a university nearby. I couldn't understand why they weren't allowing me to do it when Bhertha had left. Years later, I realized Bhertha was headstrong and she needed to leave. She was gay and felt burdened in the valley. Maybe Mom and Dad preferred she'd leave too, so they wouldn't have to think about her sexuality on a daily basis. They blamed each other for her being a lesbian.

"Tú tienes la culpa, por no forzarla a usar vestidos," my dad would say.

"Estás mal, Mario. Si no hubieras sido tan mujeriego, Bhertha no hubiera visto tanta chingadera, y no odiara a los hombres."

When I told my then boyfriend, Juan, that I was accepted to the university and that I really wanted to go, he said *"Si te vas, terminamos."* He was afraid I would meet someone else and end my relationship with him. After I realized I would not be going away to college after high school, I called to cancel my acceptance into St. Edward's University. Then I dialed the National Hispanic Scholarship Fund Association.

"I won't be using the scholarship" I told the lady at the NHS Call Center.

"Why are you giving it up?" she asked.

"I'm getting married," I said.

“Are you pregnant?” I felt a knot form in my throat and fought back the tears. I was making the call from my parents’ bedroom and felt like a failure as I tried to speak up.

“No.”

“Then why are you getting married?” she insisted.

“I just am,” my voice was barely audible.

The stranger on the other end told me I was too young to get married and for some reason I felt I was letting her down. She sounded disappointed in me and told me I was still entitled to \$500 of the scholarship monies; it was my reward for being an outstanding high school student. I thanked her for it and felt the need to apologize for my decision before hanging up. When the check arrived, I used the money to buy our first bedroom set. Mom accompanied me to Rio Bravo, Mexico to look for it. No one could believe I was still given the money.

What Juan said to me that day didn’t seem like an ultimatum at the time because I thought I was ‘in love’, but after I started writing and remembering, I began to hurt and feel angry towards him for saying it. He denies that he did. He says he doesn’t remember. But things haven’t changed much with him. Now he says “I want you to go to school because I don’t want to hear later on that you didn’t get an education because of me.” I know he feels hurt and threatened, but him saying that doesn’t help either. I need to hear him say he wants me to be happy and if getting an education makes me happy, then I should do it.

CHAPTER XXX

LOVE AND HATE

One of the many reasons my parents fought was because my dad was the first of his entire family to get legal residency in the United States, so he felt a huge burden was placed on him to support those who were still living back in Mexico. My parents met in Southern California when she was 17 and he was 22. Mom was his second wife, he divorced his first a year into their marriage. It was rumored that Diana, his first wife, had helped him get his U.S. residency, but Dad divorced her because she was mentally unstable. Dad met Mom's dad in the fields before he met my mom. Dad always credited his father-in-law with teaching him how to work. When Mom married Dad, she was attempting to escape her third stepmother and the abuse she endured at home. Her mother had died when she was six years old, leaving her and a younger sister orphaned. Mom had an older half-brother from my grandfather's first wife. She said no one was sympathetic towards her and her sister, not even family members. She was treated as a servant and her sister was sent away to an insane asylum by one their stepmothers. Mom said she remembers seeing Socorrito chained in the back yard like a dog. Their stepmother had shaved her head and claimed Socorrito went crazy from eating bad pork meat. Socorrito was three years old. Mom still misses her. She treasures the one black and white picture she has of them together when they were still happy and smiling, holding balloons. Mom thought getting married would free her from the hell she was living in at home, but she had no idea what laid ahead for her.



Twenty-five years into her marriage, my mother went through our family albums pulling out and destroying every photograph Dad was in. They'd had another fight. She went after his truck tires with a knife as he was pulling out of the driveway. She was screaming at him, trying to puncture the tires. I was afraid he'd run her over or she'd get hurt from the tire pressure if she succeeded but nothing happened. Dad drove off, ignoring her screams.

Mom looked crazy that day. She was crying and cursing Dad. Those of us who were there watched it all. The neighbors heard it but I doubt they were surprised by it any more. In her rage, Mom went to her bedroom still holding the kitchen knife and began pulling out photo albums. She sliced furiously away them. Some of the photos were so old, they stuck to the albums' yellowed pages. Her nails clawed at them as she sat on the floor, a sobbing mess of a woman.

"¡Hijo de tu puta madre! ¡Me las vas a pagar, Mario!" she kept yelling.

I pretended I was helping her. I grabbed some albums and began sneaking pictures out, hiding them under my thighs. I didn't like what I was doing, but I had no choice. She was going to destroy them all. We were sitting on the floor of her dark bedroom. Mom was hurting. My brothers and sisters were standing by the doorway looking at us. I wanted to tell her to stop but I didn't have the courage. No one did. We were all afraid of Mom. When I see those albums now,

I turn the pages quickly. I'm embarrassed it ever happened. Mom still doesn't know I hid some pictures. As an adult I have become obsessed with preserving memories. I have albums, shoeboxes, compact discs and now over 30,000 pictures uploaded on my Facebook account. Mayin laughs at me when I insist we watch a family video together. He'll say "Why? I know what happened. I lived it."

In a Polaroid picture Mom had taken of Mayin when he was less than a year old, my dad is pictured next to him, squatting with an arm around my brother. Mayin is standing in his baby walker, his chubby legs supporting him firmly, his pink cheeks shining while he smiled, showing off his two front teeth. Dad looked young, handsome and proud next to his first-born son. The picture exists in my memory now. I can still see Dad in his dark blue shirt, black hair neatly combed back, drawing attention to his widow's peak and the well-defined birthmark that he was known for on his left cheek. As hard as I tried, I couldn't save all the photos that day.

