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## **“Combustible Sinners” and other stories**

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COMBUSTIBLE SINNERS AND OTHER STORIES

A Thesis

by

MYRA IVETTE INFANTE

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Texas-Pan American  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

May 2011

Major Subject: Creative Writing



COMBUSTIBLE SINNERS AND OTHER STORIES

A Thesis  
by  
MYRA IVETTE INFANTE

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May 2011



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## ABSTRACT

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This is a collection of six short stories with a critical introduction. The characters in the short stories are all connected (sometimes remotely) to a small, Mexican, Pentecostal church in South Texas. The critical introduction explores the religious background and evolution as a Chicana writer of Myra Ivette Infante.





## DEDICATION

I dedicate this story collection to my parents, Ruben and Olga Infante, whose unconditional love and support allow me to pursue my dreams.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the help and support I received from my committee: Prof. José Skinner, Dr. Philip Zwerling, and Dr. William Broz. Thank you for your time and patience throughout this process.

I would like to acknowledge The International Women's Board and the Office of International Programs for making my study abroad trips possible. My experiences abroad empowered me to pursue my dreams of teaching and writing.



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## INTRODUCTION

*Then it happened, as they continued on and talked, that suddenly a chariot of fire appeared with horses of fire, and separated the two of them; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven. 2 Kings 2:11*

Aliens did not abduct Elijah. Sure, prehistoric man wouldn't know how to describe an alien ship, but I'm not convinced that anything on a traditional alien ship would resemble horses. Maybe if the Deuteronomist had said a horseless chariot, the alien theory would have elicited fewer giggles in my Sunday School class. Nevertheless, several people nodded solemnly when the teacher proposed that maybe angels visited Earth in the form of UFOs.

I can't pinpoint the day my beliefs turned agnostic. Maybe it occurred the day my sister's father-in-law prayed for his dead sister's resurrection. Maybe it goes as far back as when my dad exchanged fisticuffs over a church barbeque pit with a drug-dealing Bible bookstore owner who carried on an affair with a self-proclaimed witch who lived in government housing. My mom warned me not to look out the church van window as my dad, filled with holy anger, kicked some ass.

In spite of my criticisms of organized religion and my fundamentalist Christian upbringing, I celebrate the memory of my childhood. How my brain can question everything my parents believe and still have the utmost respect for them, I don't know. I'll leave that to the therapists I hope one day to afford. In the mean time, my writing helps me sort out the memories,



feelings, and the doubts I have about God (I still have to use capital “G”; I haven’t crossed over to the dark side completely.)

Two paths of discovery converged and led me to becoming a writer: my questioning of faith and my questioning of identity. This short story collection serves as a border between my old and new selves, and includes themes of examining faith and defining identity.

At some point in their lives, my parents decided they would abstain from certain joys in life in exchange for protection from the cruel, gritty outside world. Mexican rancho life included shotguns and the pastimes of dancing, drinking, and womanizing that characterized the Mexican revolutionaries long after the revolution was over. Well into the 1950s, the ranchos my parents grew up in outside of Rio Bravo, Tamaulipas, Mexico maintained turn of the century conditions with dirt floors and no sewage. Education, not readily available, couldn’t save them from this rascuache lifestyle; and so, they turned to religion for sanctuary. This meant that even after leaving rancho life and moving to the U.S., our family would never approve of drinking, smoking, dancing, or basically anything fun. Even going to the movies constituted sinning. I think King David received less chastising from Nathan the prophet for his sins of adultery and homicide than I did for dancing to the “Grease” soundtrack in my kindergarten class at the age of five. We resembled Amish people except we had electricity and didn’t make our own soap.

My parents created a God-centered life for our family. Every conversation revolved around doctrinal beliefs and we learned to weigh each moment against the threat of hell and banishment from God. After a serious brush with death – he got split in two by a forklift, losing the use of his large intestine for six months– my father became a Pentecostal minister, sold his shotgun collection to help with church expenses, and got rid of our television set because he believed it was the devil’s box. After years of entertaining myself with Christian radio drama

and classical novels my older siblings brought home from school, my grandmother gave us her old black and white console, insisting we were completely cut off from the world. I have massive gaps in my pop-culture literacy.

