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Buena Vida

Elizabeth Gill Vidaurri

I confess. I am stealing time from my real job as a composition professor. Normally, I live my life between the lines of other people's writing. In their margins, I beg for more details. In my lectures, I attempt to convince my writers of the power of narrative. "Don't be afraid to employ the rhetorical mode of narration. Share your story," I implore my writers. If I can steal time away from that, then the writing just happens organically, spontaneously. Like this.

After miles of *bahia* on my commute from South Padre Island, I deliberately drive through the *Buena Vida* neighborhood to work, so I can linger at 1250 E. 21st. For some reason, it's hard for me to pass without slowing. No, I'm not looking for property, and I'm not a real estate tycoon, snatching up what's next to the University of Texas at Brownsville to resell for big bucks.

Let me explain. I say "it's hard to pass," but really the hard part lies in how it has laid its claim on me. I've caught myself calling it "My house." I enjoy how the chain link fence defines the large lot from the adjacent empty one, and how my eye never fails to settle on the faded and flaked turquoise paint on the wooden screen frames and the scrolled ironwork columns on the small front stoop. But when I see those few flakes of yellow-orange paint—still stubbornly clinging to the curves of the wooden siding—then melancholy engulfs me. Thankfully, though, those two front windows with the stile between them—like knowing eyes—comfort me as I pass.

Some mornings I tell myself that 1250 simply has won my awed respect. Small and simple, this house has stood the test of time unaffected by the whims of those who would change it, remuddle it with vinyl or plastic siding and aluminum windows and call the transgression an "update," or worse, "improvement."

A few months ago, I was startled to find someone had removed the window shades, revealing some old lace curtains. On particularly hot mornings, the windows were half raised, and those curtains floated in and out like an Andrew Wyeth painting, except as I would slow to take in the place, my perspective was the opposite of what he intended.

Most days now I just want to pull into its dirt driveway and go inside. I don't know what I'd find if I were to give in, but some days the impulse is so strong, I tell myself that I'm crazy.

Other days I muse that if I moved back to Brownsville and started a life alone closer to campus and my classes, I would live here or some place very much like it.

But why leave South Padre Island for this?

I don't ever answer that question because something like memory always overtakes me.

I am two months pregnant, and it is the college's first Splash Day. It's May 1970, and I, in my bikini sit next to Junie Coulter, my Phys-Ed prof who is making small talk.

"Nice day for a break from all that mid-term exam anxiety, don't ya' think?"

I don't answer but instead offer a faint smile. I must look pretty bad because she is watching my every move, like she might have to tell me how to use my shoulder, instead of my elbow, when I hit the tennis ball.

My morning sickness is awful, and I am actually losing weight in some bizarre, cruel irony of motherhood. I can keep nothing down. So I sit here in the sun on my bath towel, keeping my head down, because I know if I raise it, the sky will fall.

"You should go over and talk to those kids—they're gonna swim," she prods.

Instead, I look to that old Gulf of Mexico whose waters have wrecked hundreds of ships. Then my eyes go to the family fishing off those jetties I know so well, and I see myself alone, walking the shore, very pregnant in an ankle-length white peasant dress over my bikini.

At the skeet range two nights before, I had told Lee Enwright about my pregnancy in a simple, declarative sentence. He cocked his rifle and turned its barrel on me, and stared me down like a rodent or some pest he could just as well get rid of.

I recoiled slightly, holding my ground but my heart pumped crazily as a scene from a week earlier popped into my head. He had shot and killed these sparrows that had chattered threats at us because we were standing beside their nest in the small tree. Before I could recover from this shock and protest, he had then violently shaken one of the trees until the babies fell from the nest, and then he had stomped on them with his boot heels.

Replaying these events, I am almost relieved he won't offer marriage, but an unbearable pain sucks the air out of me because I realize he isn't who he said he was, and somehow worse, he doesn't love me.

My mind flashes to those tender moments when he had so insistently professed his love. No, he had just found me hard to resist even though he had said lately that he "preferred a girl not so thin and smart." That smart thing unbalanced him... and it made him angry. And recently he had made it clear that he didn't find me pretty, either. "Whew. I plan to marry a pretty, rich girl," he would say as if he were just remarking on the weather, like "Damn, it's hot!"