Growing up we witnessed many fights between Mom and Dad. He would beat her when he'd come home drunk or after being with other women. "*¿Donde andabas! ¿Andabas con putas verdad!*" She would yell and curse at him but she never made plans to leave him. Dad threw Mom against walls. He tried to strangle her once, insulting her in his drunkenness and finally ended up in their bedroom, falling into heavy sleep as if nothing happened. Women showed up at our front door several times looking for him. One morning, I saw him getting dropped off by a strange woman. My bedroom in Weslaco was at the front of the house, it used to be a porch but was converted into a bedroom. It was still dark outside that morning when he stumbled his way to the front door, sleepy and drunk. Mom said he had hickeys on his neck that led all the way down to his pubic area. He argued later that day that he didn't remember how they got there. I

was very young. I didn't know what a hickey was but I learned dad got the *chupetones* by being a *puto*. He slept that entire day.

Mom refused to open the door for Dad when he was drunk, especially if he was getting home in the middle of the night. One of those times, Dad broke their bedroom window when his coaxing failed. He had the habit of telling mom he had tacos so she would open the door.

“¡No voy abrir la puerta! Lárgate!”

She'd get angrier, blaming him for her excess weight. Dad used his boot to break the window. We could hear them yelling in the back bedroom. He knocked the television set over when he climbed through and was hitting mom with his boot. She tried to escape but he followed her through the short hallway into our bedroom. Mom must have thought she would be safe in there, that he wouldn't hit her in front of us. She was wrong. He pushed her against the wall. I didn't want to see. My sisters and I shared the bedroom. We were all in bed together. I held the sheet over my head and tried not to cry. I didn't want to hear the screams. Mom was crying and threatening to call the police. My older sisters were yelling at him but he wouldn't stop. I don't remember if he punched the wall himself or Mom's body broke the sheetrock, but they left a hole in the wall behind the door.

That night, mom called the police. When they arrived, she told the officer what happened. *“Señora, no podemos hacer nada,”* he said. “This is his house. He has rights. We cannot get involved in a domestic dispute.” Mom learned she could never ask for help from the Weslaco Police Department again. This was in the early 80s. I don't know if it was standard procedure or if it was that officer's personal opinion that a husband was entitled to hit his wife, but years later when I was out of high school, I learned my fourth grade homeroom teacher had stabbed her

husband. She, like my mom, claimed she'd been a victim of domestic violence for many years. Her husband died from the wounds. I will never forget how the town rallied around her, keeping her out of jail. She was given probation because *she* was a victim. I believe it helped that she came from a large, predominantly well-known family who held important positions around town. My mom didn't.

When we were still in high school, Mom and Dad separated temporarily. It lasted a few months and was an awkward period for all involved. Dad would come by the house on weekends and pick us up. He looked lost, like he didn't know what to do with us. Mom was the parent. Dad was the provider. My brothers and sisters would insist Dad take us all shopping so he would. "*Háganlo que gaste en ustedes, para que no le sobre para andar de cabrón,*" mom would tell us. They started divorce proceedings that they would cancel later, but during that time, Mom learned Dad had his salary split in two so he could report only the check portion to the attorney general and leave the cash pay out of the equation. Mom said her attorney met with Dad and his attorney without her and accepted all the terms dad laid out. She suspected the attorney she had turned to was friends with Dad's attorney and didn't want to drag the situation out. Mom was getting close to nothing in child support for five kids. She threw the agreement in her attorney's face. "*¡A ver. Con la miseria que me va dar Mario vaya usted y compreles kotex a cuatro muchachas, papel de baño, shampoo, comida, ropa y pague los biles. A ver si le alcanza!*" She cried in anger. Mom said she was sent to the wrong floor at the courthouse so she would miss the meeting. I don't know whose idea it was to stop the divorce proceedings, but Dad returned home after a couple of months. Mom felt she could never win one.

In 1993, Mom left Dad. She took the bus to Washington State where my older sister, Araceli, was living. Our youngest brother Daniel was six at the time. She took him with her.

Maribel, the youngest of the girls, came to live with me. She was in high school and I was married already.

The day mom left, we didn't know how dad would react or even if he would notice right away. Mom was afraid to leave. She feared he would report her and file charges of kidnapping against her for taking Daniel away from him. We weren't familiar with the laws and they didn't seem to help my mom in the past anyway. Before calling me to tell me what was going on that morning, Mom dropped Maribel off at school. She said she had a strange feeling like something wasn't right. When Dad left for work and she decided to follow him. She found Dad at a K-Mart parking lot, a few blocks away from home, talking to another woman. It was his mistress.

Mom said she sped into the parking when she recognized his Dodge truck. When they heard her car approaching, they looked, shocked. The woman was sitting on the hood of her car drinking coffee. Dad was standing next to her. Her high school-aged son was sitting inside her car. Mom said she got out of her car in a hurry, grabbed the woman by the hair and pulled her down to the pavement. Dad didn't say or do anything to try and stop Mom. Instead, he got into his pickup truck and drove away. Mom sped off too. She thought the woman would call the police and have her arrested.

