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## South Texas Elegy: Life During a Global Pandemic

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SOUTH TEXAS ELEGY: LIFE DURING A GLOBAL PANDEMIC

A Thesis

by

BRIANNA BULLION

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Major Subject: Creative Writing

The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

May 2023



SOUTH TEXAS ELEGY: LIFE DURING A GLOBAL PANDEMIC

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May 2023



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## ABSTRACT

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South Texas Elegy: Life During a Global Pandemic highlights the narrator's experience with loss and grief during the coronavirus pandemic, which started in early 2020. This piece is written from the perspective of a narrator living in the Rio Grande Valley, which is in the southmost region of Texas.

This memoir contains thirteen chapters, which discuss deaths of close friends and family members, periods of waiting which occurred in between deaths and updates on the coronavirus, and the narrator's reflection at the end of the piece. This memoir is a tribute to lost loved ones and an account of an individual's experiences as someone who lived through the first global pandemic since 1919.

This memoir includes statistics about the coronavirus including death tolls, infected individuals, and the rate at which the virus killed. This piece also includes statistics about heart disease and cancer, which are also discussed throughout the piece.





## DEDICATION

For Tiffany, Ricky, Rudy, Sparky, Jorge, Grandma and Grandpa Mac, little Nati, and everyone we lost in between. I love and miss you all dearly.

For my parents, who have cheered me on since I told them I wanted to be a writer and tell my stories. Thank you for your constant love and support.



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## CHAPTER I

### CRITICAL INTRODUCTION FOR SOUTH TEXAS ELEGY: LIFE DURING A GLOBAL PANDEMIC

#### **Section 1: Introduction**

The Coronavirus pandemic has deeply impacted the Rio Grande Valley (RGV) since March of 2020. Since March 19 of 2020, there have been over 200,000 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and over 4,000 deaths attributed to the deadly virus in Hidalgo County alone. Today, Hidalgo County stands at the second level of the Local Health Department Operational Levels and Indicators ([hidalgocounty.us/coronavirusupdates](https://hidalgocounty.us/coronavirusupdates)).

*South Texas Elegy: Life During a Global Pandemic* (henceforth referred to as *South Texas Elegy*) focuses primarily on events that took place in Hidalgo County during the pandemic years. While several of the events in this piece focus on tragedy as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, some focus on events and problems which occurred as a result of the changes that came with the pandemic. This memoir focuses on the narrator's experiences with tragedy and loss between 2020 and late 2022 and the ramifications of experiencing elevated amounts of loss in a relatively short amount of time. This piece highlights the deaths of twelve individuals who were close to the narrator in one way or another. Of these individuals, two died as a result of COVID-19, two died of heart attacks, two died of cancer, and five died of old age. The oldest of these individuals was 94 years old. They youngest was four years old.

This piece is a memoir. It reflects the life and experiences of the narrator in a way that helps educate the reader about the events of the coronavirus pandemic and the other tragedies that surrounded it while communicating the narrator's emotions and observations. Further, this memoir presents a discussion of pandemic-related mental health issues. While the scope of this piece is relatively narrow, it reflects the experiences of an individual who lived through an important point in history. While the coronavirus pandemic was not as severe as a world war or mass genocide, it impacted the United States and the rest of the world in a profound way that cannot be undone. These impacts are discussed in detail in *South Texas Elegy*.

Towards the end of this memoir, the narrator mentions her reasoning for writing this piece. She says:

Writing and reading about pandemic experience is perhaps the sole way in which people will truly remember what has happened as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. That is why I have continued to write this story. This work is a tribute to those I have lost and an attempt to remind those who read this piece that life is fragile and fleeting—if the coronavirus has taught us anything, it should be that life can be created and taken away within an instant. The pandemic years stole time, social lives, and lives in general. Some individuals who survived terminal illnesses like cancer tested positive for COVID-19 and died as a result of the virus. Some people tested positive for COVID-19 and survived the virus only to be killed by something else. Others simply started paying more attention to their health and received diagnoses that said they would not live much longer. The coronavirus was not the only thing that stole from us during the pandemic years. But, COVID-19 was the beginning of the horrible things that were to come. The coronavirus

years took a lot from us, but it also helped us see and understand what we have taken for granted.

Perhaps we should all work harder to take less for granted. (Bullion 104)

This closing paragraph helps the reader understand why the narrator chose to tell her story. The narrator mentions that this piece is a tribute to her loved ones that she discusses in detail throughout the memoir, which also points to the narrator's desire to help readers remember the events of the coronavirus pandemic. This final paragraph also mentions that the deaths during the pandemic were not limited exclusively to the coronavirus, which helps strengthen the claim that the pandemic-years were made difficult by the pandemic alone. Throughout the memoir, the narrator mentions loved ones who suffered from illnesses and deaths that have impacted lives since long before the coronavirus. The narrator also mentions the ways in which the pandemic impacted individuals in ways that did not directly relate to the coronavirus including high stress levels, stronger concerns about individual health, and newfound issues with mental health. The closing paragraph of this memoir serves as a reminder of the ways in which the pandemic has impacted everyone, even in ways that do not directly relate to the coronavirus.

This memoir has influences from historical fiction, dystopian fiction, statistic based research, and the narrator's personal experience. The remainder of this introduction will discuss the research methods and literary influences behind this novel. Further, this introduction will provide explanations for the stylistic choices discussed in the primary text of the thesis including explanation of genre, explanation of format, and explanation of titles and subtitles.

## Section 2: Memoir Style

*South Texas Elegy* is a work of creative nonfiction. Lee Gutkind defines creative nonfiction as work that is rooted in nonfiction with certain creative elements to help make the piece more compelling to the reader (Gutkind xix). According to Gutkind, the creative nonfiction writer must "...embrace many of the techniques of the fiction writer, including dialogue, description, plot, intimacy and specificity of detail, characterization, point of view; except, because it is nonfiction—and this is the difference—it is true," (Gutkind xix). Creative nonfiction is a genre that has fallen under some suspicion over the years due to the implication that it details true events while allowing the author to alter events slightly for creative reasons. Some consider creative nonfiction to be deceitful because it passes off improvised dialogue and scenic descriptions as elements of nonfiction. However, the basis of creative nonfiction is rooted in real events and issues that impact the world around the writer or narrator.

Memoir is a genre that falls into the larger category of creative nonfiction. This thesis is a memoir, but it does not necessarily fit all of the conventions of the memoir genre. Memoirs often involve re-tellings of events that occurred in the author's life, while employing some creative liberty. While *South Texas Elegy* is an account of events that happened during the author's life, it incorporates some research in order to ground the reader in the realities of the situation of the story. There are scenes throughout the piece and the thesis features first-hand accounts of events the author experienced, but each scene includes some research elements in order to help the reader fully understand the events and situation of this piece.

Creative nonfiction and historical fiction are often confused due to their shared focus on important events in history. However, both genres are different. Creative nonfiction implies that



the writer has the ability to recall at least partial events exactly as they happened. Certain elements may be altered, but the characters and events are true. Historical fiction features fictional characters who experience events from history, but the majority of the story is creative based. The characters in this genre live through events that actually happened, but they are not recounted exactly as they happened. The altered pieces of historical fiction go beyond dialogue changes and scenic description changes. Characters are invented, tragedies tend to be romanticized, and much can be lost to the creative aspects of the story.

Creative nonfiction allows the author to recount true events and experiences with the understanding that not all of the events will be written exactly as they happened. This memoir was written as a creative nonfiction piece due to the inability to one hundred percent accurately describe the events as they happened. This memoir features dialogue, scenic descriptions, and other elements that may not describe the events exactly as they happened. Some items have been altered for creative purposes and other elements have been altered for the sake of memory. The characters and primary events in this memoir are true, but the details are slightly altered. Altered items include dialogue between the narrator and other characters with lines of dialogue and scenic descriptions. All other items and events are recorded exactly as they happened.

This memoir is divided into thirteen chapters. Nine of these chapters are dedicated to the individuals whose deaths and funerals are described in the memoir. Each chapter that is dedicated to a specific individual is titled after the person's name. The introductory chapter introduces the setting and situation of this piece as well as the first three deaths that the narrator experienced prior to the memoir's climax. The final chapter discusses the narrator's reflection on the events she has experienced and the changes she has seen in herself and the world around her

as a result of the pandemic. The remaining two chapters focus on the periods in between the losses in the narrator's life as well as the narrator's observations and struggles that occur in between losses. Each chapter introduces a new experience, which helps establish the narrator's new observations and the changes that have taken place in the narrator's life. Further, the chapters assist with establishing the passing of time, which helps establish setting.

The titles and subtitles in this piece are significant to the narrator's relationship to literature and religion. The title of this piece, *South Texas Elegy*, is a nod to a form of poetry. An elegy is written to mourn someone who has passed away. This piece is a sort of elegy for the twelve individuals whom the narrator is mourning and the life that the narrator was living prior to the pandemic. Throughout this piece, the reader witnesses the narrator's struggles with mental health, struggles with learning how to grieve in a new way, and struggles with cynicism. It is implied throughout this piece that the narrator has experienced a significant amount of change during the span of the memoir. Thus, this piece is an elegy for the people the narrator has lost and the outlook on life that she held prior to the events of the memoir. As implied in the memoir, the narrator previously had a relatively positive outlook on life with little to no experience with the kind of loss she experienced during the pandemic years. The events of this memoir make it evident that her outlook has changed.

As previously mentioned, the chapters in this memoir which are dedicated to specific individuals are named after the respective individuals. The introductory and concluding chapters are named as such, and the two remaining chapters are titled as "Limbo" and "Limbo, Part Two." Encyclopedia Britannica defines limbo as "the border place between heaven and hell where dwell those souls who, though not condemned to punishment, are deprived of the joy of eternal

existence with God in heaven” (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/limbo-Roman-Catholic-theology>). Throughout this memoir, the narrator’s religion is made clear. As mentioned on page 88, the narrator was raised in the Baptist church though other members of her family were devout Catholics. Throughout the piece, the narrator is presumed to be deeply religious and appears to experience life in a way that is heavily influenced by the religion she has been raised in. So, the narrator’s description of the periods between funerals, fatal diagnoses of family members and friends, and unexpected deaths as periods of limbo further defines the way in which the narrator has experienced the extended periods of tragedy described in this memoir. While the narrator herself is not Catholic, she mentions ties to the Catholic Church via family members whom she looked up to. Further, the narrator is presumed to be both a scholar and deeply religious, which implies that ties to both denominations she has been exposed to would define her outlook on the situation at hand. The limbo chapters in this piece may be seen as simple waiting periods wherein the narrator is waiting for something else to happen, or they may perhaps be considered as the period during which the narrator is anticipating a return to the previously joyful life she presumably led.

The style and format of this memoir help to establish the tone of the piece as well as the narrator’s journey through the pandemic years. Further, the genre of this piece allows the reader to understand that the events and circumstances of this story are true with slight modifications having been made for creative purposes and the sake of memory.

### **Section 3: Research**

This memoir features several statistics and research elements to help ensure that the primarily important sections of this piece are accurate. Further, the research in this piece is used to establish the narrator's character as a student and intellectual. While the research in this piece helps to explain the various illnesses and causes of death, the way in which the research is introduced helps to establish the idea that the narrator seeks refuge in understanding the situation and happenings around her. The use of research also helps establish the narrator's panic when she cannot fully comprehend the situation at hand.

The research in this piece is drawn from the Hidalgo County Coronavirus Update website, the Cameron County website, the Willacy County website, the American Cancer Society, the American Heart Association, the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the American Psychological Association. The research drawn from these sources includes death statistics, symptoms of various diseases and illnesses, and survival rate statistics.

One of the primary focuses of this piece is the COVID-19 pandemic. In this piece, the narrator discusses COVID-19 death rates in the United States as well as the narrowed region of the Rio Grande Valley. The coronavirus death toll for the United States has surpassed one million, which the narrator notes as astounding and devastating towards the beginning of the piece. The coronavirus death toll has surpassed 200,000 which the narrator also notes as devastating. These statistics are accompanied by detailed symptoms of COVID-19, which the narrator uses to help herself understand the way in which her loved ones who have experienced or died from the virus. While these statistics and symptoms are listed and described as the

narrator's means of coping with the situation, they also serve the purpose of allowing the reader to understand what is happening during the span of the memoir.

The narrator also discusses the preventative measures which slowed the spread of the coronavirus including mask mandates and lockdowns. Throughout the memoir, the narrator mentions the changes in her lifestyle that are a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic. These lifestyle changes include working from home, wearing masks to church, attending church via online services, and being unable to participate in church programs. These changes were all a result of the ongoing pandemic and the efforts made to limit the COVID related destruction. So, while not all of the deaths and funerals mentioned in this memoir were directly related to the pandemic, each tragedy described in this piece has a direct relationship to the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. During the time the memoir takes place, Hidalgo County underwent several weeklong lockdowns during which people were not allowed to leave their homes for non-essential purposes and mandates requiring that everyone wear masks anytime they were in public. The narrator of this piece mentions these details throughout the memoir as if they were just part of her life during the pandemic, which works to help the reader understand the way these changes were integrated into the narrator's everyday life. Though not all of the tragedies in this piece are a direct product of the coronavirus itself, each experience and situation is a product of the response to the pandemic.

The narrator also describes and discusses statistics and symptoms of non-coronavirus related illnesses including heart attacks, cancer, and severe mental illness resulting in suicide. These statistics and symptoms are meant to remind the reader that while the coronavirus pandemic was the world's primary health concern starting in 2020. COVID-19 was the third

leading cause of death in 2020 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). Individuals who lived through the early parts of the pandemic may be shocked to discover that the coronavirus was not the absolute leading cause of death in 2020, but this simple fact serves as a reminder that the coronavirus is not the only illness that has been known to kill at rapid rates. Heart disease was the leading cause of death in 2020, cancer was the second leading cause, and COVID-19 was the third leading cause of death. Heart disease and cancer are also discussed in this memoir as two of the piece's characters died as a result of heart attacks and two of the characters died as a result of cancer.

The research that has been incorporated in this memoir was taken from reliable sources that have become pillars of health research in America. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has become one of the leading points of research regarding the coronavirus pandemic. Research conducted and communicated by the CDC is widely respected in the United States. When reading news articles regarding the coronavirus pandemic, most journalists refer to the CDC when discussing vaccination information, symptom information, and precautionary measures that were to be taken to avoid catching the virus. The research conducted for this piece came from well-known and well-respected sources which are widely known to be the premier points of knowledge and expertise in their respective fields.

#### **Section 4: Literature**

When writing about events that will be recorded in history, a writer must consider the ways in which other writers have written about history. This memoir focuses on a global pandemic which will surely be a defining point in United States and world history. This thesis was influenced by historical fiction and dystopian fiction, which bear a unique relationship to

each other. In order to understand the relationship between these two genres and how they relate to this memoir, each must first be defined and discussed in detail. This section will define historical fiction and dystopian fiction before discussing the relationship between both genres and discussing the use of literature in *South Texas Elegy*.

#### **Section 4A: Historical Fiction**

Historical fiction includes literary works written about important events from history. This memoir specifically references a novel written about World War II, but it bears influence from several other works of historical fiction which focus on war, epidemics, and disease outbreaks. These pieces were considered for their language, but the primary consideration of these novels in regards to this memoir was in the way that they discuss events of the past in a way that communicates their importance and ramifications with the modern audience.

The narrator references Chris Cleave's *Everyone Brave is Forgiven*. This novel is about World War II and the English army's war efforts. This story follows the life of Mary North, who wishes to do what she can to help with the war efforts. She is made to be a school teacher for the children who were left behind after the majority of the children in England were transported to a safer place to avoid danger during the war. *South Texas Elegy* references this novel to discuss her perspective of the face masks that became common place during the pandemic years. While this is a relatively small portion of the memoir, the concepts explored in this discussion of historical fiction novels is important when considering the timeliness of the topic explored in the memoir.

Historical fiction serves to educate modern audiences about events of the past. In order for a novel to be considered a valid work of historical fiction, it must be written about an important moment in history. The coronavirus pandemic had a profound impact on the RGV,

Texas, the United States, and the world. No individual or country was immune to the ramifications of this global pandemic. Thus, these moments are important points in history which must be recorded in order to educate future generations and audiences.

The narrator in this memoir has a close relationship to literature. Throughout the piece, she references the ways in which she turns to literature to distract herself from the situation around her or to help herself try to understand the things that happen around her. The narrator, who is presumed to be the author of this piece, clearly believes that writing is a way in which important historical events may be preserved. The narrator also appears to believe that the situations in this memoir will become important points in history.

While the narrator of this piece places value on her relationship with literature and in turn uses this to place value on the events discussed in works of historical fiction, the style of this memoir differs from the style of a historical fiction piece. The primary and most obvious difference between the genre of creative nonfiction and that of historical fiction can be seen in the name of the genre. Historical fiction contains more creative based elements than a work of creative nonfiction. Characters are fabricated, dialogue is completely imagined, and there is not a true first hand account available to the reader. The events in the story still happened, but the author has taken more creative liberty than an author of creative nonfiction would.

Creative nonfiction often involves memoir. Rather than writing about an event which the writer did not experience themselves, the writer documents his or her experiences in a way that makes the piece compelling to the reader. The term creative nonfiction allows the writer to document a real event in a literary way, though the dialogue and detailed scenic descriptions may



differ slightly from what actually happened. While the writer takes creative liberty, an important moment or event from history has been recorded by the writer.

Eventually, there will be historical fiction written about the coronavirus pandemic. Writers will no longer be recording their personal experiences, but they will still write about the events of the pandemic years. So, *South Texas Elegy* and the memoirs of other individuals who experienced loss, tragedy, or even illness during the coronavirus pandemic may become the basis by which these novels are researched. The coronavirus pandemic will eventually become a thing of the past, but the impact this global pandemic has had on people from every nation will still be written about. This memoir was influenced in part by works of historical fiction because of the levity of the memoir's topic and the way in which the importance of the subject matter should be communicated to the audience.

#### **Section 4B: Dystopian Fiction**

This memoir also references dystopian fiction. The novel that this memoir references features a disease that infects and kills indiscriminately. *Cinder* by Marissa Meyer features a disease much like what is described as smallpox. Moonpox is a deadly virus that infects and kills almost immediately. The individuals who are infected by this virus are picked up by a large drone and taken to a lab where they may die in peace. Their bodies are removed from the lab once they die and are burned to prevent an excessive accumulation of bodies and to prevent the spread of the virus.

The narrator of *South Texas Elegy* compares the moonpox outbreak in *Cinder* to the coronavirus pandemic. She makes a connection between the pace at which both viruses spread as well as the way the bodies are handled once the virus kills the person who has become infected.

This connection further establishes the narrator's relationship to literature and the idea that reading helps her understand her situation. The connection between the situation of the dystopian novel and the events of the coronavirus pandemic may seem like a stretch to the reader or the individuals around the narrator, but the connection that she makes helps her relate to her situation through the situation of the characters in Marissa Meyer's novel.