Yeah. A pretty, rich girl. And I was neither. And I was so scared I couldn't breathe and I couldn't talk—to anyone, not even Junie whose deliberate chatter offered me so many opportunities to share what she read in my posture.

No, I was stuck in fear, frozen by that weird undercurrent of rage just below the surface of everything Lee did or said now.

“Lookit, damnit. I’ve already made my plans. I’m going to SMU in the fall; this just isn’t my problem. Go across and just get rid of it! That’s what other girls do!”

Other girls? Those would be girls he knew personally?

In 1970’s Brownsville, we were stubbornly holding onto the 50’s, but demographers would probably say ours was a bilingual/bicultural version of Andy Griffith’s Mayberry—where my father knew everyone and everyone knew him, the grieving widower and devoted father who brought home from Mercy Hospital a baby girl whose mother did not survive childbirth.

My father was *the* insurance man in town in a business passed down to him by his father whose own father had founded the agency on Levee St. in 1913. There was no back-story my father didn’t know. He knew every family whose daughter had to seek out a kindly, and more importantly, out-of-town aunt and uncle until she delivered a child out of wedlock that the mature but childless couple would then quietly and happily adopt.

My father called these daughters “*putas*” or “*pendejas*—plain and simple.” They “were dumb, just plain dumb,” he would say matter-of-factly, and then add hastily, “Sweetheart, don’t believe boys when they tell you they love you. They will lie to get what they want, ruin your reputation, and disgrace our family name.” The meaning of his words I am just beginning to comprehend.

And there was more to digest. On more than several occasions after an evening of business cocktails and then a glass or two of wine before a late dinner, my father had made it clear he “would shoot any boy that put his hands on me that way.” I had no doubt he meant it.

“Here’s a tuna sandwich” brings me back to Junie, who is un-wrapping the Cut-Rite Wax Paper and taking a bite. As I smell the tuna, I can see myself in a kitchen of my very own, making tuna salad with hardboiled eggs, sweet pickles, celery, and yes, the finely chopped onions that had made Lee jerk up from the table angrily. “What the hell? I told you I don’t like onions in my tuna!” he fumed as he stomped off. Instead, now I see myself alone, looking out of *my* kitchen window at the shore where the seagulls and terns circled and dipped but mostly floated.

I am just coming to understand I am a girl alone except for this little, tiny thing floating around and around in me like one of those birds, and I pray I can find the strength to do what is right and not just easy.

It is a paralyzing fear that glues my chin to my chest, but I can see and hear Junie, from the corner of eye, sitting there next to me, chit-chatting as she rattles that wax-paper around the sandwich.

“Wouldn’t you like a Dr. Pepper?”

I nod my head ever so slightly because there is a heaviness in my chest, something pressing on me from all sides like I am caught in some extra thick rubber band that Lee has looped over and over me until I can’t recognize myself.

After the skeet shoot, I had walked home. When my screen door squeaked, my heart leapt. Maybe Lee did care after all. Maybe he’d had an epiphany, and he was back to tell me he knew his responsibility, at least to the baby.

No. First he had stood in the doorway, staring at me coldly, his arms folded across his chest and his head tilted to the side as though he were examining something loathsome or even grotesque. In one long and sudden stride, he reached me, shook his finger in my face as his words and some spit came out like a snarl. “You can’t tell anyone about this, understand? You need to get rid of it. Don’t say anything

to anyone if you want to see me.” Then he turned just as abruptly, banging the screen door behind him like an exclamation point of disgust, anger

“Here’s a Dr. Pepper,” Junie is saying, and I take it and hold it and watch the condensation forming on the bottle, but as much as I think I want to ask Junie if such a Catholic metropolis as Matamoros has abortion clinics, I say instead, “Isn’t it odd how we say ‘go across’ like ‘across’ isn’t a preposition but a noun?”

“I suppose it’s just shorthand,” she laughs, relieved that I am finally talking. But I know I am not. She crushes the waxed paper, and that rattling of paper reminds me of the day before as I lie with my feet in the stirrups of Dr. Bartolla’s examination table.