When she called me that morning around nine o'clock, she had already gone home and packed some clothes. I could hear the panic in her voice. "*Rosy, necesito que me lleves a la estación de autobuses,*" her voiced trembled. We decided I would drop her and Daniel off at the bus station and I would take care of Maribel. Mayin was away at school and Bhertha was living on her own somewhere in Austin. Mom asked me if I thought Dad would go after her. She wanted to be able to say that Dad loved her more. She was leaving and she was still trying to hold on to him. "I don't know if he will follow you, mom." I didn't know if Dad would choose

the other woman over her. I couldn't give her the reassurance she wanted. I was once again stuck in the middle and as much as I wanted to fix her life, I couldn't and I began to feel guilty for having a good husband myself. Aside from a few rough moments when Juan and I were first adjusting to married life, everything was going well for us. We didn't fight like my parents. Juan concentrated on working and I concentrated on keeping house and raising our daughter Becky. I was 22 years old.

Days later, my dad was in a car accident. He was riding in *la querida's* car when they crashed on Farm Road 1015. It happened a half mile away from my house and I had no idea. He could have been killed and I would've been stuck telling Mom he was with *her* when he died. Dad must have thought this was some sort of sign because he came a few days later asking if I knew where Mom had gone. It was a stupid question because we both knew he knew the answer. I went ahead and encouraged him to go after her since I knew that's what Mom was waiting for. He left for Washington State a couple of days later and Mom took him back.

My parents' fighting didn't just take place in Texas. My dad was a *puto* and he was a *puto* in Texas, California, Mexico, and pretty much anywhere he went. Mom says she tried getting Welita's sympathy one day, hoping she could talk to Dad and get him to stop, but Welita answered with "*Mijo es macho. Va hacer lo que quiera hasta que se canse.*" This was one of the main reasons for their fights, but there were others.

One summer night when we lived on Prescott Road in the house Azevedo provided, my parents had a fight. Mom says Dad got mad when she asked him to bring food into the house so we could eat. He was outside drinking and grilling with his younger brother Cesar. Their cousin Regino and another man were there as well. They were enjoying themselves, chatting and catching up. Araceli, my oldest sister, says she doesn't remember it happened like this, but I do.

It's strange how differently we all remember things from our past. I remember how my dad had mom up against the bathroom window. He was gripping her neck, choking her. I don't think he really wanted to kill her, just scare her so she'd leave them alone. Cesar was standing in the doorway to the bathroom, laughing at them. I think dad was trying to show him that he was *el mero chingon* in our house. Mom was crying trying to steady herself. It looked like he was pushing her head outside the small window. I remember looking up at my uncle. I felt angry watching him laugh and not doing anything to stop my dad. Cesar's left arm was stretched across the doorframe as he leaned comfortably to one side. Mom kept yelling at Araceli and Bherta to go for help. The sun was beginning to go down when the two ran down the street, a quarter of a mile to an old couple's house who lived by the railroad tracks. They called the police. Araceli says Dad never choked Mom, that he never pushed her head outside the window. I don't remember her standing there watching.

It was dark by the time the officers arrived. Mom's face looked swollen and blotchy. She stood behind the screen door in her thin housedress denying anything was wrong. We stood behind her, trying to catch a glimpse of the officers. I thought it was both scary and exciting to see them at our house. Mom spoke in her broken English, reassuring the officers everything was ok and it had just been an argument. It was clear to them my mom had been crying. One officer tilted his head as he studied my mom's face. He wasn't convinced. "If you need anything, ma'am, call us back." My mom told him Dad was already asleep. The officer handed her his card and he and his partner went down the steps and left in the police car. Mom finally had a chance of being protected by law enforcement and she gave it up.

She had lied. Dad wasn't asleep. He was hiding in the backyard with his brother, cousin and the stranger who had come with Cesar from Mexico. The three of them were living in a

small mobile home Azevedo had behind our house. They had arrived a few days earlier from Nuevo Leon. Against my mom's wishes, Dad paid for the Coyote to bring them to the U.S. After a failed first attempt, they finally made it all the way to California.

I remember hearing Cesar and his cousin Regino tell the story. They said they were kicked and beaten by the border patrol when they found them in the brush. Cesar said the officers stole the little money they had, so when they decided to make a second attempt at the river, he told Welita to stitch the few dollar bills they had to the inside of their clothing. This way when they'd get patted down, no wallet would be found. Dad was very happy to have someone from his family in California with him. He wasn't counting on having to pay for an extra person though, but he was stuck doing so because my grandpa promised the stranger that dad would take care of it. The stranger from Nuevo Leon said he'd repay dad, but I don't know if it ever happened. That led to another fight between Mom and Dad.

Mom sent the police away that night out of fear. She was afraid they would find out about Cesar, Regino and the stranger and arrest my parents for harboring illegals. She hadn't thought that far ahead when Dad was choking her. She feared Dad, but she feared the law too. To this day, Dad denies the fight was about the food, he insists he was angry because Mom had been flirting at a party earlier that day. To this day, I don't know who is telling the truth. All I know is that I loved them both and I hated to see them fight. I wanted to fix their marriage so they'd be happy, but I couldn't and it weighed heavily on me. I was ten years old when I saw Dad choking Mom. It's something I will never forget. I loved him so much but hated what he did.