The narrator briefly mentions a sincere adoration of the novel's protagonist and the ways in which she sees herself in the main character. Cinder, the teenage cyborg girl who lives with her wicked stepmother and two stepsisters, is this novel's protagonist, saves the galaxy from moonpox and the evil queen who caused the disease to impact millions of people. Cinder shows considerable bravery in fighting the disease and the people who created it. She also shows a willingness and hunger to help those around her when she risks her life to find the cure for a disease which could kill her just as easily as it has killed others. Throughout *South Texas Elegy*, the narrator demonstrates a desire to help those around her and expresses her horror at not being able to help her friends and family who die. The narrator likely sees herself in Cinder as she longs to help those around her in any way that she can, but her disappointment likely comes from the simple fact that the coronavirus is a real disease that was not created by a fictional queen and thus cannot be cured simply by freeing the galaxy from her rule. The narrator wishes that she could help those around her on a large scale, much like Cinder, but she is unable to. In reading this dystopian novel, the narrator likely experiences a sense of escape from the reality of the world around her—she is able to transport herself to a world where she can help free those around her from COVID-19 by fighting a physical and external force.

The connection between the events in *Cinder* and the coronavirus pandemic may also help the reader make a connection between the events of various dystopian novels and events in history that have made long lasting impacts. The disease in this particular dystopian novel closely resembles smallpox. The symptoms included a high fever, a progressive rash that quickly spread from the face to the neck to the chest and throughout the rest of the body. Right before characters who were infected with moonpox died, they lost their sight and convulsing (which is often synonymous with an unusually high fever leading to a seizure).

While the remaining events in this novel are completely outlandish and fictional, the relationship to this fabricated virus and smallpox seems to present the idea that perhaps the author of this novel drew inspiration for this disease from the reports of smallpox from the late 1700s. This connection points towards the relationship between historical fiction and dystopian fiction. Further, the end of this novel parallels the end of this thesis. While *Cinder* features a relatively happy ending wherein the story's heroine moves on to fight other evil forces, the real-world ending of the memoir features a world wherein the narrator is forced to deal with the external forces which are continuing to impact her loved ones. She is unable to fight these forces in the way that *Cinder* is able to and there is not necessarily a happy ending, but she is still forced to deal with the impacts the external forces are making.

#### **Section 4C: Historical Fiction and Dystopian Fiction**

While historical fiction and dystopian fiction are very different, there is a connection between both genres that is evident when considering the events that typically take place in dystopian novels.

In *Cinder*, there is both a world's war and a virus that kills those who are infected at a very rapid pace. Both of these circumstances are also often featured in historical fiction. But why is this connection important?

Dystopian fiction is typically only considered to be a creative invention by the writer. There has not been an intergalactic war recorded in any history book nor has there ever been an accurate report of an evil moon queen who uses biochemical warfare to take over a planet. But, the author of this novel did not fabricate these events without a real world example. As previously stated, this novel discusses a virus similar to smallpox. Further, the evil moon queen may be compared to a dictator who will do anything in his or her power to ensure that their kingdom or world gains power. This fictional novel appears to have drawn its inspiration from an event from history.

Thus, the conclusion can be drawn that events from history influence various types of literature including both historical fiction and dystopian fiction. Literature changes to reflect the events that make profound impacts on the world. Novels and other works of literature have changed in many different ways since the earliest works of literature were recorded. Novels are not written using the same language that stories from the eighteenth century used. Stories are not written about the same things as they were when *The Scarlet Letter* was published. Literature reflects the experiences of the world around the writer. The world that is reflected in literature may not necessarily be the world that the author lives in—sometimes the events detailed in novels and stories reflect on influential events of the past.

Historical fiction clearly draws on important events from the past in order to tell a compelling story that educates the reader. The stories about world wars and conflicts within

countries help teach lessons about events of the past and how those events have shaped the modern world. Dystopian novels do much of the same, but the setting is different. Rather than drawing on past events and using the setting of those events to tell a story, dystopian fiction alters the events of the past and uses them to tell a fantastic story that seems as if it could only happen in the future.

#### **Section 4D: Historical Fiction and Dystopian Fiction in South Texas Elegy**

The use of literature in this piece is dual purpose. The narrator mentions using literature as a means of helping her understand her situation and separate herself from the losses she experiences. Thus, the need to escape from such loss and tragedy by attempting to experience life through a fictional character allows the reader to have a glimpse into the narrator's mind. The escape through literature is an attempt at a distraction for the narrator, which helps the reader establish the depth of the narrator's grief and heartache.

Further, the use of historical and dystopian fiction serves as a point of comparison. While historical fiction features fictional characters living through important events from history, this creative nonfiction piece features a narrator who has actually experienced the events of the story. Further, rather than providing a fantastical element to make the story of loss and grief more interesting, this memoir leans slightly towards the emotional side and allows the narrator's emotions to drive the story forward.

Both genres are different despite their connections, but their styles assist with claims regarding creative nonfiction. Eventually, first hand accounts of historical events reach a point where they can no longer be considered creative nonfiction because they are no longer first hand accounts. Eventually, memoirs written during a time of hardship evolve into works of historical

fiction. Their details and events may differ, but they are focused on the same primary situation. Further, once society has adequately distanced itself from a specific event, the door is opened to turn an important historical event into a point of influence for a dystopian novel. Literature is cyclical—it changes with the ebbs and flows of history. Once an event outlives its relevance as a topic for creative nonfiction, it becomes historical fiction. Once an event outlives its relevance as a topic for historical fiction, it becomes a candidate for dystopian fiction.

Historical and dystopian fiction are included in this memoir to help the reader form the connection between all three genres. Once an event is seen as important enough for a memoir to be written about it, it becomes an event that is important enough for historical fiction to be written about it. The cycle continues with new events as time goes on. Eventually, COVID-19 memoirs and works of creative nonfiction will become candidates for historical fiction. First hand accounts will become impossible to write, which will make way for fictional characters to live through these events in a fictional story. The COVID-19 pandemic has made a profound impact on the entire world. Due to the profundity of this impact, the coronavirus pandemic will remain a topic of discussion in literary works for generations to come.

### **Section 5: Conclusion**

This memoir discusses a period of time that will be discussed for years to come. Though the pandemic may seem to fade and case numbers will begin to decrease, there is no escaping the impact that the pandemic has made. COVID memoirs will likely become commonplace throughout the next several years. Some will be comfortable enough to discuss their personal experiences, while others may interview their loved ones who experienced some form of

hardship between 2020 and early 2023 to record their experiences. Regardless, pandemic literature will serve as a means of communication to future generations.

When the memoirs turn into romantic historical fiction novels that cause readers to long for a time when exciting things were happening and there were large celebrations in the aftermath of great tragedy, children will turn to their parents and ask what the COVID years were really like. The pandemic years will likely be romanticized over the next several years, much like contemporary historical fiction novels romanticize World War II. Further, the coronavirus pandemic may one day become the basis for a dystopian novelist's book about a disease that kills indiscriminately and painfully. As the literary cycle continues, readers will continue to learn about the coronavirus pandemic and the tragedies surrounding it regardless of the means.

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## APPENDIX

## APPENDIX

### **South Texas Elegy: Life During a Global Pandemic**

#### **Chapter One: Introduction**

I haven't always kept track of funerals. I have distant memories of the funerals I went to as a child and can name some of the people I mourned before I knew what mourning really was, but they used to be scattered unpleasant memories that mingled with everything else in my otherwise happy life.

That all changed when I grew up.

The concept of "growing up" has always seemed rather subjective to me. Some people use it to talk about the simple process of aging, for some people it's mostly associated with maturity and milestones. I used to think I had grown up when I went away for college in 2016. After all, I had reached the major milestone of moving away from my parents and finding a way to at least halfway take care of myself. But, the events of the year 2020 re-defined my idea of how I have grown up.

It started with three funerals for people I did not really know. One was a man named Robert, the second was a man named Michael, and the third was a woman named Linda. They were all older and distant from my scope of tragedy. Robert Jinks was a man who had attended my childhood church for a long time. His grandson was in the Sunday school class my parents taught and we went to his funeral to support the family. I did not know him, but I remember

seeing him sitting in the church sanctuary with his signature straw boater hat with the tattered green and red ribbon stretched across the middle. His funeral was packed. We sat in the green church pews that had boxes of off-brand tissues placed on both ends. The line of flower arrangements stretched across the front of the sanctuary and continued against both walls until they reached the back entrance doors. There were so many people eager to share stories of their experiences with him. One man talked about their weekly coffee visits and conversations about Baylor football. Another man talked about visiting Bobo (as they called him) in the nursing home a few days before he passed. Robert's son gave the archetypal speech most sons seem to give at their father's funerals about the advice, love, and help he offered throughout the years. I laughed when it seemed appropriate, smiled when I thought I should, and felt sad for everyone who seemed to know this man whom I just started to get to know through other people's memories.

Michael Metzger was another man from church. Unlike Robert, I had memories with Mr. Metzger. Every Sunday from the time I was about three years old until I was about seven, Mr. Metzger would step away from the entrance door and extend his hand towards me and stoop down to greet me.

“Good morning, young lady,” he would say.

“Hi!” I replied as I tried to shake his hand as hard as I could.

He would often ask what I learned in Sunday school that morning. Sometimes he asked what grade I was in.

I don't have one distinct memory of my conversations with Mr. Metzger, but I do remember the way I would skip up the steps leading to the sanctuary and sway from side to side until it was my turn to shake his hand. I also remember the joy I felt when he leaned down to talk

to me and grasp my hand with his thick, veiny hands. After he and I had talked, he would hand my parents a church bulletin and made sure he gave me one too. I never walked through the sanctuary doors without feeling like I was welcome.

Like Robert's services, Mr. Metzger's funeral was also packed—I looked around the room and saw the frowns on almost everyone's faces as we watched a slideshow with pictures of his life play on the church sanctuary screens. I was sad that we were saying goodbye to such a kind man, but the sorrow I felt was not rooted in my own grief. My heart broke when I saw the exhaustion and melancholy in his son's eyes as he hugged people and thanked them for coming to the funeral. My parents and I made it to the front of the sanctuary to pay our respects and offer condolences.

"Thank you for coming," Jason said as he patted my dad's shoulder.

"You doing okay?" my mom asked as she gave him a quick hug.

He nodded and smiled before sighing and running his hand over his face. His eyes were red and I could see the tears that were collecting at the bottom of his eyes. I felt his pain, but I also felt like I had done something to help him heal by coming to offer my condolences.

Linda Gabrielson was my fourth grade Sunday school teacher's mother. I never met her, but I remember hearing stories about her legendary worship sessions (usually involving dancing and multiple instruments) and Energizer bunny energy when I was younger. Her son, Mike, told us that he was a trouble maker when he was a child. He would pretend to be asleep well past when he was supposed to be awake on Sunday mornings just so he could stay home from church with his mom. Linda would stay home with Mike on those Sundays, and once he was sure his dad had backed out of the driveway, Mike would roll out of bed and sit on the couch with his

mom. They would watch cartoons and eat breakfast together. According to Mike, his mom always reminded him that their Sunday morning cartoon sessions had to be their secret. He said he treasured those Sundays with her.

Linda's funeral was held in a tiny room that was full of flowers, people, and laughter. We sang classic hymns with a man who sat in a tiny metal chair at the front of the room with his guitar cradled in his lap. Linda's death was somewhat sudden, so she had not really spoken to her loved ones about exactly what she wanted at her funeral. But, she had spoken to this man about what her favorite hymns and praises were. So, he went down her list and sang with tears in his eyes. We all sang together and laughed as Mike talked about his childhood as her favorite son. We all hugged and said our goodbyes after the services. I remember seeing a sad smile on Mike's face right before we left. It was reassuring to see that he was at least okay enough to offer a small smile.

I was almost certain that I knew what grief was after these three funerals. I had known people who died and attended events specifically to mourn them, so I knew exactly what it was like to grieve.

But, I had no idea what it was like to mourn someone without closure. At the time, I did not realize that funerals and memorial services serve the very specific purpose of providing closure. I did not know that being unable to hold a proper funeral for a loved one had a profound impact on your ability to deny, feel anger, bargain, be depressed, and accept.

I was in for a very rude awakening.

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I grew up in the Rio Grande Valley, which is the region of Texas that borders Mexico in the floodplain of the Rio Grande. The RGV is a region made of four counties and over twenty cities. The population of the Rio Grande Valley is over 90% latino (rgvhealthconnect.org). The little over 6% of the population that is not hispanic or latino is made up of individuals of African American, American Indian, Asian, or Pacific Islander descent. The Rio Grande Valley is also home to the only tropical island in the entire state of Texas (South Padre Island) and one of the top ten livestock shows in Texas (the Rio Grande Valley Livestock Show). The battle of Palmito Hill, which was the final battle in the American Civil War, took place in one of the four counties that make up the Rio Grande Valley (Cameron County). The diversity and culture of the RGV has made me proud to call the southmost region of Texas my home since I was a child.

I did not realize how little people knew about my hometown until I went away for college. To me, the RGV has always been a place of palm-tree, sunshine beauty filled with people from different backgrounds. It wasn't until my freshman year of college when one of my friends asked if living in the Valley meant I went to Mexico every weekend and another friend's mother was horrified when we planned a trip to visit my family for the weekend because of the "violence" that she was convinced lurked behind every "taco shack" or "paleta stand." My friend was from Houston, which actually had a higher crime rate than McAllen in 2016. She probably would have attributed that to the higher population, but I still didn't see how that really made much of a difference.

We stayed safe that weekend and actually did not really face any real danger until we were driving back to school through Austin when we were almost involved in a road rage

incident after a man driving a large chevy truck decided I was much too close to him when I changed lanes.

Since then, it has frustrated me to know that some people from other places look down their noses at the Rio Grande Valley. My friend's family won't ever even bother to think about the eight different people groups that call this place home. They won't care that the RGV has many ports and bridges that help connect Texas and the United States to other parts of the world. They certainly do not realize that without the farming and international trade in this region, we would not have access to things like avocados, berries, or citrus like we do today.

Their ignorance must have made it easier to ignore when the Rio Grande Valley became a hotspot for COVID cases.

The first confirmed case of COVID-19 in the Rio Grande Valley was a 21-year-old man from Rancho Viejo. He had reportedly just returned from traveling in Spain and Ireland. His diagnosis was reported on March 19, 2020.

After the confirmed case in Rancho Viejo, which is located in Cameron County, cases in surrounding counties followed by the day. By mid-July, Hidalgo County had reached a daily average of over 500 new confirmed cases.

Before 2020, most people had never heard of or considered what a judicial order was or what a stay at home order entailed. In fact, I had never heard of a judge carrying out any kind of judicial order from the time I was born in 1997 until March of 2020. I had been looking at articles online while I sat in the living room with my mom and came across an article about the possibility of a what was then being referred to simply as a shelter in place order.

“Have you heard about this? People are saying that the judge is going to tell everyone they have to stay home,” I said to my mom.

“Yeah—I’ve heard that too. I don’t know how much weight something like that will hold though. I’ve never heard of anyone doing something like that” she said.

The first judicial order for a county-wide shut down came on March 22. The stay at home order said that everyone had to stay at home unless they were grocery shopping, exercising, working as a first responder, or en route to a hospital.

We were told to monitor our health every day. According to the CDC, symptoms of COVID-19 may feel like a normal cold or the flu at first. It could start with a stuffy nose and a cough, then turn into a loss of taste and smell and fever all in one day. For some people, they didn’t realize they were even sick until they couldn’t taste their morning coffee anymore. Then, they would go to a drive-thru testing center, wait in line for hours on end, and get a rather invasive nasal swab involving an cotton swab that my friends said was “at least five inches long” and a technician dressed in head to toe plastic protective gear, and be told whether or not they needed to be afraid of dying for the next several weeks until they tested negative for the coronavirus.



## **Chapter Two: Della Blanchard**

It seems odd to remember the parts of 2020 that started off normally. Before everyone became afraid of coughing and sneezing and wondering whether they had just forgotten to add salt and pepper to their food or if they just couldn't taste it anymore, 2020 started off like any other normal year. I had just started a new job, had resumed the volunteer work I had put on hiatus when I went away to college, and was looking forward to being home to spend more time with my family.

I can still remember where I was when COVID-19 first came into the RGV. I can remember the plans I had made for the next day and the excitement that came with my younger brother coming home for Spring Break and the new job I had just started a few months before the world shut down. It seemed like it all passed in a grotesque blur when it was happening. But looking back, the horrible memories seem to take up the entirety of my early to mid twenties.

I was a volunteer at the Rio Grande Valley Livestock Show (RGVLS), which is the fifth largest livestock show in the state of Texas, when everyone started to use hand sanitizer religiously and use Pinterest to design and sew their own face masks. RGVLS is an annual fair held every March that allows children and youth from 4-H and FFA chapters to raise and show various livestock animals or participate in other activities that promote local agriculture. Children and youth who participate in the RGVLS can show animals including cattle, lambs, goats, chickens, pigs, and rabbits. I had volunteered in the rabbit barn every March since I graduated high school in 2016 and always looked forward to the events and atmosphere that the livestock show offered.

I had been unable to get the entire week off work to volunteer at the livestock show. I had just started as a Children's Department Assistant at the Pharr Memorial Library in January and couldn't request any vacation time until July that year. So, I had planned to split my time between working at the library and helping out in the rabbit barn when I could. Typically, we would check in all of the rabbits for the market show the Monday of Spring Break week. The show would happen on Tuesday, and the kids who were showing rabbits would have the rest of the week to take care of their animals as members of the community came to the show to admire all of the animals, carnival rides, and shop projects.

2020 and the coronavirus pandemic had a funny habit of changing plans.

I got a text from my mom about the livestock show while I was preparing for the library's Movie Monday program the Monday of Spring Break.

"Hey. They're shutting the show down now. We're doing the show tomorrow and will have to do load out late tomorrow evening. I'll let you know when I know more," she said.

My finger hovered over the keyboard for a moment before I started to form my response.

"Okay. I can head that way after work to help get ready for the show."

That's all I could think to say as I felt my heart plummet. My mind was swimming with thoughts as I sloppily scooped popcorn into paper bags.

*What about the seniors? Will any of them even enjoy their last show? What about the sale? How will the winners get to go to auction? How will these kids help their parents even pay for their projects if they can't get the sale money?*

Looking back, I wish I could remind myself that this was just a small event in the grand scheme of things. Sure, there were a lot of things that a lot of people probably wouldn't be able

to do. Some kids might miss their final show, some kids may not even get to cherish their first show. But, in the grand scheme of things, there were much more important things to worry about.

If I had known then that over one million people in the United States alone would die from COVID-19 complications or that the whole world would slowly learn to be afraid of ever gathering together or that thousands of people would lose their jobs, I'm sure I would have been less upset about the local government deciding to close down the livestock show.

I guess I wouldn't have needed to convince myself of that for long—I learned all too well what a global pandemic meant for everyone soon thereafter.

I was at work again the next day when I got a text from my mom.

*Can I call you?*

I looked around the Children's Department to make sure there were no patrons before turning to tell my supervisor that I was going to take a quick phone call.

The phone rang twice before my mom answered.

"Hey Bri," she said.

"Hey. What's up? Is everything okay?" I replied.

I could hear her sniffing over the static silence.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"Well," she said. "I have some bad news."

*Oh great. They've probably just shut down everything early and now there won't even be a show and we're going to have to find a place for all of these rabbits.* I thought.

“Larry found out today that his grandmother passed away. Her neighbor went in to check on her because no one had heard from her, and she had passed at some point last night. He’s waiting to tell Troy until he finishes for the day,” she said.

I felt the color drain from my face as I steadied myself against the wall with a shaky hand.

“Oh,” was all I could say.