Dr. Bartolla is the only doctor my father doesn’t know. Patting my right ankle, he scoots his stool from behind the stirrups and the white tent over my shaking legs. He rolls up next to my face and says, “Sometimes the pills don’t work. I have a lawyer friend in Houston who will set you up with an OB. You just need to leave soon, so no one sees anything but a skinny girl.”

Lying there with my head turned to his, a flood of tears fills my eyes, immediately running down my nose and face and plopping onto the paper. I can only guess that my face must have been the same yellow green as the vomit that spilled out onto the paper next.

“It’s okay. Understand? You’re sick all the time now? Eat saltines before you move. Keep them by your bed.” He reaches over his chest, taking an imaginary cracker into his mouth. “See? Okay, chew slow. Wait. Chew two.”

I can’t help but smile at how ridiculous he looks, but I don’t believe him.

“It’s okay. Your pelvis is quite narrow, but I have no reason to believe—. You will be fine. You will be okay,” he says almost absentmindedly as he guides me upright.

I am eight months pregnant, and the nausea has finally stopped. I am living in a trailer in Huntsville with three hard-partying Sam Houston State college girls from Lake Texana, near Edna. Elayne, the oldest of bottle blonde party animals, is a casual acquaintance from a previous Spring Break on South Padre. She has warned me not to open the door to anyone; after all, the state prison lies just two blocks north of us, and then there is also her former boyfriend I should avoid, too.

Packed along with her admonitions, is a curious bit of information about her relationship with Mr. Wrong, “Should he come, should he figure out where I am--don’t let him in! He is really pissed with me. That fucker—he thinks God gave him the right to tell me what to do. I sure the heck showed him! Why would *I* want to get married when there’s so much to do?”

And as my pregnancy becomes more obvious, the party girls come home less and less, explaining, as if it is perfectly logical, that the dance halls and all those boys consume all their free time. Only Elayne phones to ask if any of their parents have called. She always asks politely, “Do you need anything?” and sounds relieved when I say no. Each call ends with, “Be careful if that fucker, that son of a bitch should come around.”

On the windiest of evenings, the trailer groans and creaks despite its tie-downs, so on this Friday as the cold front blows in, I don’t at first recognize the banging as someone actually knocking on the trailer door until it is followed by, “Elayne, I hear you in there; open this fuckin’ door!”

Before I can cross from where I've been un-hemming and re-sewing the girls' pants at the kitchen table, the trailer begins rocking violently and the lights go out. I can't be sure what is happening, and I recognize my heart beating too loudly in my chest. My foot catches in the carpet, but the rest of my body keeps going, knocking into the furniture, knocking over some of Elayne's knickknacks and then even more furniture. As I fall with a thud, the fetus inside me—now not quite four pounds—jumps as if jolted as I emit this tattered cry.

From the floor in the now failing light, I see the door knob turning as the room begins to spin to point I can't tell what is ceiling or floor. It's all a blur as the rain begins to pound on the roof and lightening illuminates even the inside of the trailer, but I look around recognizing none of it.

“Elayne? Elayne? Open this door, Elayne. It's pouring; let me in.”

I try to focus on the table, but it's on its side, and fear seizes me as I realize I can't get up. Something is very wrong, but this thought is interrupted by, “Fuckin' mother fucker! Open this door or I'll break it and ya' know I can...” Loud popping of metal follows.

He stands over me, his head just grazing the ceiling, and hands on his hips for the first few seconds until he realizes I am not Elayne.

“Oh, my God! You're—can you move? Look girl, you'd better start talkin' or I'm takin' you to the hospital—you understand?”

I can't answer as the fall pretty much has knocked the air from my lungs, and the adrenaline rush is backfiring. I am frozen except for the fetus that now—finally—is kicking like crazy and I have this vision of his little legs flailing in flight in my amniotic fluid, the stowaway victim of this same insane adrenal shot.

And this man sees the kicking, too, and reaches out with huge hands and covers my belly completely and firmly. “You’re okay, okay, okay,” he says softly and not to me, to the baby.

I can finally focus on the face attentive only to my belly. In bits of light, I see his razor stubble, deep-set eyes flooding with tears, and the overwhelming smell of alcohol on his breath.