The first time I saw my husband get violently angry was about ten months into our marriage. I had gone to wash clothes at my mom's house and while there, received a call from my youngest sister-in-law Graciela. It was a Saturday and she was calling to warn me not to

freak out when I got home. She told me my husband's older sister Rosa and Rosa's husband Agustin had picked up my husband's house key and filled our extra bedroom with furniture and luggage. My sister-in-law Rosa had just arrived from working up north and didn't have a place to store her things while her house was under construction. I didn't see a problem with it. Juan, my husband, worked a few miles down the road from our house, so they thought it was easier to go to him for a key.

When I came into the living room and told my mom what was going on, something clicked in her and she got mad. She was upset they did not take me into consideration before filling my house with their things. She said call them back and tell them no, that they should have asked you too. *"Tú eres la mujer de esa casa. Tienen que contar contigo también."* Feeling that maybe she was right, I dialed my mother-in-law's house and told her how I felt, or how I thought I felt. After some words and insults were hurled back and forth between my mom and my mother-in-law and Graciela and I, I hung up and left in a hurry to defend my home. *"Será muy su hijo, señora. Pero hija es la que duerme con él,"* my mom told my *suegra*. When I got back to my house, Juan's mother and even his grandmother who enjoyed a good argument, were waiting outside for me to let them in. They started emptying the extra bedroom and loading up my sister-in-law's pickup truck again. I didn't speak to anyone as I unlocked the front door. I was doing what my mom told me to do, but I had seen no harm in helping them out. Mom stayed at her house and when I told her days later that they had waited for me to allow them in she said *"¿Ahora sí? Primero se metieron sin ímportales lo que tú pensarás. No esta bien, Rosy. Tienen que saber que tú eres la esposa de Juan y tú también cuentas. Tu papá y tu abuela me lo hicieron a mi cuando vivíamos en el rancho y no es justo."* Mom was crying in anger. Apparently, my

grandfather had filled her house up with grain and cases of beer when she and Dad were living at the ranch many years before.

When Juan came home from work that day and noticed the room was empty again, he grew angry, yelling at me when I told him what I had done. It was our first home, a two-bedroom, one bath, wood frame house on stilts. It had no insulation or air conditioning system. It was humble but we were paying to own it. Juan left to his mother's house a couple of blocks away to see what had happened. He came back less than an hour later and started packing his things, threatening to leave me. I was in the kitchen cooking, hoping he would calm down and things would go back to how they were, but then he pushed me up against the wall by the stove and stared me dead in the face, anger breathing down on me. We were both caught in the middle of our families' differences and wanting to side with our mothers. He took a suitcase and left that afternoon only to return a few hours later saying his mother told him to come back, that it would all be okay. He said she told him he belonged with me. To this day, my mother still holds a grudge against Juan's family for that incident. She never found out he pushed me against a wall and held me by the neck.

I think the last time Dad tried to hit Mom in front of us was when Mayin was in high school. My dad was seeing the lady from K-Mart so I'm sure the argument had to do with her. The fight escalated quickly and in his frustration, Dad grabbed one of his rifles. They were standing in the washroom just outside the kitchen, yelling at each other while Dad held the rifle in one hand. I remember the sun coming through the screen door. There were two squares of sunshine glowing by their feet. Dad was fed up with Mom's yelling. He tried to slap her but Mayin stepped in between them as Dad swung and he ended up slapping my brother. "*¡Mijo!*" dad cried out. The four of us were surprised by what happened. Dad felt bad. "*¡Ya, Apá! ¡Ya*

estuvo bueno!” My brother yelled as he grabbed the rifle out of his hands. It was then that Dad realized he could no longer get away with hitting mom. Mayin was growing up and beginning to outgrow my dad. So the abuse took on another form. Dad started pinching Mom. He’d pretend he was playing but it really hurt her. Sometimes I’d hear him whisper insults as he hugged her from behind and pinch her abdomen.

CHAPTER XXXI

I WAS BLAMED



Eight years ago, in August 2007, my parents divorced. They signed the divorce decree exactly 40 years to the date they got married. Mom thought it was a sign from above that their marriage would end on an anniversary date. The divorce proceedings started when mom and I ran into dad at a Chinese restaurant in McAllen, Texas. I was selling Home Interiors & Gifts and had been delivering merchandise and candles to a customer in McAllen. Mom would accompany me, jokingly telling my customers that she was my secretary. She'd write my name and phone number on all my brochures as I spoke to customers and picked up orders.

That day, we walked into the lobby of a restaurant for a late lunch and while waiting to be seated, I noticed Dad sitting at a table. I felt my face contort as the hurt set in. He was with another woman. My feet felt heavy and the entire scene completely surreal. *Se me cayo la cara. Lo sentí bien fuerte.* I loved my Dad so much and always hoped he'd stop hurting Mom. This

time, I felt he had failed me too. “*Mira quien está allí,*” I told her. She hadn’t seen him. She thought I had seen a friend of mine. Dad rose from his chair and began walking toward the exit. He pretended not to see us, all the while trying to hide his face by adjusting his cowboy hat as he walked by. It hurt me immensely to see him ignore me, his daughter. He tried to walk past us, but we were blocking the doorway. It took Mom a few seconds to realize what was happening. I followed her out of the restaurant as she began yelling “*¡Qué bonito! ¡Así te quería ver! ¡No tienes vergüenza, hijo de tu pinche madre! ¡Poco hombre!*” I was afraid someone would call the police so I tugged at her. He kept walking with the woman and another couple they were with. Dad never responded. The four of them got into a vehicle and drove towards the back of the restaurant. As they came around to the front where the exit was, Mom tried hurling herself on top of the car. “*¡Déjalo, Amá! ¡No vale la pena!*” I yelled. I thought I saw Dad smiling in the backseat.