*When did I become so self-centered?*

“I just wanted to let you know before you heard it from someone else. Troy isn’t going to take it very well, so we will probably wait until no one else is around to tell him. Please just be thinking about him,” she said.

“Okay. I will. Will you let me know if you need anything?”

“Of course. I’ll let you get back to work. Love you.”

I muttered a quick ‘love you too’ before hanging up and sticking my phone in my back pocket.

My parents had known Larry and Troy Fitting since high school, but they started to become close friends when I started showing rabbits at the age of nine. They had since become friends who were closer than family—they were my livestock show uncles.

Larry is the oldest of the two brothers, and for as long as I have known them he is the most level-headed of the two. Troy is the emotional brother—he feels things more strongly than most people. When he is sad, he is unable to function. When he is angry, he cannot talk to anyone without having his security-blanket cigarette in his hand. When he is happy, he makes everyone else around him feel happy too.

That night, Troy was angry.

My brother and I met my parents and the Fittings at the rabbit barn later that night after we spent some time at the carnival with some friends. Troy was leaning against the chainlink fence with a cigarette in his mouth while Larry leaned against a golf cart. I glanced at my mom and noticed that her eyes were wide with tears threatening to run down her cheeks at any moment.

“Well, Troy,” Larry said as we walked up. “I have some bad news.”

Troy moved to stand next to his brother and bumped his shoulder.

“You alright, bro?” He asked.

Larry leaned his head back, looked up at the night sky, and sighed.

“I really don’t know how to tell you this,” he said. “Randy, can you help me out?”

My dad crossed his arms over his chest and shook his head.

“Okay what’s wrong,” Troy said. “Y’all are scaring me.”

Larry sighed again before holding his head in his hands.

“I heard from Granny’s neighbor this afternoon,” he said.

“Holy crap,” Troy said. “Is she okay?”

The five seconds of silence that followed were eerily poignant.

“Larry,” Troy said. “Is Granny okay?”

“No, man,” Larry said, “she’s not.”

Troy threw his cigarette on the ground and crushed it with his boot.

“Okay well let’s go see her,” he said.

At this point, I was standing between my mom and brother. I looked up at my mom and noticed that she was being careful to look anywhere but at Troy. I turned my gaze to my dad's face and noticed that he too was suddenly very interested in our surroundings. Lastly, I looked at Larry's face. He was still slightly holding his head in his hands and his shoulders were tense with the grief he was trying so desperately to suppress.

“She's gone, Troy” he choked. “She was dead when Gladys went to check in on her this morning.”

The next few seconds passed in a slow blur of tears, questions, and curse words. The carnival lights and music warped into an obnoxious show of joy that made me want to throw up and scream at the same time.

I was brought back to reality when Troy slammed his right fist down on the golf cart so hard it dented the hood. He walked off as he reached into his back pocket and fumbled for the package of Marlboros he always kept with him. My dad sighed and followed him while my mom, my brother, and I stayed with Larry.

We didn't say much. After all, what was there to say? 'I'm sorry' seemed obvious. Any other offer of condolences would have been hollow. So, we sat there in semi-silence while the rest of the livestock show went on.

How was it that my own life could feel like it had just been halted by the death of someone I had only met in passing once or twice in my life? How was it that my family and I could be so profoundly impacted by another family's loss while no one else around us seemed to even notice?

How was it that I had been so concerned about rabbits and shows and something that was not a necessity that very same morning when someone I loved was going to be so horribly impacted by grief?

That night, as I sat upright in bed trying to read the book I had been so enthralled by the night before all I could do was think. I thought about the obvious things like life and death and family, but I also thought about what would happen if this coronavirus thing that everyone had been talking about hit the valley like everyone was saying it would.

I have often attempted to collect my thoughts and emotions by throwing myself into books. In a strange way, considering the lives and dilemmas of other people, including fictional characters. The night that Della Blanchard died, I read *Everyone Brave is Forgiven* by Chris Cleave. In this novel, the main character (Mary North, a young woman in her mid-twenties who is primarily focused on living her life to the fullest before finding a respectable man to marry) decides that she must help with war efforts in London during the start of World War II. She is disappointed when she is refused a role on the front lines of the war and is instead tasked with teaching a group of school age children who are left behind while all of the other children in London are sent away to be kept safe. The children in Mary's care have been left behind because they are either disabled, children of color, or from a lower socioeconomic status. Mary must teach her students how to stay safe in the event of a bombing and how to properly wear their gas masks.

As I sat in my bed and read through the 418 page novel, I started to fall into the familiar sense of near-mindlessness that I often feel when I become invested in a story. I finished reading sometime between five and six a.m. and stared at my ceiling for another hour thinking about

everything that had happened the day before and what would likely happen in the days to come. I couldn't help but picture Mary North teaching her students how to put on their gas masks while trying to help them understand the importance of wearing them. In my mind, I pictured one of the little boys described in the story squirming as Mary tried to force the gas mask onto his face while saying "*This will keep you safe.*" I wondered if this would be the case when people all over the world would be encouraged or required to wear face masks everywhere they went. How many would do it without question? How many would understand?

Would we need to wear masks everywhere we went? Would the masks really work? Would we be told to stay home while the virus did its damage? Or would we just continue life as normal until it went away? How long would that take?

What would Mrs. Blanchard's funeral look like?

I had to ask my dad what her real name was that night. She had been introduced to me simply as 'granny' and everyone around me called her 'Granny Fitting' even though that wasn't even her name.

Her obituary was posted two days after she passed. Della Blanchard was described as someone who "loved life and lived it to the fullest." Based on the funeral her family held for her on Saturday, March 21, 2020 that was most certainly a true statement.

Everyone shared stories about the times she made them laugh, the times she shared her favorite songs with them, and the times she made them feel special. Larry's daughter, Hailey, shared memories from her wedding the year before.

We tried to all gather together in our grief, but government restrictions and rules kept us from really being together.



There were some ‘simple’ rules we all had to follow. Local government worked together to create a set of rules that they thought would mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Every morning when I read through the breaking news articles from the local news outlets, there was a new rule or two listed.

There could only be ten people at a time in the visitation room on March 20. We broke that rule within ten minutes, but no one really seemed to care. We all had to use hand sanitizer and were told not to linger—someone even suggested that the immediate family stand outside to greet guests. My mom said that seemed to defeat the purpose of a visitation, and at the time I couldn’t help but agree.

The funeral the next day was even weirder. The small funeral home had two main rooms for services. The rooms were separated by beautiful stained glass doors that opened into the back room. The front room had pews lining either side of the room that contrasted the beautiful stained glass with hideous maroon upholstery. Every other pew was roped off with dollar store caution tape that could easily have been ‘accidentally’ removed if we really wanted to move it. They would only let 30 of us sit in the front room—everyone else had to sit in the back.

You would think that the division between the rooms would have made us all quiet. But, everyone was yelling at each other across the two rooms. No one ever told us that we couldn’t walk around to talk to each other, but everyone just assumed that it was an unspoken rule.

The burial was perplexing, to say the least. We all caravanned over to the cemetery and parked in a line near the burial site. The preacher who was in charge of the services had an FM Transmitter that he used to transmit the service to our cars.

Burials are usually the point in funerals where I allow myself to express the grief I've usually kept to myself. For some reason, that has always been the point at which the loss feels real to me. But, this time was different. I had to take my own car to the service because I wasn't sure if I would be called in to work that evening. The city I work for had been preparing a COVID-19 response plan and had asked us all to be on call in case there was a need for us at the call center. So, I sat in my car by myself and listened to the burial service.

At the time, I thought that was the strangest funeral I would ever attend in my lifetime.

### **Chapter Three: Limbo**

In April of 2020, COVID-19 cases began to fluctuate on a larger scale in the Rio Grande Valley. On average, between thirty and fifty people tested positive for the coronavirus on a daily basis ([hidalgocounty.us/coronavirusupdates](http://hidalgocounty.us/coronavirusupdates)). The COVID-19 pandemic had not yet reached its peak.

The next several weeks seemed to both fly by and stretch into never-ending pits of uncertainty.

I walked into work two days after Della Blanchard's funeral and was immediately greeted by one of my co-workers.

"Good morning Bri," she said. "I have something for you."

"Good morning!" I replied as I punched in my employee ID and pressed my index finger against the scanner.

I turned and walked towards where she sat at the circulation desk. She rummaged around in the cabinets underneath the desk and handed me a pair of blue latex gloves and a bottle of travel-sized hand sanitizer.

"I found a box of each of these at the store," she said. "I wanted to make sure you at least had something for today."

I looked down at the gloves and hand sanitizer I had just grabbed from her. There were many things I wanted to say about the effectiveness of rubber gloves and gelled rubbing alcohol, but once I looked back up at her face I decided against it.

"Thank you," was what I said instead.

She smiled before turning her gaze back to her computer.

I turned around and walked towards the Children's Department.

"Good morning!" I called towards my supervisor's office before opening the back storage room door to put my purse in my cubby.

I exited the storage room and grabbed a notepad and pen off of the staff desk before turning towards his office door.

"Will we be having a morning meeting today?" I asked.

"Hey good morning," Santiago said. "Yeah we need to have a meeting today. You can go ahead and take a seat."

I nodded and walked towards the chair closest to the window in his office.

"We'll just wait for everyone else to get in before we get started," he said.

I nodded again scribbled the date on the top of the legal pad I had grabbed. Our morning meetings were usually the time when all of the Library Children's Department staff members received the to do list for the day and Santiago told us about any upcoming major events or rule changes. Morning meetings usually lasted for hours because we usually got sidetracked. We would start talking about movies or vacations or some of the crazy library patrons we had seen the previous day before the to do list had been given and all of the 'must discuss' items had been discussed, which usually meant that our to do lists were confusing scribbles on our notepads.

That morning was different.

The two co-workers I was scheduled to work with that day arrived just shortly after I did and sat down in the office with us. Santiago didn't say much as we all got settled. He mostly stared at his computer and typed what sounded like at least 10 emails. My co-workers and I sat in

thick silence and stared at the notepads in our lap. The last time Santiago had been this quiet was when we didn't finish our to do lists the week before.

Eventually, Santiago looked up from his computer, took his glasses off, and ran his hand over his face.

“So, I'm assuming you guys have seen the news,” he said.

We all nodded carefully.

“And I'm sure you all have questions,” he continued. “I might not be able to answer all of them, but I can at least tell you what I know.”

The next 10 minutes were full of tense talk about what would happen if there was a strict stay at home order, what would happen if one of us was exposed to COVID-19, and what would happen if one of us tested positive for COVID-19. None of us scribbled on our notepads that morning. We just listened.

“I've been talking to city admin, and they are working on opening a call center for Pharr residents. They'll be using city employees and I might need to send you all,” Santiago said towards the end of his instructions.

“I will for sure be sending Ruby and Argelia,” he pointed at my co-workers who were sitting next to me. “But I don't know if I'll be able to send you.”

When Santiago's pointing finger changed directions to point at me, I felt my heart drop. If the city had to shut down and people lost their jobs, it would make sense that they would lay off the newer employees first. Unfortunately for me, that would mean I was the first one in the Children's Department to be asked to leave.

“Okay,” I finally said.

“I know your Spanish isn’t super great,” Santiago continued. “And if we need to shut the building down we’ll have to continue programming to serve the community. If we close the library, you’ll be working on designing our online program base from home.”

“So I would still be able to work, just from home?” I asked.

“Yeah. It would be strange and you’ll have to use your personal computer and stuff, but you will be helping us build our online programs.”

“Santiago it sounded like you were about to fire her,” Ruby chuckled.

I started to laugh quietly and shook my head. Ruby was right—I had already started to think about how I would scrape together the money I needed to make my car payment every month and the loan I almost certainly would have had to ask my parents for if I had been let go. I assumed that getting a new job at the beginning of a global pandemic would have been nearly impossible unless I planned to work in healthcare.

“What? No—the city has a plan in place so no one will lose their jobs unless this shut down lasts for too long,” he said.

That meeting ended with no to do list and no sense of direction for the day. The three of us sat behind the staff desk and helped library patrons find books as they came in. Oddly enough, in the few months that I had worked at the library I had not spent much time looking for books. I was usually asked to work on preparations for daily programs and helping plan our larger events. It was a very slow day, but it was good practice for the next few months when all we could do was help people find books in between filming for our online programs. We passed the time with tic-tac-toe, hangman, and origami. I usually won hangman, thanks to my extensive knowledge of random words that my co-workers had to google the definition of. I taught everyone how to

make origami cats and we struggled to make enough roses to cover the top of the department desk. Tic Tac Toe usually ended in a tie and laughter. The sense of camaraderie and peace we felt throughout that day oddly paralleled the panic and uncertainty from that morning. We bonded over words like “superfluous” and “iambic” (which Argelia eloquently pronounced “ee-ahm-beak”) while Santiago sat in his office typing out emails and making phone calls.

The next day, Ruby and Argelia were sent to the call center. The library hadn’t been shut down yet, but I was transferred to the circulation department because we cancelled all children’s department programs and closed the children’s department. Before the pandemic, we typically saw anywhere from 50 to 150 children between the ages of two years old and twelve years old per day. We offered programs, coloring pages, and special classes for children between the ages of three and twelve and hosted quarterly events for children and their families to enjoy. All of these programs were free to the public and several of our regular families frequently told us how much they valued our programs. We received several phone calls when we announced that we were suspending all in house programs from angry patrons. The next day, the library was deemed non-essential. I started working from home on March 27, just five days after the start of the first stay at home order.

Building our online programs took me two days. I came up with a basic outline, wrote scripts, and researched everything I could about copyright laws and children’s books.

The next three weeks were almost excruciatingly boring. There were many things going on in the world, but I was confined to the bubble that was my home. We watched the news, tried to stay in the loop about all new COVID protocol, and checked in with family and friends often. As someone who prefers having a full schedule and clear plan for how I am going to take on

every day, it was frustrating to have no to do lists, schedules, or real deadlines for twenty-one days. I did my best to find other ways to work on expanding online programs, but I spent most of my days reading, cleaning, or helping my mom around the house.

One day, my mom and I were organizing the pantry (for at least the third time since we had been told to stay home) and talking about my work situation.

“Have you heard from the other girls? How are things going at the call center?” she asked.

“Ruby texted me a few days ago and it seemed like everything was going well,” I said. “City admin is supposedly talking about slowly opening things back up, but nobody knows for sure.”

“And you’re still getting paid? To stay home?”

“Yeah, so far.”

She nodded and neatly stacked chip bags in a basket.

“That is beyond me,” my mom said. “It seems like God had you start working at the library specifically because of this virus.”

We had talked about that a few times. I had a hard time finding a job that paid well after I graduated with my Bachelor’s in May of 2019. I had written a few articles for magazines here and there, but it took me months to find a job that paid well enough to make my car payment without dipping into my savings. When I found a part time opening at the library, I jumped at the opportunity. When I had the opportunity to get promoted to a full time position, I didn’t question it.

It’s a miracle I landed a job in Pharr when I did.



My friends and family members were being laid off left and right. Several of my college friends lived in Houston and had been told that they would no longer be employed by their various companies. My best friend called me one day in tears as she had just lost her job as a tutor.

“I just don’t know what I’m going to do,” she said through tears. “I have bills to pay. I have a wedding to plan and pay for.”

She had recently gotten engaged to her boyfriend and was planning an elaborate ceremony. They postponed their nuptials twice and eventually broke up because their relationship had become strained beyond repair.

Another friend lost his job and had to drop out of college. Another was forced to move back in with his parents when he could not afford to pay for rent. Even though they had lost their jobs and had no stable income, they still had bills to pay. Anxiety and panic seemed to hand in the static in our phone calls.

Every day it seemed like someone new lost their job or had their hours reduced by ridiculous amounts. But, my job was secure. Other cities in the area had to let some of their employees go during the lockdown. With not much revenue and virus protection measures, it made sense that funds were not necessarily readily available to pay all employees as they had been. But, the city that was exactly thirty-two minutes away from where I lived that just so happened to be hiring when I was desperately looking for a job had a plan in place so that no one lost their jobs.

I thought about this when we sat in the living room on Sundays and watched online “church services” on the T.V.. I prayed and thanked God for the plan that He had in place for me

and for making sure that I was taken care of during such uncertain times. I also prayed for everyone who wasn't quite so fortunate.

Sunday mornings at home during the lockdown were strange. My family and I would sit in the living room with coffee and blankets and watch sermons that would have almost been unbearably long if they had been given in person.

Easter in 2020 was even stranger than Sundays during the lockdown. Normally, we would have had a big lunch after church with my grandparents and some friends. We would eat a smoked ham, laugh with each other, and end the afternoon with a confetti egg fight that almost always ended in someone getting sprayed with the water hose.

But, in 2020, things were different.

We had planned on having my grandparents over because gatherings of 10 people or less were deemed acceptable by the CDC, but COVID had just swept through the Veterinary clinic where my grandpa worked just before Easter. So, we watched a sermon while we sat in the living room, participated in the Lord's Supper with stale red wine and homemade rice crackers, and a lackluster confetti egg fight.

We still celebrated, but it was odd. I hadn't realized how much I enjoyed our Easter celebrations until 2020. I didn't realize that Easter was one of the holidays I looked forward to the most because of the gathering that took place. But in 2020, I was all too aware of the emptiness I felt when celebrating Easter with my immediate family.

Mother's Day felt even weirder. I had always enjoyed celebrating my mom by making her a huge breakfast and inviting her parents over for lunch after church. But, during what was

labeled as the “second wave of COVID-19” it was almost impossible to find any of the ingredients I needed for breakfast that morning and church was still online.

I tried a new recipe with almond flour (plain flour was almost impossible to find after the infamous panic-buying sprees that ensued during the pandemic), made sure my mom had her favorite blanket for church, and made her coffee in her favorite mug.

“Thank you so much,” my mom said as we ate the crumbly almond flour scones I made that morning. “This is nice.”

I just smiled and sipped my coffee.

“And you even put my softest blanket in my chair for me. Thank you, again.”

I cleared the table once we had finished eating and sat down on the couch for what we had started to call “COVID Church.” At the end of the sermon, my mom opened the garage door to grab something out of the fridge and gasped as soon as she stepped into the garage.

“Are you okay?” I asked as I stood up from the couch.

“I think I just saw a kitten in the garage,” she said as I walked over to her.

We both stepped into the garage and saw the tiniest kitten sitting on the floor scarfing down a can of food we had left for one of our outside cats. She was growling as she slurped up the cat food and eyed us with a ferocity that did not at all fit her size.

She had a pointed face and big ears. Her gray fur was semi-matted and her tiny shoulders were hunched almost over her head. She became our COVID kitten—she lived in the garage for a few more days before moving to the shed we had in our backyard. She ate hot dogs and hissed like vehicle hydraulics when she saw us coming.

Our COVID kitten became the most vivacious thing in our house for the next couple of weeks.

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Over the next few months, COVID cases continued to rise and fears began to escalate. I saw news articles and videos that talked about how people all over the world had started responding to the COVID-19 health crisis. Most people had started refusing to go anywhere without wearing masks or gloves or standing far enough away from each other. When the government mandated that everyone stay home when they could and wear masks when they couldn't, most people just decided to stay home full time.