“You need to say ‘It’s okay.’ He needs to hear your voice—know that you’re okay.”

I know he’s right, but instead my eyes fill with tears I have forced myself not cry for months and when I open my mouth, all that comes out is another little ragged cry that grows into sobs as this complete stranger wraps his arms around me, lifts me to the couch, and still holding me, cradles my tummy as if he can see the fetus.

Two weeks later, I am in Houston, living in an aging apartment complex on the north end, near Spring where Elayne’s ex and lots of other salesmen live humbly and cheaply. They are mostly on the road, living out of their suitcases but needing a place to call home. Only a few company cars dot the parking lot at night, but come daylight, they disappear. I befriend the young woman, Tonya, who works in the apartment office, and she finds me a studio that hasn’t been renovated, so it’s vacant until her father’s crew can strip it and then bring it back to life. She brings me the crews’ uniform shirts and I sew on their names, Manny, Jorge, Juan, Pete, Gil, Johnny, Pancho, and Jose who are all building a house some blocks away.

This second story walk-up has no view of it, but the freeway hums at us constantly, and I try to hum back. I talk constantly as if carrying on a conversation, describing what I am seeing—which isn’t much—but omitting what I am feeling until sometimes I can’t, and then I try not to cry aloud.

Late one night as I bathe before bed, I feel the fetus shifting inside me. The rubber band loosens momentarily and then tightens and keeps on tightening. I can see him turn sideways and struggle. I can barely breathe watching my belly contort into this sideways, oblong shape, and I stand up in the bath tub, wet and shivering in pain, holding on to the towel rack, trying to breathe. I calm myself; I rinse with warm water and try to hum but find myself almost gasping and so uncomfortable as though someone is sitting on my lungs. Later I realize it is his head squashing my lungs, and he is breech, understanding I can't deliver him in the normal fashion. Now I can't bend forward, and my back aches from having to arch it so I can breathe. I pray my rib cage can be flipped up like the hood of a car to make some room for him, but my prayer is not answered.

Early the next morning, Tonya drives me to my doctor who shakes his head and says "You're going to have to give this three to four more weeks, and then we'll do a C-section if things don't worsen before that."

I am too afraid of what "things" might get worse, and I try to push away images of my father back in Brownsville eating alone, but especially the one of him coming home alone from the hospital when I was born.

Thankfully, my second and final visit to Bartolla's friend, Mr. Westerman, comes just after my doctor's appointment, and it seems like the moment I open the law office door, each person takes in all there is of me. A middle-aged couple eyes me from the corner and then looks discreetly away. The receptionist forces a smile but stares at her calendar once she begins speaking to me. Before I can even attempt to identify myself, Mr. Westerman comes and guides me by the elbow into his office.

"I have some questions I need to ask you. And I need you to answer them honestly. Do you understand what I mean by *honestly*?"

I say that I think I know what honesty is. But I wonder, does he think just because I am pregnant and lying to my father and my family and my friends that I don't know the truth from a lie?

Again he starts, "I need you to think carefully about the questions I ask and answer them honestly."

"Okay," I offer, so he can start.

"Do you understand that you are giving up all parental rights to this unborn child?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you understand that you are never to seek out this child or this child's adoptive parents?"

"Yes, sir."

"And the father—he knows about your pregnancy and your decision."

"He doesn't care, sir."

"I didn't ask you that. The father knows about your pregnancy and your decision?"

"Yes, sir."

"Is he in agreement?"

"He doesn't care—he asked me to have an abortion."

Westerman looks up from his script, frowning. After a measured moment, he sighs and then resumes, "You're a Christian. Do you have any objections to this child being raised in the Jewish faith?"

"I would only hope the child would be raised with some religious faith, sir." I listen to my words but images of my own church on Elizabeth Street, the stained glass windows, the pipe organ, the sound of the kneelers going down if the rector says "Let

us pray in Christ's name," flash through my head and then end with how Lee would sneer, "God-damned Jews" when he was drunk. And I add, "The Jewish faith is fine; I do not object to it."

"And you don't love this child?"