I didn’t know what to do, how to comfort her. “*¿Y ahora? ¿Que hago?*” she asked me as we both ate in silence, tears rolling down her cheeks. This was the question that set our futures off. “*Déjalo, Amá. Nunca va a cambiar. Si quieres vivir en paz, ya déjalo. Tú mereces ser feliz también, Mamá.*” I lowered my head as I answered her. She cried and tried to swallow her food.

Mom acted on emotion, wanting the divorce to move along as quickly as possible. She wanted to hurt Dad, to surprise him with it and show him who was boss. All of her kids were rallying behind her. We were encouraging her to do it and get on with her life. I don’t know about the others but I know I promised to be there for her in whatever she needed. I’m sure my brothers and sisters did too. Mom liked the attention she was getting. A week after the divorce was signed, Bherta drove down to the valley from Austin and took Mom on a road trip to Arizona. Bherta thought it would do Mom good to visit her relatives. Halfway there, Bherta says

she wanted to ram her car into the back of an 18 wheeler to stop Mom from nagging and talking about Dad. *“If you don’t shut up, Mom, I’m going to kill us both,”* she says she told Mom. Mom tried to sit quietly, crying the rest of the way.

We soon discovered Mom enjoyed being a victim. She craved the attention so much that we began dreading taking her to stores with us. She looked for an audience wherever she could and spilled her bitterness all over. We tried to get her out of the house to entertain her so she could forget about Dad for a while, but it was useless. She would begin talking loudly about the shit Dad had done to her over the years. *“Cuando tu papá andaba de novio con la Leonarda, no le cabía un pedo en la cola,”* she would say out loud. Leonarda was the woman from K-Mart. People would turn around and look at her. Sometimes she would engage them in conversation if she noticed they acknowledged her comment. “I just leave her there, talking. It’s embarrassing. No one needs to know your business,” Araceli said one day. She eventually stopped inviting Mom out. Araceli said she was too embarrassed. Mom wanted the world to know how much she had suffered with my dad, how badly she was treated and disrespected. None of us liked what she was doing. When we talked about it weeks after their divorce, we agreed that people were probably thinking Mom was stupid for having put up with so much. “They’re not going to feel sorry for her. They’re probably thinking *“Que pendeja. Para qué se quedaba,”* Araceli said. She said “Anyone else would have dumped Dad sooner.” I know Mom was hurting and angry, going through all the emotional stages of divorce that we hear about, but there is time and a place for it which she wasn’t caring about. She was grieving the divorce.

CHAPTER XXXII

DEPRESSION HITS

Months later, when the dust of the divorce had settled and she was alone at home, Mom blamed me for her fate. She told my brothers and sisters that I had told her to do it and now she was miserable, worried where her next meal would come from while I was still happily married. *“Por tal de tener el taco en la boca, no me hubiera divorciado.”* She cursed me for her loneliness. I stopped going to her house when I learned this. We didn't speak for six months.

I don't remember the exact moment I burdened myself with thinking I was responsible for keeping the family together, but I carried that cross with me my entire childhood and adolescent years. I thought she was serious when she asked me what she should do, so I gave her an honest answer. I thought she wanted to be free. I thought she didn't want to hurt anymore or be embarrassed by Dad's cheating, but I was wrong. She was missing him and she was willing to forgive him yet again for all the shit he had done to her, but she was not willing to forgive me. She never once picked up the phone during those six months to ask how I was doing or if my kids were still alive. I felt betrayed.

During those six months apart, I fell into a deep depression when I couldn't muster the courage to confront my mom. In one of my last visits to her house, I had taken a gun she had and hidden it in our storage room located in our back yard. I was afraid she would use it on herself, but when I became depressed, I wanted to look for it and use it on myself. I thought it would end my hurt and I would really stick it to her for blaming me for her unhappiness. I fought my

depression alone. I didn't tell anyone what I was going through. Thoughts from my postpartum depression came back too. I remembered how I wanted to put my boys in the microwave or dryer when they were little. Jonathan and Joshua were eighteen months apart. I thought I had put it all behind me, but I hadn't. I cried every day, thinking I was a bad mother for wanting to hurt my kids. "You're supposed to nurture, Rosa! Not kill!" I'd constantly remind myself. I thought of killing myself along with my kids. I didn't dare tell anyone for fear of being judged. Juan couldn't understand why I said I felt depressed. "*No te falta nada. Tienes todo,*" he would say.

I was thirty-seven years old when my youngest son Joshua started attending school for most of the day. All four of my children were in school now and I had a difficult time adjusting. My husband was on the road cross country the entire week and coming home on weekends. I was alone. I felt lonely. I ironed, kept the house clean, shopped, tried to keep busy, but it wasn't fulfilling anymore. I had invested all my time and energy in being there for others that I had forgotten how to be there for myself. I didn't know how to occupy my time. As a stay-at-home mom, I became a faithful follower of Oprah's Book Club and began purchasing every book she suggested.

"Are you still reading that? Don't you get tired of reading?" my husband would ask.