Six feet was deemed the appropriate distance between two people by the CDC, but it often felt like people measured that distance differently. Some people seemed to only stand 3 feet away from strangers, while others stood a full ten feet away. Stores tried to mark the distances on their tile floors with signs that said "Thank you for practicing social distancing," but people still measured the distance for themselves. I took to simply counting the floor tiles between myself and the person in front of me when I went to the Walgreens by my house, which was the only store I frequented during the early portion of the covid years.

Right before the pandemic invaded South Texas, I had started working on the ever-growing stack of "to-be-read" books that was sitting on my bookshelf. During my undergrad studies, I had not had much time to read for fun. I graduated with my bachelor's degree a year early and had taken on a heavy course load during the time I was a student at the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor so that I could graduate in 2019, which often meant that I was taking more than the recommended number of classes each semester. My final semester, I took 21 hours of

literature and writing intensive courses. So, I had not had time to address the stack of books I had collected in three years. By June of 2019, I was ready to dig into some YA novels and historical fiction. My mom and I had a little book club of our own—I would read a book, decide whether it was worth reading, and she would read it after me. When I was too busy to read a book first, she would determine whether or not it was worth reading and pass it along to me so that I could add it to my stack. We had done this since I was around thirteen, and it had helped me discover the dystopian genre, which quickly became one of my favorites. I loved reading about people in fantastical worlds who experienced things that seemed like they were far away from my bubble. It helped me escape the occasional monotony of my everyday life.

Right before the pandemic, I had just finished reading a series of YA novels about a young female cyborg living a Cinderella-esque life. In Marrison Meyer's *Cinder* series, there is a horrible disease akin to what has been described of smallpox outbreaks that is killing people left and right. In this series, people who are infected are taken to special labs via a self-driving helicopter contraption and families are notified that they have been infected via a video message. Families are not allowed to enter the hospital under any circumstances—they cannot bid their loved ones farewell as they succumb to this horrible disease.

When I was reading this novel, I thought that the concept of a disease so horrible that it killed everyone in its path within a matter of days was ridiculous. I also thought the idea of not visiting sick loved ones in the hospital was absurd—who would be okay with letting their family members sit in a hospital bed without even trying to visit them to say goodbye? What kind of hospital would keep families from going to see their loved ones?

It also bothered me that none of the infected individuals in this novel were given proper funerals. Their bodies were either kept for research purposes or burned so that they would not infect anyone else.

Though the United States' response to the COVID-19 pandemic did not involve an intergalactic war between people groups fighting for the cure to this disease, there were eerie similarities between the response to the coronavirus pandemic and the handling of the moonpox outbreak in this dystopian novel. In this series, the protagonist is able to find the cure for moonpox by defeating an evil moon queen who wants to take over the world.

I thought about how nice it would be to be in the heroine's shoes and find the cure for the horrible disease that had made so many people afraid to leave their homes. I thought about how wonderful it would feel to finally put an end to the covid-induced madness and help everyone else feel safer going about business as usual. In my fantasy, I imagined what it would feel like to find the secret vial of COVID-Cure. Perhaps I could find a special herb that people could use to make a tea that would make them immune to the virus. Maybe I could find a special river somewhere with anti-coronavirus water and snap my fingers to make it rain down on the world. Or, maybe I could simply walk into a hospital and look for a special vial that would hold the cure to this virus (only, of course, after fighting some horrible monster or villain). I imagined that it would save everyone around me and that the pandemic would be over and we could all go back to seeing each other's smiles.

But, the coronavirus was a little more complicated than moonpox. There was no evil moon queen and there was not an army of people ready to stand behind me to wage a war against something that war could not be waged against. It would take more resources, research, time, and

patience than I had the ability to provide. Unless a cyborg doctor came in and saved the day, the coronavirus pandemic would be nothing like Marissa Meyer's book.

Hospitals were at full capacity. No one was allowed into the COVID ward unless they were a doctor, a nurse, or a COVID patient. It did not matter if you had tested positive for COVID and wanted to visit a COVID patient or if you claimed that you did not care if you contracted COVID while visiting your loved one. No one was allowed in the hospital without specific clearance.

I felt horrible for thinking it at the time, but I wondered when they would start burning bodies or transporting them to the hospital with drones. I imagined the machine from the dystopian series I had just read parking in someone's yard to pick up the infected body and carry it off to the disposal site. The world of the Cinder series was fresh in my brain as I grabbed the next book off my stack, but it really didn't seem too far-fetched to me at the time. Keeping bodies in plastic bags in freezers didn't really seem too far off from what was described in the book I read. Regardless of the means of disposal or storage, the bodies were held in a way that they would be kept from everyone else so the virus wouldn't spread.

It seems like all of these horrible, horrible things had to have happened in a large span of time. After all, there's no way that so many things could all happen in a year. There's no way they could just be instances that happened within a few months.

2020 trudged on as things started to get worse. The year dragged on and spit more and more hardship and tragedies in the faces of the everyone in the Rio Grande Valley as summer approached.

## **Chapter Four: Tiffany Miller Villalobos**

2020 decided to start fighting harder on June 23.

I was upstairs painting my nails when I heard shouting downstairs.

“No. No! NO!”

I dropped the bottle of nail polish I had been using and watched it shatter crimson shards all over my bathroom floor. I ignored the stains already forming on my white bathroom rug and ran to my door.

“What’s wrong?” I called.

There was no reply.

“Guys?” I called again.

My brother came over to the stairs and delivered the news that would kickstart the endless cycle of grief that would continue over the next several months.

“Tiffany is dead.”

I cocked my head to the side and frowned.

“Tiffany? Like, chiropractor Tiffany?”

“Yeah. She died tonight.”

*What?*

I ran down the stairs as fast as I could and told myself I couldn’t cry yet. I needed to be able to comfort my mom before I allowed myself to grieve—I needed to be strong.

“Bbut how? ShShe was sso ccareful.” My mom was gripping the kitchen counter as she cried.



I wrapped my arms around her and guided her to a chair. She held onto me and repeated the word “no” over and over again until all she could do was choke out sobs.

My dad showed me the same text he had shown my mom just a few moments before I came downstairs. One of our pastor’s had texted him to let him know that Xavier, Tiffany’s husband, was at the hospital and would likely need a friend. The text didn’t say if anyone knew how she had passed or if she had been in the hospital all day—it just said that she was dead and that her husband would need someone there with him.

Tiffany and Xavier were close family friends. They were members of another family friend’s wedding party alongside my parents and had since become pillars of our lives. Tiffany lived life with a fervor for everything—she was kind and joyful and made sure her friends knew that she loved them. She and my mom had particularly bonded over their shared love of natural remedies and natural medicine. Tiffany had introduced my mom to Doterra essential oils when I was in high school and she was constantly giving advice for how to make sure they were used properly.

She would talk to me about essential oils too. While my mom was interested in their medicinal properties, I was mainly concerned with the way they smelled. Every time Doterra released a new aroma therapy product, she would test it out to tell me about it. The oil she used as a perfume smelled fresh and crisp—fitting for a chiropractor. It was called ‘Wish.’ I keep a bottle of it in my medicine cabinet and use during the Spring.

When I was eleven, I started suffering from debilitating tension headaches. The anxiety I hadn’t yet been diagnosed with would cause me to tense up so horribly that it caused an excruciating headache to develop starting at my temples and wrapping around my forehead.

These headaches would last for anywhere from several hours to days. Sometimes the pain was so horrible I would have to stay home from school and sleep or just lay in bed until it wore off. Sometimes sleep helped, sometimes it didn't. The only thing that seemed to help was finding a way to relax so that my shoulders were not so tense that they touched my ear lobes. Tiffany encouraged me to allow her to see if chiropractic treatment would help. I started visiting her office twice a week for treatment when I was 13. My tension headaches became less frequent and much less severe shortly thereafter. Eventually, I stopped needing treatment from her all together.

I continued to attend my mom's chiropractic appointments with her so that we could say hi to Tiffany. The last time I spoke to her, I had my nose partially buried in a Harry Potter book that I was re-reading for the fourth time. She came up behind me and pressed on my back and nudged my hand up until I was standing up straight while I read. She chastised me for undoing all of her hard work with my bad habits before she started treating my mom for the day.

My dad went to the hospital to be with Xavier the night Tiffany died. He couldn't go into the hospital, but a group of men from our church waited in the parking lot until Xavier walked out. My dad said that he looked lost. Xavier was a handful—that was the topic of most of my parents' friends' jokes when they were teasing each other. Tiffany had taken care of him for over twenty years and they weren't able to have children—they had planned on starting the adoption process about two months before she passed. They had hesitated because they wanted to learn more about the entirety of the adoption process, then when COVID caused a near global lockdown things got more complicated. Now, it was too late. Xavier would go home to an empty house with only their two dogs to comfort him. He was all alone now.

Tiffany's funeral was planned quickly. There were only a handful of funeral homes that were willing to host an in-person funeral at that point. Everyone was required to wear masks wherever they went, social distancing was in full effect, and churches were not considered essential. So, we could not hold a funeral service at our church.

Tiffany's funeral was at Funeria del Angel in the neighboring town of Mission. Xavier had told my dad that he hoped that the funeral home was so packed that day that there were people in the parking lot watching the livestream on Facebook. He wanted to celebrate her life in a way that would have made her feel special and loved.

We arrived at the funeral home fifteen minutes early only to find that the room was full and they could not allow anymore guests inside. There were no parking spaces left, but we were allowed to park in a semi-empty field just behind the funeral home. My parents watched the service together on my dad's phone, and my brother and I watched on mine. The service involved speeches from Tiffany's patients, her friends, and her colleagues. One of her colleagues mentioned that Tiffany had spent the entire time they had known each other trying to invite him to church. Not long before she passed, this colleague had dedicated his life to serving the Lord. She gifted him his first Bible.

We left the funeral home before the burial services started. There were restrictions on how many people could attend the burial services, even though they were held outside, and we wanted to make sure that Tiffany's family was able to say their goodbyes properly.

I pass the cemetery where Tiffany is buried often as it is on the road I take to get home from church. Every time I pass the cemetery, I catch a glimpse of the flowers that Xavier makes sure he leaves at her grave as they sway in the wind.

My tension headaches returned with a vengeance shortly after Tiffany passed away. I remember her often, but I especially think of her every time I sit hunched over my keyboard or as I am slumping while I read or when I pass the Tiffany blue flowers that rest next to her.

Tiffany's cause of death was revealed to be a heart attack. In 2020, one in every five deaths was reported as being caused by a heart attack. 697,000 people died from heart disease in 2020.

Heart attacks happen when an artery that sends blood and oxygen to the heart becomes blocked. People who have heart disease are, of course, at a higher risk for heart attacks. High levels of stress can lead to things like high blood pressure, which leads to a heart attack.

Stress is a weird thing. Sometimes people downplay it—they claim that they just become stressed easily, so it really isn't something to worry about. Sometimes people accuse others of being lazy or neurotic because they are anxious. Often times high levels of anxiety can make it seem like the world is collapsing, nothing and everything matters at the same time, and demise is inevitable. Anxiety can make people behave strangely. Sometimes people try to accomplish everything on their own so that they don't burden anyone else with their stress which may cause others to think poorly of them (one of the worst fears for someone with severe anxiety).

I wonder what kind of stress Tiffany was handling on her own. She helped hundreds of people in her lifetime and her career as a chiropractor. I wonder if she would have had a heart attack if she had let people help her like she helped them. I wonder if she felt like the world was collapsing as she broke into a cold sweat and she started to feel pressure in her chest. I wonder if she thought about Xavier when her head started to spin and she felt faint. Did her arm hurt? Is there something someone could have done to help her?

Who would be next?

As time has passed, I have longed for the opportunity to have helped Tiffany with her anxiety. I could not have offered the same chiropractic care she did, but I could have listened to her. I could have tried to share the weight she carried with her. I could have offered some sort of reassurance. If only she had at least told someone what she was dealing with. Maybe things would have ended differently if she had asked for help?

I wonder when we will have more answers. I wonder if we ever will.

Tiffany's death caught me off guard. It caught everyone off guard. The night Tiffany passed, someone said that it was all a part of God's plan. I can't remember who said it or why they felt the need to say it when they did, but it made me pause.

I grew up in the Baptist church. My parents raised my younger brother and I in a Christian household, which shaped the way I think as an adult. When I was about fourteen years old, I actually started to believe the things I heard in church and read in the Bible because I started to see God in the world around me.

When I was in middle school, one of my best friends was diagnosed with cancer. She had a large tumor in her brain and had to have surgery to remove the tumor. The surgery did not work. Her cancer had already spread throughout her body. Things did not look good, to say the least.

My friend, Autumn, told our other friends and her parents that she understood that her illness was all part of God's plan. She said that she was ready to take whatever happened to her and use it to give glory to God. At the age of fourteen, I thought she was the bravest person I knew. Now that I am twenty-five, I know she was one of the strongest people I have ever known.

Until that point, I had not really believed that letting God take over and control every aspect of my life was what I was supposed to do. I knew that God was real and that I was supposed to say “Okay God, you got this. Do your thing,” but I did not understand what that actually looked like until Autumn set that example.

Autumn eventually caught pneumonia while she was at the hospital for treatment. She died from the infection. I was reminded of her statement that she was okay with whatever happened to her because it was God’s plan when I was sitting next to my friends at her funeral.

I had already believed in God and understood that no matter what His plan was good at that point, but I would not have believed it so strongly if I had not seen Autumn’s example.

Nonetheless, when someone said that Tiffany’s death was part of God’s plan it upset me. I firmly believe that God’s plan is good and that everything that happens is part of God’s plan, but for some reason I had a hard time coping with the idea that Tiffany’s death was something God had planned. I have since asked God a lot of questions about why Tiffany died when she did.

Why didn’t you warn us?

Why did you let Xavier watch her die?

Why didn’t you let them have children before she died?

I don’t have answers to these questions. It used to bother me, but I have found a peace with the uncertainty of it all in an odd way. I tend to want to know everything there is to know about a situation when I walk into it. I always want to dissect situations and figure out where things went wrong and how they could have gone right. But, God doesn’t always grant us that courtesy.

It took me a while, but after about a year I resigned myself to the idea that not understanding Tiffany's death was okay. Part of this realization was rooted in frustration, but part of me has also come to the understanding that I will not understand absolutely everything about this world and my life in it. After all, scholars and theorists come to new realizations and make new discoveries every sing day. Why should my life be any different?

## **Chapter Five: Enrique Rositas**

We were able to re-open the church just two weeks after Tiffany died. Governor Abbot released an order stating that churches must now be considered essential business, but the local government had a list of rules we had to follow if we wanted to stay open.

The church my family and I attend is located almost exactly in the middle of McAllen on Beech avenue right next to Archer Park. Because of our close proximity to several different shelters and low income neighborhoods, First McAllen is often full of people looking for a place to go. Sometimes they find their church home, sometimes they just find a place to escape the heat. I have attended First McAllen since I was a baby. My mother attended this church as a child and when she met my dad at the age of seventeen, he followed her to church. What most people think of as the old fashioned Baptist church behind the McAllen Food Truck Park is the church that my children will grow up in when I have a family of my own.

I have attended church at First McAllen almost every Sunday since I was a little girl. Every Sunday for as long as I can remember, my family has gotten up early and drive to church. When we made it to church, my parents would drop my younger brother and I off at our respective Sunday school classes before going to their own class. When Sunday school was over, my parents would meet my brother and I outside our classrooms and we would walk to regular Sunday services, which we called “Big Church” together. We would walk from the Sunday school building on the other side of the paved breezeway and open the heavy glass doors to enter the church sanctuary. The colorful stained glass windows seemed to shine differently every Sunday. Sometimes I would see the blue and pink hues in the background, and other days I would see the yellow and orange that represented the sun at the top of the window. As my



brother and I grew up, our Sunday routine changed and eventually all four of us went to Sunday school together before walking towards the church sanctuary together. I started to look forward to Sunday mornings and the excitement of coming to church and seeing our friends—it became my favorite day of the week. I looked forward to sitting with the friends I had grown up with and learning about God together. Of course, my reliance on our Sunday morning routine had its cons—I realized during the pandemic that our regular Sunday mornings had made me depend on the church building for the closeness to God that I longed to feel at the beginning of the week.

In a way, online church was good and bad. I despised the fact that I could not worship with my friends or see the nursery age children I had started teaching with my mom, but it helped me find ways to feel the same closeness that I felt sitting in a church pew while I was sitting in my room. It was hard to worship from the living room and even harder to pay attention to the sermon on the screen, but it also forced me to focus on actually seeking the relationship I had always hoped to have with God. In this way, the pandemic helped strengthen my faith.

I was elated when I heard that we could start church services again, but getting back to business as usual during the pandemic was unlike anything I could have imagined.

Everyone had to wear a mask. It didn't matter if you were sitting by yourself or standing in the lobby or putting your offering in the box at the entrance door—everyone had to wear a mask. I had to catch myself smiling at people who walked into the sanctuary without saying anything. I realized at some point that it must have just looked like I was staring at everyone instead of smiling in silent greeting.

Some people wore masks without a fight or question. Others, however, tried everything they could think of to find a way to not wear a mask over their nose and mouth. Some church

members initially wore masks without question only to obnoxiously pull the blue cloth out and down away from their faces to talk to each other or worship.

The sea of eyes just barely peeking over medical blue masks seemed like something out of a dystopian novel. I remember wanting nothing more than to see everyone's smiling faces as they walked around the sanctuary.

Some of us were in charge of seating everyone and making sure that everyone left the sanctuary in an orderly fashion wherein none of us came too close to each other. I was tasked with making sure the left side of the sanctuary was seated and dismissed immediately after the sermon ended.

Someone ordered cheap plastic chains and command hooks to block off every other pew. We could only seat half as many people as we had been able to seat prior to the pandemic and different family units could not, under any circumstances, sit too close to each other. When my parents and I would find our seats on Sunday morning, I would sit on the end furthest from the aisle and push my purse until I could not stretch my arm any further without leaning to the side.

Church was the first social place my family and I were able to return to when pandemic restrictions began to lift around June of 2020. The first Sunday after re-opening, I made sure my favorite dress was clean and woke up early enough to curl my hair and make sure my makeup was perfect. I laughed when I pulled off my mask in my car after church and saw most of my efforts had been transferred to the inside of the blue paper.

When we re-opened the church, the pastors formed a plan for what would happen if church members started to get sick again. We would close the church and return to online sermons. I was not looking forward to sitting through more online church. Church had always

been the place where I did most of my socializing. After all, the Bible says that the church is supposed to really be a body of believers coming together to worship and learn. There is no real togetherness when you have to watch a sermon online.

The week after we re-opened, we had to close again.

Two church members were diagnosed with serious cases of COVID-19. One of these church members was named Enrique Rositas. Everyone called him Ricky.

Ricky was a deacon at my church. He had a good sense of humor and loved babies. Almost every time I saw him walking around the sanctuary before services started or after they had ended he was carrying a smiling baby and laughing. His laugh filled whatever room he was in with light—his energy was contagious. He loved his church and his family fiercely. He worked long hours at a job he was not necessarily fond of so that he could make sure he gave his wife everything she ever wanted and so that both of his children could attend the college of their choice.

Ricky's wife, Monica, had two children before they were married. Even though Alan and Moni were not Ricky's biological children, he loved them as if they were. He worked and saved and pinched pennies so that both of his children could go to college. Once both children had graduated from college and started their careers, Ricky saved so that his wife could choose the most beautiful furniture they could find to furnish their family home. He lived to provide for his family. Ricky's daughter and I had known each other since we were young and had become close friends in recent years.