His question rocks me; I feel it buzz-sawing through me. "I never said that! I can't say that. No. You've misunderstood; I love the child; that's why I'm giving it away to your clients."

He sees my eyes begin to water, and he asks, "You love the child?"

"Yes sir."

"So are you sure this is what you want to do?"

"Yes, yes, it is what I have to do."

"So you're *sure* this is what you want to do? I have to be sure."

"Yes, it's what I want for the child."

Tonya, from the apartment complex, drives me to the Baylor Hospital on Fannin three days later. Once we pull in the drive, she begins, "Should I stay? Do you know what time in the morning they'll perform the Caesarean? Should I call anyone for you? Here's my phone number again in case you forget. You can call me if you need anything."

"Thanks. I may need you to pick me up—I don't think I have anyone to do that..." I start to explain; then seeing it is beyond even my own comprehension, my voice just trails off as I drag the little piece of hand-me-down luggage across the back seat of the shiny, new six cylinder Ford her father has just bought her.

I smile as I think I can hold on to her brightness, her exuberance the day before when she exclaims, "Let me introduce you to *my* car!"

She is the twelfth child of sixty years of marriage. Her father is eighty and delights in buying her the things young women like—clothes, shoes, jewelry, concert tickets, and eight-track tapes and albums.

Her father is unlike any man of his age that I have met; he moves across a room with the grace of a dancer, and he is just as likely to be singing a *corrido*.

His secret—he is a simple man, a hard worker whose love of labor keeps his youth. He explains this to me when he comes for the uniforms, and then he laughs, “I just don’t feel right until I’ve broken a sweat because the Lord intended us to be honest laborers.”

When he was just fourteen, along with other young men from his little Mexican village near Xilitla, he had come to Houston to work laying concrete highway and amid the construction boom, he had stayed and had begun building his own little frame house, and then others, selling them to people like himself who were starting over, starting anew. His early buyers loved the colorfully sweet and simple frame houses with big yards where their children could play. Of late he has graduated to brick facades that mimic the large, ubiquitous and coveted ranch styles, but the yards are tiny because his buyers now have no desire to sweat outside in Houston heat. “Nobody can live now without their AC,” he explains, shaking his head, “It’s wrong for the children not to have a place to run and play.”

We converse easily, but as he comprehends my situation, I see his struggle not to say what he believes: “A child is a blessing, *mija*; never turn your back to a blessing.”

In the hours after surgery, when I know my baby is gone, I dream to soothe away the pain I have known always would be unbearable. I dream about his early houses and the big yards with children laughing and playing, and then I smell the

beach and see terns and gulls floating over the yards and shore. I want more than anything for this pain to stop, to be home and safe and to be the person I used to be, but I know home will, most likely, never afford such comfort again.

I'm passing through *Buena Vida* again, and at 1250, there's a very old man on the stoop. He's maybe in his late eighties, but it's so hard to tell when someone's had an active and healthy life. He turns gracefully as I slow for my daily ritual. With my window down in 100 degree heat, I take in the scene, the yard, the Mockingbird's and the Great Kiskadee's songs and the soft *conjunto* music playing on his radio. A seagull's floating high above. The *viejito* stares at me and my car like he's seen me everyday. We acknowledge each other almost simultaneously. A smile from his face brings me to tears. I turn away as if found out, but I drive on to work slowly, diligently stopping at each stop sign, trying vainly to focus on what I will say to my students when I return their essays.

Notes

Buena Vida, literally “good life” is the neighborhood surrounding the University of Texas Brownsville and Texas Southmost College.

Bahia, literally “the bay,” refers to the wetlands of sand and water ecosystems between South Padre Island and Brownsville called *Bahia Grande*, *Laguna Larga*, Little *Laguna Madre*, and the *Laguna Madre*.

Conjunto literally translates as “group,” but in South Texas it is generally applied to a genre of music which uses the button accordion.

Corrido is a genre of Mexican music, usually a popular narrative song or a ballad.

Mija is often considered a term of endearment in South Texas, like sweetheart; literally it means “daughter” or “girl.”

Pendeja is an “irresponsible” or “foolish” woman.

Putita means “whore” or “prostitute.”

Viejito means “old person.”