It was a different book every week, but he couldn't tell the difference and he never bothered to ask. My collection began to grow that I resorted to hiding them under the bed and in drawers so my husband wouldn't get mad at me. I treated them as forbidden objects. He complained that I had my nose buried in one every time he came home. I was living through books escaping into them time and time again. When I returned to school in 2008, I felt I now had an excuse to own books. I purchased bookcases and began taking my treasures out of their

hiding places. I filled eight shelves almost immediately. I thought: I'm a student now. My reasons for wanting to read and own books are now valid.

After my husband complained about reading, I began purchasing 1,000 piece jigsaw puzzles. The small pieces covered my dining room table every day. I assembled each puzzle together in two days' time, sitting at the dining room table for hours on end. I had become an expert at it too. I didn't have to study the pieces anymore. I just grabbed them and fit them in. My eyes could automatically connect their shape and color with the shape of the empty space that sat waiting for them. They were coming together as I was falling apart. I must have done at least fifty puzzles before I finally stopped. I wasn't eating, showering. I was a mess. I was running up our credit card debt purchasing items I thought I needed from the shopping network QVC. I hid some of those items too. Nothing I did could bring my joy back. I felt defeated and useless. When I picked my kids up from school, I thought about ramming my car into the concrete barriers that separated the highway where I lived. I would cry silently on the way home with them, hiding my tears behind my sunglasses.

After a couple of months, my youngest brother dropped by my house around two in the afternoon unannounced and noticed I wasn't myself. I was unbathed and still in pajamas.

"What are you doing, Rosy?" he asked. "You need to go back to school. This is your chance."

I had taken courses at a local community college but had stopped when I felt I was burdening too many people with my kids' childcare. Daniel sat with me that afternoon, made me pull out old college catalogs and together we browsed through them to see what degree I could go for.

“Let’s mark off all the courses you already completed,” he said.

We looked at the different careers.

“Do you like nursing? Science? Criminology?”

I finally decided I’d like to be a social worker, so he marked off all the courses I had already completed from that degree plan and we discovered I only needed four more courses to graduate with an Associate of Applied Science with a concentration in Social Work.

“How old are the students in the courses you’re taking, Daniel?” I asked him nervously.

I was afraid I’d be the oldest one and was doubting my ability to retain information.

“They’re all ages, Rosy. You’ll be fine,” he reassured me.

“I don’t want to stick out like a sore thumb,” I sulked.

I don’t know why I was so scared when it had been me who always encouraged others to go to school. “Look into taking college courses,” I would tell my sisters-in-law. “Start with a course or two.” Araceli said she went back to school because I insisted so much. She earned an Associate Degree in computer networking during the time I was having more babies. When Daniel left that afternoon, I felt a pang of excitement and fear. In one week’s time, I applied for financial aid, got approved, purchased my books and a week later, sat in a college classroom again.

CHAPTER XXXIII

WRITING MY STORY

After I received my Associates Degree from the community college, I decided I would take another stab at a University degree. I had attempted it twice before but cancelled everything before classes started. The first time was after high school. I had listened to my mom, Juan and my then future mother-in-law's complaints and decided I needed to work to help pay for my wedding. The second time was before my parents' divorce, when I had a moment of courage and thought I should transfer from South Texas Community College to UTPA and finish my associate degree there, but the advisor I was assigned discouraged me from pursuing a career as a Spanish teacher and I went home in tears that day. I went back to being a stay-at-home mom.

When I was finishing my associate degree in the spring of 2008, Jim told me via email "I have always thoughts of a book written by you. I could write it myself, but I think it'd have more impact coming from you." He insisted I had a story to tell, a story that would help young girls overcome obstacles, especially if they were migrants like I had been. I was thirteen years old when he met me. It was 1984 and my family and I had just come back to Texas after a long summer in California. He was new to Weslaco. We didn't meet at school though; we met at the church I had been attending with my brothers and sisters for several years. I decided to humor him, and I began writing. Not knowing where to start, I thought why not at the beginning. I would tell of how my dad met my mom and how the Ledezma-Calles family came to be. As I wrote, the anecdotes rushed onto the keyboard so quickly that I could hardly keep up. I typed 24

pages in a couple of hours and emailed them to Jim. “I feel like the guy who started his big, powerful motorcycle, then realized it was in gear and the throttle stuck open. I’m hanging on the handle bars flapping in the breeze, moving fast and loving it,” he replied.

I was enjoying myself too. Because it was my life, I thought every memory was important and crucial. I found myself crying or laughing every time I wrote. I still joke with friends, telling them that if I ever make it big, I’ll be known as the crying writer. I felt I was reconnecting with the person I used to be. “This may very well be a catharsis for you, a cleansing of the soul and spirit,” Jim said when I told him. There were things I couldn’t share with my family. They would never understand. They couldn’t see me past my role of wife and mother.

My kids and my husband did not understand why I kept at it if it seemed too painful at times. I couldn’t explain it. I was remembering my youth, my teenage years, the hopes and dreams I once had. I remember wanting to be a teacher, surrounded by little kids, colors and paint. Then I wanted to be a flight attendant and travel the world, not settling down anywhere. I thought living out of a suitcase and meeting different people would be fun. I could find love in another country or several countries. As I got older, my dreams changed and the scent of crayons became nostalgic; the idea of flying around the globe forgotten.

Then one day when I wasn’t home, Juan asked my daughter Becky to log on to my computer and open my book file. He was curious about my writing and why I was refusing to share any details with them. It would be months before I’d find out he did this. It would also be during one of three fights that would eventually lead to a separation. After Becky read to him what I had saved in my files, he felt betrayed and bitter, throwing my words back at me one afternoon before breaking the kitchen table and laundry room door in a moment of rage.