Ricky was one of the Border Patrol officers who was in charge of training other officers when they joined the force. According to his wife, Ricky shared a cubicle space with a man who

was exposed to COVID-19 while on the job, but he didn't know that until it was too late. He and Ricky were both hospitalized for COVID-19.

The symptoms of COVID-19 are terrifying because they can easily be mistaken for a cold, allergies, the flu, or strep throat. A lot of people didn't know that they were exposed to COVID while they went about their days, which often meant that they didn't know that they had the virus until it was almost too late.

When the symptoms get worse, it gets harder for anyone infected with the virus to breathe. The lungs fill up with mucus and are often scarred by intense coughing or other types of lung distress which very quickly turns into difficulty breathing. If this issue gets too bad, people with COVID are put on assisted breathing machines called ventilators, which requires intubation. Intubation was usually a death sentence—about half of the people who were put on ventilators in ICU died before they could be taken off of the assisted breathing machine (National Library of Medicine). Extreme exposure to things like ventilators can eventually cause even more damage to the lungs, which in turn makes it even harder to breathe. It is most certainly a vicious cycle.

Symptoms are usually worse for people with any kind of underlying conditions. These people are deemed “at risk” by the CDC. Underlying conditions that cause people to be classified as at risk for death due to COVID-19 are asthma, diabetes, heart disease, cancer, old age, being a cancer survivor, pregnancy, being overweight, and various autoimmune diseases. Ricky was diabetic, which made him at risk for death due to COVID-19.

We had heard about Ricky's battle with COVID and how he had been taken to the hospital. I had texted his daughter, Moni to check in on her a few times and had hoped and prayed that Ricky would get better. I was watching a movie with my parents and my younger

brother when my dad got a phone call from our pastor. Ricky was supposed to have come home on July 9, but something happened overnight and he had to be moved to ICU. Pastor Steven had called to tell my dad that Ricky was about to be intubated.

That stupid, horrible word seemed to hang over our living room all night. Instead of just meaning the practice by which a medical professional inserts a tube to assist with artificial breathing, intubation now meant the practice by which a medical professional decides to try the last thing they know how to try before someone dies a horrible and painful death by skewed suffocation.

Normally, it would make sense for family and friends to have stopped by to say their last goodbyes after someone had been intubated, but COVID changed that. No one was able to go see Ricky because no one was allowed in the hospital unless you were sick or you were treating someone who was sick.

I finally decided to break the disturbing silence in the room once the spinning in my head had slowed down.

“He could still make it,” I told my mom as we sat around the kitchen island that night.

She pursed her lips and shook her head. My mom has always had this uncanny way of saying what everyone was thinking without saying anything.

“There could be a miracle and he could wake up and go home by the end of the week. We have to have some hope.”

I couldn't tell if I was trying to convince my mom that things would be okay, or if I was trying to convince myself.

My dad went to the hospital parking lot to pray with some of the other men from my church. They could not enter the hospital to pray or sit with Ricky, so his friends and fellow deacons stood in the parking lot and asked God to heal Ricky. While they were praying, I texted Moni. I didn't know what to do to comfort her—I couldn't drive over to her house to give her the hug I so desperately wanted to give her because she and her mom were isolating themselves. I couldn't problem solve and take the problem away. She was probably either busy or trying to process everything, so a phone call might not be the best option either.

I typed and re-typed my message to Monica at least twelve times. How exactly do you tell your friend that you're sorry that their dad is dying without sounding insensitive? *I'm sorry* didn't seem quite right. *There is still hope* seemed worse—I would probably yell at someone if they told me that when my dad was dying. I finally settled on a message and hit send.

*Hey! I am praying for your dad and the rest of your family. Love you guys. If you need anything even if it's just someone to talk to let me know. Love you friend!*

I winced at my terrible grammar after I sent the message. So much for my English degree.

My phone pinged with a quick response from her.

*Thank you Brianna, for everything. He was just put in intubation.*

I hadn't realized I had started crying until a fat tear plopped onto my phone screen. I wasn't sure why, but I felt somewhat guilty for being as sad as I was. I knew Ricky and considered him a family friend, but he wasn't my dad. Allowing myself to feel sad felt almost like I was inherently discounting my friend's grief. It also made me feel like perhaps I was giving

up on Ricky—it felt like being sad because he was in the process of dying meant that I was resigned to the idea that there was no hope.

But not feeling sad felt like it would have been worse. Instead, I chose to allow myself to feel a sort of fake numbness that allowed me to do my best to comfort my friend from afar and put my emotions in my pocket to be taken out at a later time.

About an hour after I texted Moni, I started to head upstairs to get ready for bed.

“Your dad just texted me,” my mom called from the living room.

I turned and walked back down the few stairs I had already climbed.

“Any news?” I asked.

She was staring down at her phone screen when my brother and I came into the living room. When she looked up at us and shook her head slowly, I knew what the text said.

Enrique Rositas died on the evening of July 11, 2020. He left behind a loving wife, two devoted children, and a church family that grieved his loss with a pain that can only be described as excruciating.

My mom, brother, and I stood together in the living room and waited for my dad to get home from the hospital. My brother simply stood with a stoic face that expressed his emotions in a way that betrayed none of his thoughts. I hugged my mother and cried with her. I cried for Ricky and his pain. I cried for his friends. I cried for his wife. I cried for Moni and her brother who would have to live the rest of their lives without the man who they had called dad since he married their mom when they were young.

The numbness I had forced upon myself before disappeared as I let myself grieve. There was no more hope for a worldly recovery—he was dead. I still felt guilty for allowing myself to be as sad as I was, but my grief and anger and sadness seriously outweighed the guilt.

I didn't understand why Ricky passed away. He was supposed to be getting better. He was supposed to be able to come home to his family. He was supposed to be able to return to church. He wasn't supposed to *die*.

That night, I sat upright in my bed and tried to remember everything I could about my last interactions with Ricky. The Sunday before we had to shut down the church for the second time, I had been walking across the sanctuary picking up trash that had been left behind after the service that day. He and I walked past each other and I smiled at him. I stopped in my tracks and laughed when I realized that it looked like I had just looked up and stared straight at him—he couldn't see my smile under my mandatory mask.

*I promise I'm smiling at you, it's just invisible.*

*Ha. Same kiddo.*

I waited for the thoughts in my brain to stop dancing and spinning before grabbing my phone to text Monica. This time, I didn't type and re-type my message or second guess what I should say. Instead, I typed a simple four word message that would be the only thing that I would have wanted to hear if my father had just died somewhat unexpectedly.

*I love you friend.*

Enrique Rositas was the first Border Patrol officer in the Rio Grande Valley to die from COVID-19. At the time of his death, COVID was at one of its peaks. Thousands of people had



tested positive for the coronavirus and hundreds had been hospitalized. The average cases announced per day was near 500 for Hidalgo County.

500 people a day were being diagnosed with the grim reaper virus that had taken nearly a hundred lives in Hidalgo County alone. The people who were diagnosed with the virus surely were not the only ones impacted by the spread of the virus. Every time someone was diagnosed with COVID, their family members and friends braced for what could have been the worst. When they were hospitalized, pens went to paper to start writing obituaries. When they died, they left behind friends, families, colleagues, and lives that could not be replaced.

After Ricky passed, a young man in Florida who ran for officers who were killed in the line of duty ran a mile to honor his legacy. He carried a flag with a thin green line on it while he ran and spoke to Ricky's family via a video after he ran. He did not know Ricky nor had he ever heard his name before that week, but he cried as he paid his respects.

It seems strange, but that video offered more comfort than Ricky's funeral did.

When a law enforcement officer dies, there is a certain level of politics involved in their funerals. When that law enforcement officer is the first to die from a virus that has taken the world by storm, there are even more politics involved.

Seating at Ricky's funeral was limited. There was room for his family, his pastors, and members of the Border Patrol. We watched his funeral from our living room. It was difficult to pay attention to what was being said at the funeral—it felt like I was watching a bad TV show where they were mourning the death of some character who was unknown to me and everyone around me. It did not feel like I was watching a funeral for my friend's father. It did not feel like I was watching a funeral to help myself grieve and heal.

Sometimes I wonder why it still doesn't feel like Ricky is gone. He passed several years ago—it should feel normal at this point. But, the practice of celebrating life through funerals works to allow grieving people to say goodbye to their loved ones. When people can't hold normal funerals, there's a chance that death hangs fresh for longer than it should.

I guess that's my problem. I guess that's why I still wonder if he'll be carrying a baby around the sanctuary on Sundays or if I'll hear his laugh traveling down the church hallways as I walk. I guess that's why I haven't stopped grieving.

## **Chapter Six: Rudy Garcia**

During the COVID chronicles, it became easy to forget about all of the other illnesses and diseases that could kill just as easily. It also became easy to forget that there were people I loved who were fighting these diseases.

One of these people was an old man named Rudy. He was an archery coach and shop owner from Sebastian, Texas who I had known since I was a little girl. He owned Eagles Nest Archery, which was a tiny archery shop he ran out of his backyard. He opened by appointment only and would not, under any circumstances, open his shop on Sundays. Rudy had also been diagnosed with prostate cancer at the age of 89.

I met Rudy when I was nine years old. He always wore a maroon and white baseball cap, worn leather boots, and a smile. He loved working with children and teaching them about archery. I had been shooting archery through my 4-H club since I was three years old and had just become old enough to participate in competitions. Rudy sold my dad my first ever competition bow, which still hangs on my wall, though I have not touched it in years.

A week later, the string on that bow broke during an archery practice—a Sunday. We were supposed to leave for a state competition in San Antonio at 4 a.m. the next day.

My dad called Rudy to see if there was any way he could open his shop early on Monday so that we could stop by and pick up a replacement string. Rudy told my dad to stop by the shop that day. He opened his shop on a Sunday evening so that we could go pick up a replacement string and still go to San Antonio the next day.

My dad and I left for Rudy's shop right after he got off the phone. When we got to the shop, Rudy brought out the extra string and a few other small pieces of equipment he thought I

may need including an arm guard (to protect my bow arm from the string that would inevitably hit it) and a finger tab (to protect my fingers on my string hand as I shot). He put the items in a brown paper bag and handed it to my dad. When he handed the bag to my dad and smiled down at me, I couldn't help but smile back. I had planned on using some of my dad's old equipment that did not quite fit my fingers or arms but would do the trick just fine, but Rudy had made sure I had my own.

“How much do I owe you Mister Rudy?” My dad asked.

Rudy just shook his head, smiled, and waved towards the door.

“You have to let me pay you for this, especially on a Sunday.”

Rudy smiled again before answering my dad's protests.

“Tell you what—just bring me a picture of this young lady with her archery medals after the competition this week for my wall. Then we'll call it even.”

Rudy's shop walls were lined with pictures of archers he had helped throughout the years. He could tell you a story about every single person in the pictures he had collected.

*That little boy in that picture? He shoots archery at A&M now!*

*That little girl with the pink quiver? She brought her daughter to the shop the other day.*

*She's going to start teaching her to shoot too.*

Rudy even had a picture of himself standing next to one of his archery friends on that wall. That archery friend was my grandfather, who had known Rudy since our 4-H club first started attending the competitions his archery club, Golden Eagles, hosted.

*That guy there? He's a white-haired, grumpy viejo now. He still shoots though.*

I won a total of 6 medals at my first ever state competition that week. My parents took a picture of me with all six of my medals in front of the sign for the competition arena and printed a copy for me to take to Rudy. He hung it up on his shop wall when we took it to him the day after we got back from San Antonio.

I wonder what story he told people about me.

*You see that picture there? She was here in my shop right before she went to that competition. I can't wait to see where this sport takes her.*

He asked for another picture when my dad and I told him I made the Texas team to compete at the National 4-H archery competition the summer after my senior year of high school. I didn't win any medals at that competition, but he still put the picture of me standing in front of the National 4-H Shooting Sports Championship sign.

I imagine that he wore the same proud smile he had when he congratulated me for being on the national team when he told stories about me. I hope he realized the impact he had on my career as an archer by opening his shop on a Sunday just so that I could have the equipment I needed for the competition that would stir my passion for archery.

Rudy and his friends from his archery club made Native American style arrow heads and hid them in the dirt at their competitions. Every time we went to a Golden Eagles shoot, Rudy made sure my brother and I left with at least one arrow head that he had made. I have a collection of about fifteen of Rudy's arrowheads sitting on a shelf next to the armguard and fingertab he gave me the day before I left for my first state competition. Every time I look at them, I remember his kind smile and the way his face lit up when he learned that a new "young gun" was learning how to shoot. I remember the way he came up to me and shook my hand when

I attended my first Golden Eagles shoot as a 4-H alumna and the way he smiled when I won a trophy that day.

“She hadn’t even shot a single arrow since 2016 before this morning!” He shouted when he shook my hand as he handed me my trophy.

When Rudy was diagnosed with cancer, he was already a frail man who had difficulties walking and moving around, but his cancer made it even harder for him to participate in the sport that he loved. The chemo made his body weak. He couldn’t even knock an arrow on his bowstring or pull back his old compound bow.

He battled cancer for about a year before he passed.

I was scrolling through Facebook the night that he died and saw a post from Golden Eagles announcing that he had passed. I paused when I saw the post and rose from the couch to tell my parents about what had happened. The news didn’t hit quite as hard as the other deaths we had experienced—Rudy was 90 when he died and his cancer diagnosis made his death expected.

I felt a sense of melancholy when we learned of his death, but he hadn’t spent weeks in the hospital only to be moved to ICU after he was supposed to be sent home. He didn’t just drop dead in his living room. Rudy had cancer and was very old—it made sense that it was his time to go.

It may sound insensitive and crass to say that some deaths are not as sad as others, but it’s true. The unexpected always catches us off guard and leaves us reeling once it shows its ugly head. Unexpected deaths never make sense. Expected deaths, on the other hand, seem to pass as easily and quickly as the days of the week. Eventually, it even seems comforting when someone

who has endured months and months of treatments and disease leaves the pain of this world behind. Growing up, I heard the phrase “At least they aren’t in pain anymore” spoken at several funerals for the elderly and chronically ill. Oddly enough, I hadn’t heard that at a funeral for anyone who died unexpectedly.

Rudy’s death may not have been quite as sad as the others, but it was a painful reminder that there are things besides the coronavirus that kill. Sometimes, deaths caused by other illnesses may even be worse. Cancer kills easily as COVID does, and it has killed easily for longer than COVID has. So, if someone were to spend months avoiding the coronavirus only to be diagnosed with stage four lung cancer with no cure in sight, the cruel irony is that their death may be quicker and even more painful than a death as a product of COVID.

When I reflect on Rudy’s death, it reminds me that even though it seemed like the world started imploding when the pandemic started, there were still bad things that happened before the word “coronavirus” was a concern. Cancer kills and has killed since 3000 B.C. (American Cancer Society). Things did not just suddenly get bad in 2020, they were just magnified. Nonetheless, I did not feel quite as sad learning about Rudy’s death as I felt like I should have. He was a kind man who had a profound impact on my life. But, I felt more at peace about his death than anything. I pictured him walking into the gates of Heaven with his bow in his hand and a quiver full of arrows and steady fingers that were able to properly grip the arrows and secure them to his bowstring.

I felt at peace knowing he was not suffering anymore. It felt like his death was God’s way of healing him, even though it was in a way most people don’t really understand. I bet his limp was gone, his cataracts were not a concern, and his shoulders did not ache from years of archery.

He was healed in a way, and that was enough for me. But, I have since wondered if there is a certain sense of morbidity in the idea that watching someone suffer makes their death easier for the people they leave behind to understand. It feels selfish to say, but I think it is easier to handle a loved one's passing knowing that they suffered for a time before they left this earth and are no longer suffering in their death. That is how I imagined Rudy's death. I knew he had suffered, I knew he had been ready to never have to take another chemotherapy treatment again. So, his death did not leave me feeling quite as heart broken and distraught as the others.



## **Chapter Seven: Sparky Steiner**

On August 17th, 2020 I was sitting behind the Children's Department desk as patrons came into the library. I had just finished editing videos for our online programs, shelved and re-shelved every book in my section, and cleaned the desk at least eight times.

No one came into libraries during COVID. Sometimes, kids would come in to use our computers for online classes, but our walk in statistic sheet often homed a big, fat zero in the space where we marked how many patrons came in that day. August 17 was one of those days.

We were having a slow day, so naturally I was checking FaceBook every fifteen minutes to see if something had magically appeared in my newsfeed. I was mindlessly taking BuzzFeed quizzes, reading articles about different celebrities I didn't care much about, and silently watching Disney blogging videos as they came across the feed. Every time I got bored of scrolling, I would close the app, re-open it, and refresh it. The last time I refreshed the page, I saw a post from my church's Facebook group.

*URGENT PRAYER REQUEST: Sparky Steiner has fallen and hit his head. He is unconscious. Please pray now.*

I took a screenshot of the post and sent it to my mom.

*What do you know about this?*

I stared at my phone until she texted back.

*I don't. Calling Steven now and I'll call you when I have info.*

*K.*

I set my phone down and stared at the plexiglass we had started keeping on the department desk at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. I tried to remember when the last

time I spoke to Sparky was. It was somewhere around late July. He had asked me how work was. I lied and told him it was going well—I didn't want to disappoint him. We had talked about jobs and families for a little bit before he had to attend to one of the infants he and his wife Marlene had just started hosting.

Sparky had been one of my spiritual mentors my whole life. He and his wife had hosted hundreds of foster children over the years and had adopted several of their foster children. I had taught a class of preschoolers with my mom since I was twelve years old. Most of the children Sparky and Marlene fostered went through our class. Every time he stopped by to drop a child off or pick them up, he would ask me how I was doing.

Sparky and I talked about a lot of things during the time I knew him. He would give me life advice when he could tell I needed it, he would ask me how school was going, he would ask about my writing, he would ask about my job search after I graduated with my Bachelors degree—Sparky always asked me at least 5 questions about my life before he said goodbye for the day.

I remember one conversation I had with him as a teenager very vividly. He was picking up a little boy he and Marlene had been fostering for several months—his name was Adam. I handed Sparky Adam's coloring pages, crafts, and take home card and asked him how his Bible study class had gone.

“How were the big kids tonight?” I asked.

“Oh they were fine—we had one of the pastors come in tonight as a guest speaker,” he said.

“I bet they loved that,” I said as I turned around to call Adam to the door. “Adam, dad's here!”

Adam came running up to me and hugged my leg.

“I don’t wanna go yet!” He cried.

I laughed and reached down to pat his back.

“You’ll be back next week—the sooner you leave here tonight, the sooner you can come back,” I said.

Adam squeezed my leg one last time before shrugging his shoulders and running out into the lobby to where the rest of Sparky’s family stood.

“You are so good with the kids,” Sparky said as he was turning around to leave. “You’re going to be a wonderful mother one day—I can see that.”

I smiled and thanked him before waving behind him towards his family.

That conversation has been fresh in my mind since the evening we had it. When I found out that the probability of me having my own children was relatively low, I remembered the impact I saw Sparky and Marlene make on the lives of their foster children.

The first class I taught with my mom was the biggest class I ever taught. I was twelve years old learning how to help handle a class of 20 preschoolers. One of those 20 preschoolers was one of the little girls Sparky and Marlene were fostering. Her name was Ray.

Ray made the journey between the Steiner’s home and her biological mother’s home too many times for anyone to count. She was taken back to her biological mom’s house the year she was in my class. I’ve heard stories about what happened to Ray and her brother while they were there from several people who spoke to Ray once she was brought back to the Steiners six months later.

Supposedly, Ray was telling her mother that she loved how long her hair had grown since the last time she cut it. She was so excited to have such long and beautiful hair that she told her mom she would never, ever cut it again. That night, while she was brushing Ray's hair before bed, she chopped her long locks into a choppy bob.

There are so many other things I heard that Ray went through while she was with her biological mother, but that's the incident that bothers me the most. Ray was such a happy child before she went to stay with her biological mother. When she came back, her hair was shorter and her joy was gone.

A few years later, Sparky and Marlene were able to legally adopt Ray and her brother. After she was adopted, I saw her joy return. She smiled more, she laughed more, and she rarely left her family's side. She was happier.

Ray was just one of the children I saw change when Sparky and Marlene took them in. The Steiner family impacted over 300 children's lives throughout the year. After seeing the impact they had on the children they fostered and adopted, I decided I wanted to adopt my own children one day.

I wished I had told Sparky that before he passed. I wished I had told him that our weekly check-ins made my week. I wished I had thanked him for being an example of the kind of person I wanted to be.

Fifteen minutes after I texted my mom to ask about Sparky, she called me.

"Hey Ruby, I'm taking my fifteen minute break. I'll be in the craft room," I told my co-worker.

I didn't wait for a response before shutting the craft room door behind me and answering my phone.

"Hello?"

I didn't need to see my mom's face to tell that she had been crying. Her croaking voice and sniffing told me everything I needed to know. I had hoped that she would call me with good news. I had hoped that she would tell me that he had hit his head but was fine because it wasn't really that bad and he would just be spending the night in the hospital.

So much for wishful thinking.

"Sweetheart, Sparky died. He passed away in the ambulance on the way to the hospital. They think he had a heart attack."

I sat down on the cold tile floor and put my head in my hands.

"Really?"

She was silent. So was I.

"Do you think he was in pain?" I asked as I wiped the tears from right under my eyes so my mascara wouldn't smudge.

I don't know why I asked that question. I suppose it did not really matter if he had been in pain when he passed, but it also seemed like an important detail at the time. I guess it's hard to think of someone as not feeling anything as soon as they close their eyes in death.

"I don't know. What's important is that he isn't in pain anymore. We have to remember that."

"Okay," I said.

“Your dad and I are going to take the Steiner family supper tonight. Call me when you’re walking to your car later, okay?”

I hung up before allowing myself to fall apart on the craft room floor for five minutes. I delicately wiped under my eyes and smoothed my makeup over the tear streaks that had covered my face. I let myself sit and calm down for 5 minutes before coming out of the craft room.

I tried to bring my brain back to work, but nothing helped that night. My brain and heart were overflowing with regret and grief and anger like I had never quite experienced before. I regretted not making sure Sparky knew how much I appreciated his guidance and mentorship. I was grieving the fact that I would never be able to talk to him about life again. And I was angry that God took Sparky from us. I was so, so angry that my friend had been taken away from this earth and that I would never be able to speak to him again. Ruby tried to talk to me while we closed that night, but I don’t know that I actually heard anything she said. All I could think about was Sparky and the way he died so suddenly and unexpectedly. It was like someone had been holding a flashlight over me as I went through life that slowly grew dimmer and dimmer each year. Suddenly, the batteries in that flashlight had run out of juice and the dim light it offered was gone.

I wished I could bring back the numbness I forced myself to feel the night Ricky died. I wished I could just take this horrible, horrible pain and stuff it in my pocket until I was alone in my car where no one could see me cry and scream and grieve. But, my pain was big and my pockets were small.

Somehow I managed to hold myself together until I threw my bags into my passenger’s seat, sat down in the driver’s seat, and locked my doors once we closed the library that night.

Once my doors were locked and my colleagues were trickling out of the parking lot, I let myself really break down.

I cried and screamed and rested my head against my steering wheel. I asked a lot of questions that night. I asked myself why I couldn't stop crying. I asked God why Sparky had to die. I asked God why He created heart attacks. I think it was my way of praying to give myself some comfort at the time, but my questions have still not been answered. I wish I knew why Sparky had to leave this place and why heart attacks exist at all, but God has not answered my questions yet.

I do not know that God will ever answer my questions about Sparky's death. I suppose it does not really matter much. My understanding of the situation will not change the outcome. I could wake up tomorrow and understand why Sparky died, but he would still be dead. His sudden death reminded me of Tiffany's. He was fine one minute and not fine the next moment, much like Tiffany. I asked God the same questions about Sparky's death as I did for Tiffany's and got no answer for either. I have grown to accept that I will not get an answer about Tiffany's death. But, I have not quite resigned to not having an answer about Sparky's death yet.

I do not know which word appropriately describes the way I feel about Sparky's death. Sadness would be one way to describe it, as would confused. Anger may come close, but at the same time it does not completely capture the way I feel. I have not accepted that I will never have an answer about why Sparky died yet, and I don't know when I will. I have asked God to help me accept Sparky's death in the way that He helped me accept Tiffany's, but for some reason I cannot shake the odd sense of confusion I feel.

I've tried to understand in the small ways that I can. I remember looking up heart attacks on the CDC website and the American Heart Association website the night we found out how Tiffany died. I had questioned why I researched the different causes of heart attacks and why I had felt the need to learn everything I could about them at the time, but that night my actions made more sense.

When I was little, I insisted that there was a monster that lived under my bed, as most children do. When I told my mom about this monster, she turned on my bedroom light and instructed me to look under my bed. I did as she said and saw that there was no monster. My mom reminded me that things seem scary when we don't understand them. I didn't understand what was under my bed or what the darkness that surrounded me held, so I was scared of what may be hiding there and what my wild imagination had decided was lurking in the darkness. But, when you know absolutely everything you can about something, it doesn't seem so scary anymore. I applied that same logic to my fear of chronic illness and things that caused people to die. If I looked it up and learned everything I could about it, it was not as scary as it was when I knew nothing about it. Heart attacks were something I knew at least a few things about.

Heart attacks are always scary. Sometimes you'll just feel like you ate too much and there's pressure all over your chest and abdomen. Sometimes it'll feel like your chest is collapsing on itself. Sometimes you pass out and hit your head, sometimes you make it to the hospital so the doctor's can catch it before it really gets bad.

Sometimes you die before a doctor can even look at you.

Heart attacks can sometimes be caused by stress that leads to high blood pressure. Obesity and high fat diets can also cause heart attacks. Some people are just born unlucky and



are genetically susceptible to heart attacks. Sparky was a somewhat heavy set, unhealthy man. He was also under a lot of stress. Some of his stress was COVID related—he had just finished mourning the loss of his fellow deacon, Enrique Rositas. Some of his stress was a result of the foster kids he and Marlene had been looking after. There were a lot of things that could have caused Sparky's heart attack.

A lot of people had heart attacks during the pandemic. Sparky was one of the 697,000 people to die from a heart attack in 2020.

I wonder if pandemic related stress caused the obscene amount of heart attacks in 2020. It makes sense—people were either stressed that they would get the virus or stressed that they would lose their jobs or stressed that one of their family members would get sick and die. But, just because something makes sense doesn't mean it's fair.

I was able to calm myself down after sitting in my car with the radio playing for 30 minutes. Once I was calm enough to drive, I turned the radio volume all the way down, fastened my seatbelt, and left the parking lot. I didn't bother to wipe away the tears that rolled down my cheeks as I drove home—I was worried that acknowledging my tears would make me cry more, which might have caused me to have a car accident which might have claimed my life.

I have never had regrets quite like the regrets I had that night. I regretted not spending more time with Sparky. I regretted not thanking him for being my mentor. I regretted never even telling him that I considered him my mentor and letting him know that I appreciated his wisdom. I have since worried that he did not realize how I looked forward to our conversations. I regretted not asking him what was happening in his life more often. I regretted checking FaceBook.

I was angry at myself for not telling Sparky how much I appreciated his impact on my life. My anger quickly turned into regret, as it typically does when you cannot address the things you are angry with yourself about because it is too late. I found myself wishing that I could find a way to go back to the last Sunday we were in the church sanctuary and I only offered a small wave rather than walking up to Sparky and his family to say hi. I regretted that my last memory of seeing Sparky was the image of his smiling eyes above his blue mask as he waved back at me.

I think part of my guilt and regret stems from the fact that Sparky had such a profound impact on my life, but I do not feel like I did the same for him. I wonder if he would have appreciated knowing that I saw him as my spiritual mentor. I wonder if he would have liked to know that I looked up to him and respected him more than I respected most of the members of our church leadership. I wonder if telling him these things that Sunday would have made me feel less angry and regretful the night that he died.

After the regrets I felt after Sparky's death, I promised myself that I would not even risk someone in my life not knowing about the impact they had on me. Now, when someone does something that impacts me in a profound way, I let them know and thank them profusely. Some of my friends have noticed and asked why I thank them for being "decent human beings" so often, but they do not understand why I want to make sure they know how I feel about them every day. I do not want to leave anything to chance anymore—after Sparky's death, I make sure I tell my loved ones that I love them. I often obsess over making sure I adequately thank people when they do something I appreciate, or making sure I apologize when I think I have even remotely upset someone. Sparky's death made me more aware of the impact people have on my life and the importance of reminding people how much they mean to me.

I have also become more aware of the way I encourage the people around me. Sparky encouraged me when he knew I was struggling to find a job. He made sure he let me know that he thought I was doing a good job when I first started volunteering in our church nursery. He encouraged me in a way that only my immediate family had previously encouraged me, and it made a huge impact on my life. I figure that the best way to thank Sparky for the impact he had on my life is making sure I provide the same encouragement he provided to those around me. I will never get to thank him officially and personally for what he did for me, but I believe he would be happy to know that I am trying to carry on his legacy in this way.

## **Chapter Eight: Jorge Cabrera**

Usually the month of August is exciting for me. My birthday is in early September, so I typically spend most of August looking forward to celebrating my birthday. In 2020, August was different. I was not excited—I even forgot that my birthday was coming up and that we would be celebrating. Once I remembered that I was about to turn 23, I told my mom that I did not want to celebrate. It didn't feel right to even think about celebrating my birthday and another year of life when so many people had not made it to their birthdays in 2020.

I can't remember much of what happened in the days leading up to my 23rd birthday. Everything seemed to fly by in a haze that I didn't realize I couldn't feel. Somewhere in that haze, one of my dad's best friends was diagnosed with COVID-19.

Jorge Cabrera was a police officer with Mission PD. He told my dad that police duties changed a little bit during the pandemic. According to Jorge, they couldn't pull people over for less than criminal levels of speeding, they had to be more careful when they did pull people over and make sure that they didn't touch any drivers licenses or insurance cards with ungloved hands, they had to make sure they wore masks and that the people they interacted with did too, and they had to transport prisoners to the hospital if they caught the dreaded coronavirus.

Jorge wasn't supposed to transport prisoners to the hospital. That wasn't part of his job description, even during the pandemic. He was just a traffic inspector. But, the one thing that seemed to be consistent about life during the pandemic were the changes it brought that seemed to go beyond the normal scope of regular changes—people all over the world seemed to be in fight or flight mode against the coronavirus. Some of us were trying to fight against the fear and

uncertainty that COVID brought, and some of us tried to flee the fear and danger that came with the pandemic.

Jorge and his partner were assigned the task of transporting a prisoner who had tested positive for COVID-19 some time in August. It wasn't long after they transported that prisoner that Jorge and his partner both tested positive for COVID-19.

Jorge's entire family caught the virus when he did, but no one else in his family had symptoms that were quite as bad as his. One morning, Jorge woke up and realized it was becoming increasingly difficult to breathe. His wife, Amy, took him to the hospital that same day.

I wonder if it crossed her mind that the car ride to the hospital might be the last time she ever saw her husband of 20 years.

He was in the hospital for what felt like months. Every day there was either a really good update, or a really bad one. It was hard for the doctors to stabilize his blood gasses (the level of arterial gasses such as oxygen and carbon dioxide in blood), which made it impossible to treat him. Jorge was one of the individuals deemed as high risk of death due to COVID-19 because he was a heavysset man and did not necessarily maintain a healthy diet. According to the CDC, the chances of Jorge recovering were slim.

Jorge almost beat the odds. He was supposed to come home the night before he was intubated. Something happened that night—no one knows what it was—but he suddenly was doing much, much worse. The hospital decided it was time for him to be moved to ICU and intubated. He was on a ventilator for several days. His blood gasses continued to fluctuate at extremes while he was intubated and unconscious.

Jorge died on August 24th.

My parents were out of town the day Jorge died. I worked a 10 hour shift that day and called my mom as soon as I got home. I was exhausted and nursing a headache from wearing a too-small mask all day. I came home and kicked my shoes off at the front door before called my mom. I remember that conversation as clearly and plainly as if it happened yesterday.

“Hey Mom,” I said when she answered the phone. “How was your day?”

“It was alright,” her voice cracked. “Did you make it home?”

“Yeah, I got home like 2 minutes ago. Are you okay?”

She paused for a moment.

“Mom?”

She was silent for a few more seconds.

“Has there been an update on Jorge?”

“Yes.”

This time, I was silent. I paused and waited for her to tell me that he was coming home and was doing much better or that he had gotten worse but the doctors were hopeful that he would be able to go home soon.

“Is he doing any better?” I asked.

“No,” my mom started crying. “Jorge died this afternoon. I didn’t want to tell you while you were at work because it didn’t seem fair. Amy hasn’t made it public yet because she wants to reach out to their entire family before it ends up on social media.”

I had gone outside to feed our family dogs while I was on the phone with her. I steadied myself on one of the pillars on our back porch and gasped.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you when it happened. I didn’t want you to have to finish your work day while you were trying to hold your emotions together,” my mom said.

“He didn’t make it?” was all I could blurt.

“No,” she said, “he didn’t.”

I quickly fed the dogs while I was still on the phone and went back inside.

“Is dad okay?” I eventually asked.

My mom didn’t answer immediately.

“No, he’s not,” she finally said. “I think he will be, but right now he’s mad.”

“Okay.”

We talked for a few more minutes before hanging up. I sat in the recliner in our living room and stared at the wall for a while before getting up to feed the cats and get ready for bed. I had some homework that needed to be done that night, but I couldn’t bring myself to even open my laptop.

According to CRI-TAC, COVID-19 killed 221 active duty police officers in 2020. The state of Texas was on the higher side of the national average for the number of active duty officers who died after contracting the coronavirus while on duty. When Jorge died and I was curious about how many active duty officers died as a result of COVID-19, I thought about how strange it was that a world that had come screeching to a stop still needed police officers. No one was really going anywhere because everything was pretty much shut down—there wasn’t much to do. So, why did we need officers?

According to the COVID Prison Project, hundreds of thousands of inmates who are incarcerated in prisons have contracted COVID-19. Of these hundreds of thousands of inmates,

2,000 have died. When a prisoner tests positive for COVID-19, they are transferred to a hospital by police officers.

COVID-19 is highly contagious for 48 hours before a person starts showing symptoms. In a confined space like a prison, COVID can become a serious problem. Everyone is forced to be near each other all day every day, so it makes sense that prisons would become a breeding ground for a virus like the coronavirus.

Sometimes people seem to think that all police officers are heartless—they don't care about prisoners, law breakers, or speeders. Sometimes it's easy to understand why people feel that way because there are several police officers who give the world of law enforcement a rough reputation. But, not all police officers fit that description. Jorge certainly did not fit that description. He cared about the community he served. He volunteered to transport the inmate from whom he contracted COVID-19 to the hospital. He made the conscious choice to help make sure that the man he was transporting was given an opportunity to receive proper medical attention. These were the thoughts I had when I heard people say that Jorge deserved to die simply because he was a police officer. Several local news outlets posted articles about Jorge's death and his service to the community as a law enforcement officer. I saw these articles on social media and read through the articles themselves as well as the comments. I read through a total of twenty five comments that made statements about Jorge's death and made claims that he got what was coming to him. One person even went as far as to say that they hoped he infected all of his colleagues at Mission PD. Thankfully, the comments were removed before Jorge's family could read them.



I suppose that Jorge's actions were really examples of common human decency. After all, what kind of a person would just knowingly let another human being suffer from a deadly virus when there are ways that he can be helped? Who would consciously and intentionally deny that person the opportunity to seek medical attention simply because he was a prisoner? Still, I'm not sure I would risk my life in that way for someone I did not know.

I don't know what happened to the inmate that Jorge transported. I don't know if he lived or died. I don't know if he was intubated or if he just needed antibiotics. I don't know if he lived and went back to prison and is still there, or if he lived and finished serving his prison sentence. I don't even know his name.

But, I know what happened to Jorge. I know that he caught COVID and went to the hospital and was intubated and died. I know that his family and friends wish he had said that he would not transport that prisoner. I know that he would gladly do it again if it meant he could help someone, even a prisoner.

I never considered Jorge to be defined by his work as a police officer. To me, he was defined by his love for his family and his love for his church. He had three beautiful children—Amber, Elijah, and Maddie. He worked hard to make sure he could provide everything his family could ever possibly want or need for as long as he could. He worked a lot of overtime hours just to make sure he could afford family vacations. Jorge taught the newlyweds Sunday school class at church. He would have been made a deacon if the coronavirus hadn't decided it needed to camp out in the RGV for as long as it did.

Sometimes I still catch myself wondering if I see Jorge's patrol car driving around Mission. I'll see a police car and make sure I am right next to it while I'm at a red light just so I can look in the window to see who it is.

It's been more than two years, and I still can't shake that habit. I doubt I ever will.

We attended Jorge's funeral on September first. During his funeral procession, hundreds of people lined the streets of Mission waving American flags and saluting our cars as we drove. Their tribute brought tears to my eyes. They didn't even know Jorge. I have since thought that they came to pay tribute to a public servant or that perhaps they had met Jorge in passing at one point or another. Their show of respect helped me almost forget the comments I had read right after Jorge died.

They didn't know that Jorge walked into church every Sunday in his uniform with a box of donuts and the biggest travel coffee mug I have ever seen. They didn't know that Jorge had three beautiful children—the youngest of whom was celebrating her eleventh birthday the day we laid her daddy to rest. They didn't know that Jorge had fallen off of a ladder three weeks before he caught COVID at work, which made everyone tease him relentlessly until they couldn't tease him for anything anymore. They didn't know that Jorge was one of my dad's best friends.

They just knew he was an officer who caught COVID while on duty and died.

I stood by my parents at Jorge's graveside service and stared at the metal posts on the canopy that had been set out for the family. We had listened to other officers give speeches and watched as a plane flew overhead when the tapping of an intercom sliced through the air.

"Status report Officer 416," the voice cracked.

I looked up at my dad's face when they started the last call. My dad was usually a rather stoic person—he rarely expressed any emotions besides happy and angry. In fact, I had only ever seen him cry three times in my life before September first. Once when Grandma Sadie died, once when my brother graduated from high school, and once when my family dropped me off at college. I saw him cry for the fourth time on September 1, 2020.

“Officer 416—Jorge Cabrera,” the voice did not crack this time.

“Last call, Officer 416.”

I started to cry as I listened to Jorge's wife wail.

“Oh please God no,” was all she could say.