Contrary to what Jim believed, at the age of 37, I did not see myself as a success story. I saw myself as someone who got lost somewhere along the way and never fulfilled her childhood dreams. It began to feel like a mid-life crisis. I felt sorry for myself and began hating my husband for marrying me when I was only nineteen. He was 24. I convinced myself that he was ready to settle down when I wasn't, that I was just going along with it for the sake of having a wedding and pleasing everybody. It wasn't completely true though. I knew I felt something for him and at that point in my life, I saw marriage as a next stage. I was young and naïve and thought I could do it all.

My excitement for writing was met with opposition almost as fast as the start I had had. When my mom found out I was writing about our lives, she told one of my sisters *“Dile que escriba que yo me morí después que la tuve a ella.”* If I was supposed to write that she died after giving birth to me, how was I to explain the birth of my younger siblings? I had emailed my brothers and sisters at the start of my writing journey and told them what I was embarking on. “I hope I have your support in this,” I wrote. “I’m really excited about it.”

At first, I began receiving emails which were initially supportive, but then began to change. Maribel wrote “My lawyer will have to see it before you send it to print. My lawyer being my father-in-law.” I felt she wanted to brag how she had married an Anglo of Italian heritage. Bherta wasn't much different from Maribel. She wanted to approve any scenes she was depicted in. “Your first mistake was asking them for permission,” Jim told me when I shared how they felt. I didn't think I was hurting anyone by wanting to tell my story.

My writing triggered my depression again and after having ended my estrangement with Mom, I decided to call her, hoping her words would comfort me.

“Me siento mal. Nunca le dije pero cuando los niños estaban chiquitos, pense en meterlos en la secadora y microondas.” I told her about my crazy thoughts and to my surprise, she grew angry.

“¡Porque no pensabas en meter a Juan a la secadora! Querías matar a tus hijos pero a tu esposo no.”

Her words shocked me back to reality. I realized she was not the person I thought would help me through this. She was still bitter. I didn't argue with her. Instead I pretended I would be ok and hung the phone up. I began to cry in shame. I thought of all people I could tell, she was the best choice. She had had six kids after all. She must have suffered similar pain, but I was mistaken. I never brought it up again. Instead, I turned to Zoloft in an attempt to feel better. It didn't help.

CHAPTER XXXIV

COMPARING LIVES

“Maribel vive en un apartamento el tamaño de un closet,” Mom tried consoling me one day. I was comparing my life to hers, voicing my thoughts with a knot in my throat for the first time. *“Quien quisiera tener una casa como la tuya,”* Mom continued. I knew I had more than others, but no amount of words would make me feel successful. Maribel sent me an expensive tote bag from France when I graduated from South Texas Community College with my associate’s degree. She said she was very proud and I felt she was. When I graduated with my Bachelor’s degree, she congratulated me. When I entered the Master’s program, I didn’t hear from her and it saddened me. She knew what was happening in my life because I published it on Facebook and family and friends from around the country were happy for me and shared in my joy of being accepted. “Maybe you weren’t expected to have a college degree,” my thesis adviser speculated. “You were just supposed to be a mom. She may be jealous because you’re going to have a degree she doesn’t have,” Dr. Braithwaite told me as I broke down in her office. “But I’ve always been happy for her. I would pray that she be blessed with a good career and that she be successful. I always wanted the best for them. Why can’t she be happy for me?” I cried. “She has traveled the globe, is able to afford expensive clothing and accessories, to vacation in England. I’m just trying to get a degree.”

I don’t have the courage to ask Maribel what happened to her encouraging words, why the sudden change in attitude, and I’m almost afraid to ask because she may turn around and say

my life isn't as important as I think. She has changed a lot since she moved to New York.
Maybe I have imagined this but I don't believe I have.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE UNDERGRAD

I will never forget my first day at the University of Texas Pan American, at age 37 and listed as a junior. I was extremely nervous and giddy the first day of class and not knowing where to park, I left my car at the farthest point from the building all my classes were in. I walked clear across campus and as a result was late to my very first lecture by five minutes if not less. The professor had closed the door, but I went ahead and walked in. “When that door is closed, you are not allowed to come in.” I felt my face get hot and my hands begin to sweat as I made my way to the back of the classroom. I don’t know if all eyes were on me, but I felt the weight of them anyway. I sat down and concentrated on not crying.

The next day, I had difficulty finding parking again and was late once more. This time, the professor didn’t see me coming around the corner and he closed the door right in front of me. I stood there for a moment, kicking myself and debating. “Fuck it. I don’t care if he embarrasses me again. I’m not missing a lecture.” I walked in avoiding looking at his face. He said nothing.

A few weeks into the semester, I had made my way to the front row where I was being the most active participant in class. I didn’t understand why the rest of his students were so quiet. I was enjoying myself. Every book or author he commented on or recommended, I wrote down. I was determined to get my financial aid money’s worth. There was a time or two when I’d be mad at myself for not knowing everything he was teacher. I would kick myself mentally for learning it so late in life. I should know this already, I told myself. I felt like a loser.

Months later, I confessed to him how I felt that first day of class, how nervous and scared I was about finally attending the university and then being humiliated in front of everyone.

“You don’t know what that does to a woman like me,” I told him.