I knew she was sad—it wouldn't have made sense if she wasn't. But, I do not know that I had ever heard someone grieve quite as much as she did that day. I wanted nothing more than to walk up behind Amy and comfort her. I wished I could have walked up to Maddie to tell her happy birthday and hug her as tight as I possibly could.

My parents taught me the importance of offering comfort to those who need it. They raised me to feel empathy in a way that has made it hard to not feel the feelings of the people around me. I am thankful for this life skill—I do not know what kind of person I would be without the empathy my parents encouraged me to have. But, in that moment, it made it hard to think about anything but going up to Amy and squeezing her so tight that her sobs didn't make her body shake anymore. It made it hard to not notice the people around me who were crying and it made it impossible to not cry for their pain.

There was caution tape around the area where the family sat and everyone still had to stay six feet apart. The world was ready for in-person funerals, but not for true togetherness.

My mom grabbed my dad's hand and placed her other hand on my shoulder. As we listened to the mingled radio static and grief we cried. We cried for the friend we lost, for the husband Amy had lost, and for the father Maddie, Elijah, and Amber lost.

As we stood and cried together, my grief felt somewhat muted. I was sad and could feel that I was sad, but I didn't feel the familiar urge to hide my grief or control the emotions I let others see. At the time, I thought it was because I was getting emotionally stronger.

I realize now that I was numb. Not in the sense that I couldn't feel anything anymore, but I didn't feel anything fully. I didn't feel the uncontrollable anger mingled with sadness and melancholy that I had felt for every other loss we had experienced to that point. I didn't feel the need to curl up in a ball on the floor and cry until my body was dehydrated and I passed out.

All I felt was an unproductive sense of sadness. I knew that I was grieving and that I was sad, but I could not do anything to help myself overcome the melancholy that had rooted itself in me. In the past, I had felt that the anger and tears and my expressions of grief had helped me heal and move past the sadness that inevitably came with funerals. But now, it seemed pointless to even try to not feel the pain or make myself feel better. After all, as soon as I started to not feel sad there was a high chance something else either equally as terrible or worse would happen. What was the point of trying to feel anything but sadness? At least it was dulled at this point and did not fully consume me. At least I was still able to function.

What's strange is that Jorge's death is still one of the only deaths from the year 2020 that feels real. I know that Tiffany and Rudy and Ricky and Sparky are also gone, but it still feels somewhat foreign to say it. When I drive up next to a patrol car and realize it's not Jorge in the

passenger seat, I chastise myself for forgetting. When I drive past Tiffany's old office and look for her car in the back parking lot, my not-scabbed over wounds start to bleed again.

I wonder if that's because we were able to grieve in the same way that I've been trained to grieve my entire life. We went to a service, we went to a burial, and we saw the place where he was buried. I wonder if that's why it seems more real. Maybe it's because I heard about the way he suffered in the days leading up to his death. Maybe it's the way I saw his family suffer before he died and the peace they seemed to have after his service. Does it seem more real simply because this was the point that numbness started to take over?

I don't know that I'll ever have an answer to that particular question. I've only partially resigned myself to not knowing why I don't understand the meaning behind my own emotions or lack thereof. I have grown accustomed to the idea that things like this just take time to get used to, but I have also been journaling and trying to study myself to help me understand why I feel the way I feel a little bit more. It has not helped. Perhaps God is trying to teach me that it is okay to not understand, but I am stubborn. I am not sure when I will fully learn that lesson.

## **Chapter Nine: Caroline Macmanus**

The day after Jorge's funeral, I exited my room to find my mom crying at the bottom of the stairs as she started climbing up to come talk to me.

"Mom, why are you crying?" I asked.

She stopped climbing the stairs and did not answer.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"No," she finally answered. "I just heard from your grandpa. He let me know that Grandma Macmanus passed away at around 6 this morning."

I had joined her on the fourth step of the stairs and put my hand on her shoulder.

"Oh," was all I could say.

"He didn't want to tell me. He hasn't told your aunt Caitlin or Leslie yet. I think he's having a hard time accepting it."

All I could do was nod and squeeze her shoulder.

Grandma Macmanus' health had been failing for years and her death did not surprise or shock anyone. My extended family was prepared to make arrangements for her funeral.

Grandma Macmanus was a special lady. She wrapped all of her presents in comic strips, made all of her own bedding on her vintage singer sewing machine, and was a hostess extraordinaire. She couldn't cook very well—her jello salad always jiggled and danced when we walked past the dessert table at family gatherings in protest of never being touched, but she could certainly arrange a fancy dining table.

Grandma Mac loved to give books as gifts. When I was in first grade, she gifted me a few American Girl books for my birthday. She had wrapped them in a Garfield comic strip (which I

have kept in my keepsake box since my seventh birthday) and given me a card that mentioned how she was excited I was reading the books her girls and my mother had once read and enjoyed.

Grandma Mac prayed for every single one of her children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren every day. That was no small feat, as there were enough of us to fill up a church sanctuary with no open seats. But nonetheless, she prayed for us every single day.

Every time she saw me, she would reach out her shaking veiny hands to grip mine. She would ask how school was going, if I had written anything new, and if I was dating anyone yet.

“Have you met anyone special yet? Can we expect wedding bells some time soon?” She would ask.

“No, Grandma,” I would respond. “Not yet.”

Her shoulders would slump forward as she smiled and patted my shoulder.

My Great Grandma and Grandpa Macmanus had moved from their family home into an assisted living facility not too long before she passed away. When they moved to the assisted living facility, Grandma Mac didn't know how to handle it. She couldn't understand why they weren't having Christmas at their house or why they had to pack up everything they had in their two story house on Bass boulevard and move.

She didn't understand why they had to move. She resented the fact that she had to leave her home that she had filled with so much love over the years behind.

Everyone knew Grandma Mac was dying. She had a stroke a few weeks before she passed and we knew her time was almost up. It wasn't a surprise that she passed when she did. It was sad, but everyone had seen her suffer. We knew that she was upset that she was no longer

living in her house on Bass boulevard in Harlingen. It was hard to see her so upset and broken. In January of 2020, Grandma Macmanus was hospitalized because she had not been eating and was unable to move. We went to visit her at the hospital, and I was shocked to see how different she looked.

Her hands that had once sewn baby blankets and knitted hats for each of her grandchildren were now thin and her black-purple veins were now like mountains poking up on the tops of her hands. Her wispy hair hung around her face in limp white gray tendrils. Her eyes still twinkled, but it was dulled. Age and bad health caused my great grandmother to suffer. Perhaps that is why it was not as sad to think about her death as I felt like it should have been.

Even though we were expecting Grandma Macmanus' time to come soon, but we were not prepared for the challenges that came with planning a funeral for a family with over 40 people.

COVID restrictions were not as strong by the time Grandma Mac passed as they had been in the weeks and months leading up to her death, but there were still restrictions in place. We all had to have tickets to get into her funeral. I remember thinking that it was absolutely absurd that I had to have a ticket to attend my own grandmother's funeral—it seemed like there was some sort of regulation on who could and couldn't grieve this loss.

After we found a place that would allow over 40 people to gather for a funeral ceremony, we had to find a facility that was willing to let us have a reception of sorts after the funeral was over. Every time someone from our family passes, we treat it as a celebration of life rather than a mourning of a loss.



That seems much easier to imagine when the person you are mourning was expected to die for several months. It also seems so much easier to say that a celebration of life is a celebration than it is to treat it like a celebration.

I remember parts of Grandma Mac's funeral. We got stuck behind a train on the way to the church and had to sit in the back of the sanctuary because we were a little late. We also tried to be strong for each other—I tried particularly hard to be strong for my mother. Grandma Mac was only the second grandparent she had lost in her lifetime, which might have made it a little bit harder for her to cope with the loss.

I did my best to seem like I was holding myself together so that I could help hold everyone else together. I think it worked—no one pulled me into a hug to tell me it would be okay or reassured me that it was okay to be sad and that they would miss her too. I had concealed my emotions well enough so that nobody knew what I was really feeling.

That night, I sat upright in my bed and tried to let myself be sad. I felt like I needed to show some physical sign of sadness, whether it was tears or tugging at the hair on the left side of my head like I normally do when I am upset. I don't know who I was trying to show that I was sad. I think that perhaps I was just trying to show myself that I could feel something. I wanted to show myself that I wasn't losing the ability to express emotions in a healthy way so that I could heal.

I tried to cry, but I couldn't. The numbness hadn't quite left yet. I was sad, but I was unable to let myself feel that sadness in a way that would have allowed me to heal. Instead, I sat in my bed and counted the darker spots in the paint where I've patched it over the years. Eventually, all of the spots turned into one giant blob and took over my entire line of sight. I laid

back and closed my eyes, but I wasn't able to sleep that night. I picked up a book from the stack on my bookshelf and tried to lose myself in its pages, but this time it did not work. I could not retreat into literature to help myself heal because I could not feel anything.

It was a strange feeling. I knew that I was sad and that I had a reason to be, but I could not feel my heart pounding or the space behind my eyes getting hot as I held back tears. All I could do was sit and stare with the knowledge that I had this emotion but could not express it. In a way, it felt like I was someone else witnessing my struggle. I felt like I was witnessing something hard rather than experiencing it.

Knowing that I could not do anything to help myself heal only increased my feeling of helplessness. I knew there was nothing I could do help the people around me because there was no way to fix what had happened. All I could do was try to provide the comfort I knew they needed. But, how could I provide comfort for them if I could not even help myself heal? How could I possibly help the people around me when I could not even feel the emotions I knew I had?

It was like I had a concussion of sorts—my brain was swimming and there was a tingling in my ears that I couldn't really place. I was exhausted, to say the least. But, my body wouldn't let itself sleep. I was in permanent fight or flight mode, but flight wasn't an option. There was no fleeing from the destruction that the pandemic years brought. I could not walk or run away from the problem at hand and I could not help the people I loved get away from the situation. There was no escape. There was also no end in sight.

After Grandma Macmanus' death, I asked God if He could tell me when the destruction and grief and heartbreak would end. I asked for a break from death and sadness. I did not think I

could handle another funeral or reading another obituary. It was strange not feeling my emotions, but I was not sure how much more damage could be done to my emotional health. I was scared that the numbness would become permanent and that I would never be able to feel anything again. The thought of not ever being able to heal terrified me because I was not sure what that would mean for my interactions with other people. I figured that eventually people in these situations snap, and I did not want to do that. I did not want to become so bitter that I took my muted anger and frustration out on everyone else.

The battle with my mental health was just beginning, and I had no idea how to fight it.

## **Chapter Ten: Limbo, Part 2**

New Years Eve 2020 felt like a bad movie. All of my friends were excited for the new year because they thought it meant that the pandemic would finally be over—there would be no more COVID and the world would just magically reset itself once the clock struck midnight.

But 2020 was not a royal ball and Cinderella isn't real—midnight doesn't mean anything.

I wanted to grab my friends by the shoulders and shake them out of their stupor. How would a man made construct of time change what had happened over the last year? How would the clock striking midnight suddenly make COVID and all the carnage it left behind disappear?

By the end of 2020, over 300,000 people had died from COVID-19. That's 300,000 people that meant something to someone. That's more than 300,000 people who made an impact on someone's life. That's over 300,000 people who would not magically be brought back to life once the clock struck midnight.

2021 saw new COVID-19 variants and new developments in the coronavirus battle. I tried to stop paying attention to the words Delta and Omnicron as the year went on, but it was impossible. COVID was everywhere.

My Uncle Thomas tested positive for COVID-19 close to the end of 2020. He recovered eventually, but he had COVID symptoms long after he had supposedly gotten better.

Thomas experienced brain fog and difficulty sleeping for months after he had 'recovered.' He also had a cough that sat in his chest for months after the virus had left his system. It seemed like there was no way he would ever get better.

But, months after he tested negative for the virus his symptoms started to go away. He still struggles with some of the aftermath of having suffered from COVID complications over a year after he was pronounced ‘fully recovered.’

That’s called Long COVID. Some people experience Long COVID after having the virus, especially if they already have a hard time recovering after they’ve been sick. Long COVID sometimes never goes away. Thomas eventually recovered, but not everyone is so lucky.

The coronavirus used to be a two-week problem. You got it, got really sick, either went to the hospital or stayed home, and either survived or died. For the most part, things were completely resolved within a month. The virus usually made quick work of things. Long COVID is different, and there doesn’t seem to be much of a cure available.

Maybe it’s a result of the lung scarring, maybe it’s because of the tendency to stay in bed once you get sick instead of walking around and getting sunlight to help with the healing process. I’m not a doctor, so I can’t say for sure.

Long COVID isn’t the only long term issue that we have to face as a result of the coronavirus.

Years ago, I would have scoffed at someone telling me I needed to address my mental health. I’ve always been prone to anxiety and depression, but I always considered it an attitude issue. If I was sad, I always told myself just to get over the melancholy that had settled in my heart. I would smile and try to make everyone else believe that I was happy. If I was stressed, I would tell myself that I needed to find a way to calm myself down and “get over myself.” I never considered that these feelings were important in any way. The pandemic made it hard to ignore my declining mental health.

Mental health was an issue for everyone after the pandemic. Some people still have crippling anxiety that won't go away because they lived in fear for two years of their lives. Some people have depression that looms with a scythe as a result of the long term exposure to sadness.

Some people overcome that. Some aren't able to.

I haven't known anyone who's committed suicide since the pandemic. I have wondered if that's because everyone understands what a gift life is in the aftermath of a non-discriminatory virus that destroyed entire families, but I'm not sure.

There were over a million suicide attempts in 2020 ([afsp.org](https://afsp.org)). Not all of these attempts were successful, but the attempt is enough to force one to realize that there is a problem. Suicide increased in 2021 (CDC) with over 47,000 suicides being reported.

Mental health issues are one of those things that can kill just as easily as COVID. It doesn't discriminate, it doesn't heal on its own, and it doesn't let up.

The battle with mental health is hard. It feels like you're in a rigged boxing match against yourself where your hands are made of gelatin and your opponent is made of steel. People are cheering for you, but you can't help but wonder what they're actually thinking. It comes in different forms. Some people get depressed, some people get so anxious they can't move, and some people get so consumed by their trauma that they decide to end it all.

It's a new battle every day. Some days I open my eyes and stare at the ceiling until I absolutely have to get up, get dressed, and drag myself to work. Some days I lay awake because I can't stop worrying about what tomorrow will bring. Most days I try to force myself to feel something—anything.

It makes it hard to care. It makes it hard to have ambitions—if life is so fragile, why should anyone have dreams? You could have a heart attack one day with your vision board in hand and nothing accomplished. The dreams I had in early 2020 and late 2019 seem so far away now—it's like they're cased in a shadow box with a combination lock where the combination is hieroglyphics.

My anxiety hit a high when my parents both tested positive for COVID-19 in 2022. I spent their two week recovery period isolating upstairs in my bedroom and panicking. I tried to read and write to pass the time, but most of the time I ended up staring at my soft gray walls and tugging at the hair on the left side of my head. I chewed my fingernails down to the nail bed and organized and reorganized the papers on my desk at least six times. I could not stop thinking about the horrible things that could possibly happen to my parents as they were recovering.

*What if they have to be hospitalized?*

*What if I catch it and can't stay coherent enough to buy them orange juice and chicken soup?*

*What if they die?*

I tried not to let myself focus on that last question too much. If I had allowed myself to think about the possibility of one of my parents' names being published in an obituary, I do not think I would have been able to stop thinking about it. I realized later that I will likely have to prepare myself for that reality one day, but for some reason the idea of my parents becoming one of the COVID death statistics absolutely horrified me.

My dad slept most of the time and my mom had a hard time talking, so we mostly texted. I would order fresh squeezed orange juice, homemade chicken soup from a local deli, and leave

mugs of hot tea with honey and lemon outside their bedroom door. When they were unable to taste anymore, I made them hot lemon water with honey to help them with their sinuses. I wanted so badly to be able to take care of them on a closer level, but my mom did not let me.

“I know you want to help, but if you catch this virus from us I will never forgive myself,” my mom texted me one morning.

I understood what she meant, but I was worried that she did not understand my intentions. I would not have been able to forgive myself if something worse happened while they were recovering and I had not been able to help them. Nonetheless, all I could do while we waited for the two weeks to pass was sit upstairs and think.

If I had felt helpless before, I really felt helpless now.



## **Chapter Eleven: Gerald Macmanus**

A few weeks after my parents recovered, my Great Grandpa Macmanus passed away. Like my great grandmother, he was very old and sick. The skin on his hands had become so thin that every time he bumped his hand on a chair, table, or wall he would start bleeding profusely. He had skin cancer spots on his head that he said caused him a great deal of pain. He was also very ready to see his wife again and told his priest as much.

My Grandpa Macmanus was a devout Catholic. His son, my grandfather, was also a devout Catholic. When my grandfather met my grandmother, who had been raised in the Baptist church, he fell in love. When they got married, it was a scandal. A “good Baptist woman” would never marry a Catholic, after all. My Great Grandpa Macmanus did not feel that way. He loved and welcomed my grandma with open arms and rejoiced in knowing that his son had married a Christian woman. Unlike most people in the church community his age, Grandpa Mac did not care about denomination. When my mom decided to raise her own family in the Baptist church, Grandpa Mac was even happier. Our family was half Catholic and half Protestant—Grandpa Mac was just happy we all went to church.

Grandpa Mac’s celebration of life was normal. All of our family was there and we didn’t need a ticket or a mask or gloves to get in. Everyone was free to grieve as they pleased, unlike Grandma Mac’s funeral that we attended almost two years before.

It’s strange, but Grandpa Mac’s funeral was one of the first normal social events I attended post-pandemic. It felt strange to go to a funeral and not worry about finding a venue that wouldn’t tell us that 40 family members was too many because of a virus, but it also felt freeing. There was a semblance of normalcy in the celebration.

I didn't feel very much at Grandpa Mac's funeral, but as I consider the situation now I do not think that was because of the numbness that had overtaken me. Just like with Rudy and Grandma Mac, I knew that Grandpa Mac was suffering before he died. I knew that he was unhappy and that he wanted nothing more than to be with Grandma Mac. He was ready to die—he said so himself. When Grandpa Mac's priest told my family about the conversation he had with Grandpa Mac just before he died, it made sense. He did not give details or specifics about the conversation, but I have imagined it going something like this:

“Well, Mr. Gerry, how are you feeling?” Asked the priest.

“Old,” Grandpa Mac probably answered (as it was what he usually said).

“Is there anything you would like to say before your time?” I think the priest would have asked.

I imagine that Grandpa Mac did not have sins to confess at this time, but I am not sure. Everyone has elevated opinions and fondness of the people they look up to, and I looked up to Grandpa Mac. But, I do know that Grandpa Mac lived to serve and worship God. He attended Sunday mass at his church in Lyford every Sunday. When he could not drive himself to Lyford anymore, he made my Uncle Brian take him. When he couldn't go anywhere to worship, he invited his priest to Uncle Brian's house, which is where Grandpa Mac lived towards the end of his life.

“I am ready,” I imagine Grandpa Mac said. “It's time for me to go. It's time for me to leave here. I miss Caroline.”

Knowing that Grandpa Mac was ready to go makes his death less sad than it would have been if he had died suddenly. In fact, it made me feel selfish for wanting him to live a little

longer just so we could have more time with him. If he was ready to die and had been ready for a while, who was I to say that he had to stay on this earth just so I could get in a few more conversations with him? How could I say that he should not have what he wanted just so he could be alive long enough to see me publish a book or get married or finish grad school? Grandpa Mac's peace with death changed the way I see it.