He didn’t remember it was me he’d done it to. He chuckled, enjoying himself.

“I do that every semester. It teaches the kids to not be late. It taught you a lesson too, didn’t it?” He said, tapping his fingertips on his desk.

“Yes,” I said. “I now arrive on campus one and half hours before class to find parking. I force my kids to be at school before the sun even comes up,” I said. “But I will never forgive you for embarrassing me like that, you bastard.”

At the end of my first semester, I got an A in his class.

In the weeks that followed, he began approaching me while I sat in the hallways, waiting between classes. I felt flattered that a professor had taken an interest in me and that he wanted to know more about my life. There had been other people who had taken me under their wing when I was growing up, and it made me feel good because I knew they had my best interests in mind. I didn’t think I was as intriguing as the professor made me out to be, but I continued to meet with him. Sometimes he’d come out to the hall and sit next to me, crossing his legs and making small talk, occasionally greeting other students or professors as they walked by. Other times I would see him waving me over from the end of the hall, inviting me to join him in his office. One of his first questions as he closed his door was “Where is your husband right now?” I didn’t know why he was asking. I thought he was just curious to know Juan’s whereabouts in the country.

The first time I went to his office, I sat across from him. He sat behind his desk, rearranging notes and pens and smiling at me while I hugged my purse and fidgeted. Something made me nervous, I felt like I would stutter or not speak correctly. I noticed the rug under my feet was worn and tearing. I could see a yellowish powder on the floor and imagined it was from the bottom of the rug, the worn out nonskid material. When I called it to his attention, he promised to change it out, claiming it had been there for many years and it was time to put a new one in its place. He brought it two days later and asked me to help him set it up. It was red.

Weeks passed and we continued to meet in his office almost every day. I enjoyed listening to his stories and banter. He possessed a childlike enthusiasm that came out when he'd break out in hysterics, laughing as he recapped his own shenanigans. It made his adventures more enjoyable to hear. We laughed a lot and he would encourage me to continue with my studies. "Stay poor a little longer," he said, "and continue on for your master's degree. You think it was hard coming back to school now? If you wait until later, it'll be harder," he said one day. I don't know why he chose me, why he singled me out, but he did. "*Intelligence is an aphrodisiac*," he later told me. That's when I realized this was the reason I was attracted to him. Actually, I was attracted to other professors as well, but none of them had looked for me like he had.

He read a poem one day when I went to see him of my own volition. I don't know why I went, maybe subconsciously I was looking for comfort. I was on the verge of tears, stressing about my kids, my classes and feeling burdened by it all. Without asking what was wrong, he opened a book and read:

‘i like my body when it is with your body.
it is so quite a new thing.
Muscles better and nerves more.
i like your body.
i like what it does, i like its hows.
i like to feel the spine of your body, and its bones,
and the trembling—firm—smoothness
and which i will again and again and again kiss...’

I remembered the poem from class. It was e.e.cummings. I didn’t understand why he chose that poem, of all the poems he could have read. Listening to him read calmed my nerves. I felt a tingling sensation, a rise in temperature. I looked down embarrassed as he closed the book and smiled. I shyly said ‘thank you’ and left. I wondered if I had given myself away.

For weeks, I tried to stay away. “Do you have minute?” he came out to ask me one day. “Yes,” I said, and followed him again. We entered his office and he closed the door. “How are classes going? Are you okay?” he asked. “I’m getting by fine,” I tried assuring him. “I’m staying busy,” I told him.

We talked a lot about nothing that afternoon. He rose to close the blinds and I felt the darkness wrap around me. “I should leave,” I told him. He walked back to his desk and switched the desk lamp on. I stood up, mumbling my goodbye. He came around his desk, blocking my exit and pressed his body against mine. “If you decide you want to upgrade to an older man, let me know,” he said. His right hand moved quickly into the top of my blouse and he cupped my breast as he forced a kiss on me, at the moment I gasped, his tongue went searching inside for mine. I hadn’t expected this and before I knew it, I felt my body beginning to give into his. I kissed him

back then pulled away and barely uttered a goodbye. My arms went limp and my purse fell to my side. “We mustn’t. We can’t,” I uttered.

I drove home that night feeling strange. My adrenaline had never felt such a rush. I could feel my heart beating all the way home. I couldn’t stop thinking about what had just happened. I felt my insides literally disturbed. There was a vibrating sensation inside of me that wouldn’t stop and as hard as I tried, I couldn’t put it under control. I couldn’t concentrate or sleep that night. A part of me had liked it and a part of me knew it was wrong and it scared the shit out of me, but I told myself it had already happened. He had managed to stir my curiosity. I didn’t think this would ever happen to me. I thought it only happened in movies. My parents were right after all. A voice in my head called me a *puta*. A *puta* was a divorced woman or a woman who never married, like my mom would say when we were growing up. “*Esas nomas quieren andar de sueltas para andar de cabronas.*” I didn’t think I was a bad person and I wasn’t out to hurt anyone.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Rosa E. Trevino was born December 10, 1970 and resides at 1937 Royal Palm Drive, Mercedes, Texas 78570. She earned her Bachelor of Arts in English from the University of Texas-Pan American in May of 2010. This stay-at-home mom finally fulfilled her dream of acquiring a higher education. She loves preserving moments both through writing and photography and plans to pursue a teaching career in the near future. Her goal is to help others, of all ages, achieve their dreams.