I have come to see that there is a certain beauty in the way some people die. In a way, Grandpa Mac's death seems like an act of mercy from God. My great grandfather had not been truly happy since Grandma Mac died and he moved in with my Uncle Brian. He had lost his confidant of over sixty years when Grandma Mac died—I cannot imagine what that must have felt like. Grandpa Mac also lost the ability to socialize with his friends and extended family during the pandemic when he was cooped up inside Uncle Brian's house. Realizing how hard Grandpa Macmanus' life must have been in the last couple of years before his death was quite sobering. I had spent most of the last couple of years moping about my experiences and the losses my family endured, but that was nothing compared to what Grandpa Mac had endured since Grandma Mac died and during his time in the army and living through the Great Depression. What I had experienced was still horrible, but it was not nearly as hard as what Grandpa Mac dealt with throughout his life. It made me realize that even though I feel like I have dealt with a lot of loss and heartache for someone in their mid-twenties, there will be more hard things to come. I hope I can be as strong as Grandpa Mac was.

Grandpa Mac was born right before the Great Depression. During his lifetime, he saw more awful and difficult things happen in the world than I think he realized. I have thought about how crazy it seems that Grandpa Mac came into this world right before one of the darkest times

in American history and left it during a global pandemic that turned everyone's lives upside down. He saw the world change and how the tragedies that seem to have grown more frequent over the years have impacted the United States.

The coronavirus pandemic impacted our nation in more ways than one. Sure, there were a lot of deaths and hospitalizations that came out of the pandemic, but that is not the only way in which this global pandemic has changed everyone's lives. People are battling with the repercussions of the pandemic every day. Between the new mental health crisis and the hospital reform that we desperately need, the world is changing faster than it seems anyone expected.

When people are faced with the idea that their health can suddenly and horribly decline from one day to the next, they start to focus on themselves more. The same can be said of the way they care for their children. If a child sneezes, his or her mother is probably halfway finished typing a google search about some sort of horrible illness that manifests itself in uncontrollable sneezing before she realizes that her child has seasonal allergies.

I wonder if Grandpa Mac noticed these changes or if he just considered them normal changes that came with an ever-progressing nation. I won't ever know the answer to that question, but I would like to think that he noticed these changes and thought deeply about them. Perhaps he and I could have had a long talk about it.

## **Chapter Twelve: Natalia Alejandra Cristobal**

When my church fully re-opened post-pandemic, I resumed my volunteer work with nursery aged children. I started teaching a preschool Sunday school class with my mom and quickly fell in love with teaching little ones about God and watching them grow. I felt my mental health starting to get better as I taught the class and started to be able to feel normal emotions again. One emotion I could feel very clearly was love—I loved the children in my class as if they were my own.

We started with a class of five children. Their names were Cece, William, Hadasa, Paul, and Keyla. Each child learned and thought differently. Cece has a younger brother, so she behaved like every big sister would and acted like she knew more than all of the friends in her class. William is the youngest of three children and he gives his mother a very hard time. I could fill several books with the family secrets he shared with me on Sunday mornings. Hadasa is the youngest of three children and has two brothers. She is quick-witted and soaks up information like a sponge. Paul liked tactile learning and enjoyed playing with blocks while we reviewed the Bible story. Keyla is a quiet little girl who has helped me practice my Spanish.

I would walk through the glass door that led to the nursery classrooms every Sunday morning alongside my mom with my coffee and curriculum in hand and make sure all of our copies, activities, and games for the day were ready. At around 9:15, my students would start trickling in.

“Good morning, Sunshine!” I would say as they walked through the classroom door and ran over to the coloring pages on the table.

“What are we coloring today?”

“When can we play with blocks?”

“Are we going to the playground today?”

Their excited questions made me smile and laugh as we continued the lessons each morning. Eventually, three of my students moved up to the first grade Sunday school class. I was sad to see them go, but the thought of new little ones joining us made me excited. On advancement Sunday, a little girl wearing a pink sequin dress and rainbow unicorn bow stepped into my Sunday school classroom and waited for me to tell her how beautiful her dress was before she left the doorway. Her name was Natalia.

Natalia was a spitfire, to say the least. She loved to play with whatever toys she could find, dance to worship songs with my mom, and color. Natalia spoke a mixture of both Spanish and English, but she knew her colors in Spanish. She always demanded that I sit down to color with her. She wanted me to tell her which colors to find in the tub of broken crayons before she grabbed the correct color and used it to scribble all over her coloring page. She would hold up her paper with such pride and wait for me to acknowledge how beautiful her artwork was.

“Wow, so pretty!” I would say. “But it needs more colors. How about five more? Where is rojo?”

Before she sat back down to grab the red crayon out of the tub, Natalia would raise her little hand above her head and move it in an arched shape.

“RAINBOW!” she would exclaim.

“Yes, my love,” I would say with a smile. “Let’s make a rainbow.”

We drew rainbows on the backs of all of her coloring pages. Once we were finished, she would snatch her paper up off of the table and run to show it to my mom.

“RAINBOW!” she would say as she showed my mom her picture.

Natalia’s speech was limited, but her joy spoke volumes.

One day, Natalia did not come to Sunday school. At first we did not think anything of it, lots of kids missed a Sunday morning here and there. But when she had been gone for three weeks, we began to worry. My mom did some digging to see if Natalia and her family were okay.

Natalia’s mom had become more conscious of her daughter’s health since the pandemic. It makes sense—it can be easy to be terrified that your child will catch some horrible illness right after you have seen so many people succumb to the virus that caused the country to shut down. One night, she noticed that Natalia was not herself. So, she took her to the hospital.

After weeks and weeks with no answers and lots of questions, Natalia was diagnosed with Difuse Intrinsic Pontine Glioma (DIPG) which is a form of childhood cancer with a 98% mortality rate. DIPG is really a fancy word for a really really bad brain tumor that directly attacks the brainstem. Natalia’s tumor was completely embedded in her brain stem, which is common for children with DIPG. The placement of the brain tumor meant that there was no way Natalia could undergo surgery to remove the lump on her brain. Her only options were medicine and treatments that would only delay the inevitable. Natalia was three years old when doctors told her parents that she would not live to see adulthood.

My church had been severely impacted by horrible loss since the beginning of 2020. We had lost several deacons, church members, and almost every family in our church had lost at least one family member. When one of the youngest members of our congregation was handed a death sentence, everyone was shocked.

I have worked with the children at my church since I was in middle school. By the time Natalia was in my class, I had been working with children in this capacity for about ten years. In those ten years, I had never had a student who was terminally ill. I had never even thought about what it would be like to have a student who had the deadliest form of childhood cancer.

The other children in our Sunday school class started asking about Natalia. Every week that she was not there they wanted to know when she would be coming back. Every time we sat down to pray before eating snack, they reminded me that we needed to pray for her just as I was about to prompt them to pray.

“Remember Miss Brianna,” they would say. “We have to pray for our friend Natalia. We have to ask God to heal her.”

Hospital rules had slightly changed post-pandemic, but not much. Natalia’s family was able to be with her in the hospital, but she could not have many non-family visitors. She also had to be extremely careful wherever she went—a common cold could have put her in the hospital and COVID most certainly would have killed her.

I have talked to Natalia’s mom a lot since Natalia was diagnosed with DIPG. We have talked about so many different things, but she has never told me how alone they felt in those moments. Our church family rallied around them and offered prayers and gifts and a lot of love, but none of us were allowed to be in the hospital room with them when they got updates about Natalia’s health. None of us were able to sit with them and hold their hands while she was getting treatment.

Natalia’s mom got permission for one of the pastors at our church to visit Natalia and perform a Biblical anointment. Pastor Kevin, who received the phone call from Natalia’s mom,



called my dad and asked if he would like to go to Houston with him to visit Natalia. I have heard that the conversation went something like this:

“Hey,” Kevin said. “I am going to visit the Cristobals in Houston. Dani wants me to do a Biblical anointment and pray over Natalia for healing. Do you want to come?”

“Yes,” my dad said without a second thought. “Let me talk to Steff and Bri to see if they want to send anything with us.”

“Great. We’ll leave in like two days or so. I need to iron out the details but I’ll let you know.”

When my dad asked my mom and I if we wanted to send anything to Natalia, we immediately made a plan to go shopping to buy her the biggest, most sparkly rainbow stuffed animal we could find. We settled on two jumbo squishmallows with glittery eyes and rainbow markings. One was a rainbow cheetah and the other was a rainbow zebra.

“She will love these,” I chuckled as I held the stuffed animal out in front of me.

“I know,” my mom replied, “what do you think she’ll say when she sees them?”

“Rainbow!” I said as I used my right hand to make the shape of a rainbow in the air above my head.

We both laughed before walking towards the cash register, picking up a coloring book and some stickers along the way. Pastor Kevin and my dad went to visit Natalia that week and prayed over her. Kevin was automatically allowed into the hospital because he was a member of clergy, but they had to bend the truth just a little so that my dad could visit the Cristobals. Kevin supposedly told a very concerned member of hospital staff that he was clergy and my dad was his head deacon, so it was alright for them to be in the hospital room. My dad is in fact not a

deacon at our church and never has been, but that little white lie meant that he could support the Cristobal family. So, he played along. Natalia had just had a treatment when they arrived and was allegedly very grumpy and upset that she had not been able to eat her lunch of choice yet (her mom said she specifically requested pepperoni pizza).

When my dad came home the next day, my mom and I would not stop asking him questions about his visit with Natalia.

“How is she?”

“Was she happy to see you?”

“Did she like her presents?”

“How are her parents?”

He told us all about his visit with Natalia and her excitement at finding the jumbo stuffed animals inside the giant gift bag we sent with him. She had reacted just as we had predicted. My dad has said that she pulled both stuffed animals out at the same time before dropping them on the hospital bed next to her and waving her hands in the air while exclaiming “RAINBOW”. She resumed her hangry scowl after she made sure the stuffed animals were positioned perfectly on either side of her.

I hope that Natalia’s gifts made her feel loved. I know that the visit from Pastor Kevin and my dad helped Natalia’s parents feel less alone, but I wish that there had been an opportunity for a steady stream of visitors to stop in and stand beside Natalia’s parents as they dealt with their daughter’s failing health. Natalia’s mom has said that watching Natalia’s decline was the hardest thing she has ever done. I was heartbroken to watch such a sweet little girl slowly change and decline as her tiny body worked to fight against the cancer invading her body, I cannot imagine

how much harder it was for her mother to witness everything. Natalia was not my daughter and I was not alone while I voiced my heartbreak. I wished that there was something I could do to help Natalia or at least help her mother cope with the horrifying reality of watching her three year old daughter suffer and undergo horrible treatments that made her face and fingers swell and her eyes stop working.

But, all we could do was hope. We could only hope that the 98% mortality rate would not include little Natalia. We could only pray that she would be a part of the 2% and not the 98%.

Natalia was able to come to church a few times after her diagnosis. Each time she came to class, she would hobble over to me and give me a hug before grabbing my hand and guiding me to color or worship with her.

I prayed for Natalia often. I prayed that she would be healed, that she would come back to church, and that she would be able to run and play with the other children again. I never stopped seeing her as the tiny little girl who waited in the doorway for me to tell her how beautiful her pink sequin dress and unicorn bow were. I never stopped seeing her as the beautiful girl who loved spinning in circles while she worshipped with my mom.

The last class she came to is a memory I cherish. Natalia came in during worship and joined her friends without even thinking.

“Hola, mi amor!” I said as I bent down to hug her gently.

She giggled and grabbed my hand as she worshipped. I sang and danced with her before it was time to go back to our main classroom to continue our activities.

We sat down for snack after worship and got ready to pray.

“Okay friends,” I said. “Let’s put our hands in a prayer position and thank God for this snack. We should also thank God for something else today,” I winked at Natalia before continuing. “We have been praying and asking God to bring our friend Natalia back to us safely. Today, she is here with us. We should thank God for that.”

Natalia smiled before she squeezed her hands together and closed her eyes tightly. She brought her balled hands up to her forehead and squinted her closed eyes and began to mouth the words to the prayer we said every time we prayed as a class.

“And thank you God, for bringing Natalia back to us today,” I said at the end of the prayer as I wiped a tear from under my eye.

Natalia’s health got worse after that Sunday. Her parents took her back to the doctor for treatment and were sent back home to wait for Natalia to fall into eternal sleep—they were told she needed a miracle.

Treatment was not working. Despite the doctors best efforts, the tumor in Natalia’s brain continued to grow and grow and the cancer had invaded every part of her tiny body. But still, we prayed for a miracle.

Because I saw Natalia suffer at the hands of this horrible cancer, it made it easy for me to think about the healing that would come with her passing. I hated to think it and sobbed the first time the thought even occurred to me, but if Natalia died she would not have to deal with the horrible treatments, take the horrible medicine, or feel the pain that the tumor caused anymore. The tumor in her head would not exist.

I was torn about whether or not it would be best if Natalia passed. I did not want her to die, in fact I prayed many times and begged God to keep her here on this earth and to bring her

back to our little class until she was old enough to be in the first grade class. At one point, I begged God to take her illness away and give it to me instead. I could not understand why such a beautiful and innocent little girl had to endure such pain.

Natalia went to be with Jesus on October 11, 2022. She lived to see her fourth birthday, but not much else. She is survived by her mother, father, grandparents, and two year old sister who asks for her daily.

I have imagined that Natalia ran through the gates of Heaven and jumped into the arms of Jesus. In my imagination, her face is no longer swollen, her head does not hurt, and her beautiful brown eyes are smiling just as much as her mouth is. I have also imagined that she pointed to the rainbows that I picture to be in Heaven and threw her hands up over her head.

“RAINBOW!” I can hear her say as clearly as if she was saying it in our Sunday school classroom again.

Nobody was allowed to wear black to Natalia’s funeral. At her mother’s request, we all wore bright and pastel colors and sat in the church pews surrounded by rainbow and unicorn mylar balloons. One of the balloons came loose from its string and floated up to the top of the sanctuary and got stuck on top of one of the hanging ceiling tiles. It still sits there and smiles down at the people who go to church every Sunday morning.

Natalia’s funeral was the largest post-pandemic funeral I have been to so far. At least 200 people celebrated her short life and grieved the loss of a little girl who loved rainbows, unicorns, and coming to church.

Natalia’s celebration of life was a reminder to me. It reminded me that funerals are meant to be a time for celebrating the life a person has lived and all that they have achieved. It

reminded me that life is something that not everyone gets to experience for long—some make it to 99 and others make it to 4. As I pulled Natalia’s mother into a tight hug and fought through my tears to tell her that I loved and missed her daughter more than I could describe, I was reminded that loss, no matter how tragic, is a part of life.

I miss Natalia every single day. I miss her terribly whenever we talk about God’s promise that he communicates through rainbows and even more when her little sister asks me to hold her and spin around while we worship. Her friends miss her too. My Sunday school students still ask about her and ask if we can pray for her mommy and daddy. They all love drawing rainbows on the back of their coloring pages.

I have had a hard time understanding how this is part of God’s plan. I have struggled with the fact that God’s answer to my prayers was not the one that I wanted. I begged God to heal her and bring her back to my Sunday school classroom. God said no. I am slowly learning that even though it was not the outcome I wanted, God still used Natalia’s short life to make a difference. Her friends learned how to pray. Her church came together to support her family. Her family learned that they have a church family that will support them as much as they can no matter the circumstances. There was some good that came from this situation. God’s plan, is still good.

### **Chapter Thirteen: Reflection**

We've lost a lot of people since 2020. It used to seem like we went to a handful of funerals every year and each one made sense, but now it seems like every time Monday comes around we are waiting for some sort of news that someone is chronically ill and likely won't recover.

When I started writing this piece, I was writing it to remember those that I had lost and help myself heal. This piece started out as a tribute to my family and friends who left this earth and left me behind. I wanted to make sure I did not forget how I felt when they left this earth, but I also wanted to make sure I documented my most cherished memories of them. In a way, this piece was my way of telling them how much I appreciated the impact they made on my life. This piece started as a sort of thank you letter to make up for the ones I never got to send. But now, it means so much more.

Writing has healing powers—I used to think this was a fact that applied only to me. But now, as I have grieved alongside family and friends and watched people try to heal, I have learned that this applies to most individuals.

I wonder how many pandemic memoirs there will be ten years from now. Will we all remember the fear with which we lived as we waited with bated breath to test positive for a virus that claimed the lives of thousands? Will we remember the virtual funerals and solo grieving that has caused so many of us to lose control of our mental and emotional faculties?

Even as I sit finishing this piece and listening to the Christmas movie playing in the background, I find that it is harder to remember exactly what happened during the height of the coronavirus pandemic. I cannot remember exactly what happened the day I heard about the first

coronavirus case in the Rio Grande Valley. I cannot remember how I felt when I read about the first COVID related death or even how I felt when the omnicron variant was announced. I cannot remember most of what happened outside of the bubble I am confined to when considering the impact of the pandemic on my family. I can recount my own experiences when prompted or when I really think about it, but it is not something that I can think about without trying to. I have written about it, so I can remember my accounts of things, but I cannot feel the things I felt when I wrote now. My memories have been diluted.

Even after the events of the last several years, my understanding of the world has been largely influenced by the things I have read. I primarily read historical fiction and YA fiction. While both genres are very different, they share certain elements that make their structures quite similar.

Historical fiction tells about the past. Sometimes it is about war, sometimes it is about the forming of countries, and sometimes it is about an outbreak of disease. I have read novels about World War II since I was thirteen years old. I have always been fascinated by the events of the past, but it has also seemed somewhat absurd to me that there are events in history wherein such awful things happened. The events in historical fiction are all true, and books about these important events in history remind us about the horrible things that have shaped the world around us.

In a way, YA fiction draws from historical fiction in that many of the diseases, wars, and other traumatic things that are described in YA novels are also described in historical novels. YA authors draw from real historical events to build the worlds their stories take place in. Marissa



Meyer did not create the concept of moonpox entirely by herself. Its symptoms resemble the symptoms that are described of smallpox. So, in a way, YA novels mirror historical fiction.

Reading these two genres has done two things for my understanding of the coronavirus pandemic: COVID-19 is a historic pandemic that will be talked about for years to come, and it will probably be altered in several years to describe a disease with a made up name that impacts a fictional land. Literature is how writers pass on the things they have experienced and learned to generations to come.

Writing and reading about pandemic experience is perhaps the sole way in which people will truly remember what has happened as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. That is why I have continued to write this story. This work is a tribute to those I have lost and an attempt to remind those who read this piece that life is fragile and fleeting—if the coronavirus has taught us anything, it should be that life can be created and taken away within an instant. The pandemic years stole time, social lives, and lives in general. Some individuals who survived terminal illnesses like cancer tested positive for COVID-19 and died as a result of the virus. Some people tested positive for COVID-19 and survived the virus only to be killed by something else. Others simply started paying more attention to their health and received diagnoses that said they would not live much longer. The coronavirus was not the only thing that stole from us during the pandemic years. But, COVID-19 was the beginning of the horrible things that were to come. The coronavirus years took a lot from us, but it also helped us see and understand what we have taken for granted.

Perhaps we should all work harder to take less for granted.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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