The early days of my parents' church work resembled a vigilante ministry. They helped catch a few unfaithful spouses in the act, pulled drunken church ladies from bars, and helped unwed pregnant women prove their child's paternity. As the pastor's daughter, I had access to information about parishioner's lives. Adults either forgot I occupied the room or they extended their trust of my parents to me. I drew inspiration for my writing from those years.

The community I grew up in included people who struggled daily with their sinful natures and transmitted the fear of retribution from God to their children. This created unique dynamics for both adults and children. Some stories in my collection admit a humorous and irreverent take on this religious community, and others show disturbing deviances from rational thought.

Other writers, too, have questioned religion through their writing. In *The Canterbury Tales*, Geoffrey Chaucer's characters, while on a religious pilgrimage, tell stories, which question what the Catholic Church has taught them. In the end, they each adopt their own doctrine and justify their actions whilst quoting scripture. Sounds quite familiar.

Helga, the main character in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*, has identity crisis after identity crisis. She gets wrapped up in the frenzy of the charismatic Christianity of the Harlem Renaissance only to realize it was all a lie. "And this, Helga decided, was what ailed the whole Negro race in America, this fatuous belief in the white man's God, this childlike trust in full compensation for all woes and privations in 'kingdom come.' ... How the white man's God must laugh at the great joke he had played on them! Bound them to slavery, then to poverty and insult,

and made them bear it unresistingly, uncomplainingly almost, by sweet promises of mansions in the sky by and by (458).” Larsen, an atheist, works out her religious qualms through her fictional character.

Some writers assume a more comical mode of questioning religion:

“Unfortunately, Pope John Paul closed down purgatory when he came to power. Was it closed down because the same overcrowding problem we have in our jails and penitentiaries here on earth? Was it a budget problem? Was everybody in purgatory pardoned and sent up to heaven? Were some sent to the eternal fires of hell? What kind of credit can I get for my ejaculations [short profound prayerful utterings] now? These questions remain unanswered (Burciaga 66).”

My stories join the many other works of literature that question religious beliefs and practices. “The Printed Fabric,” the only story in this collection that doesn’t involve questioning of religion, still raises certain issues about the effectiveness of church. Naida’s parents, Gilberto and Linda from “Zombie Love,” remain ignorant of what has happened to Naida. Naida receives no attention within the church community – she remains invisible, and so church doesn’t play a big part in her life and story.

In retrospect, my pursuing writing was inevitable. My romantic inclinations convince me that writing is in my blood. For a great part of my childhood, my father sat behind a typewriter late into the night unloading unto the page in Spanish. During one of my nosey pull-open-every-drawer episodes, I found some withered, moth eaten pages inside a folio tied with a string. The pages bore ribbon-typed poems about a girl with ruby lips who cried at a funeral. The shock at the mention of lips by my father made me stop reading. When I asked my father about the poems, he said I could only have them published after his death.

My parents did not consider reading and writing real work. My father joked about his lazy brother who copied his school notes everyday to get out of doing farm chores. My dad’s

strong work ethic prohibited the sun finding him (and the rest of our family) in bed. Real work took place out in the fields, and he left the reading and writing for the evening. However, no matter how poor and small our house, my father always kept a library in one of the rooms. Both my parents read voraciously, and I inherited this love of books. Most of what they read involved religious topics as if they could only allow themselves the pleasure of reading and writing if it involved God. Maybe that motivated my father to become a minister; he could read and write all he wanted if it pertained to God.

My views on writing changed when I returned to college as a music major and non-traditional student at the age of thirty-two. I hoped to one day record my own Christian music album, but encouragement from English professors (and reality-check sessions with music professors) motivated me to pursue an academic career in English. A spider web map of opportunities and decisions made me a high school English teacher with a desire to improve my writing. Enrolling in the MFA program, not with the purpose to become a published writer, but rather the desire to become a better English teacher, eased the pressure of evolving from non-writer to writer and freed me to treat the time in the program as a journey of self-discovery. I began the program as a practicing Christian and non-writer and emerge an agnostic writer.

My early experiences (pre-MFA) with writing mirrored what I learned from my parents; I wrote song lyrics, plays, and stories that had my church congregation as the target audience. But as I engaged in more writing opportunities, my questioning of religion turned bolder and I allowed the doubts I felt growing up resurface. This change came gradually. I first abandoned the most fundamentalist beliefs and adopted a less severe Baptist doctrine that even allowed me to get a tattoo. Eventually, I questioned everything I knew about religion.

Despite my newfound boldness, two dilemmas present themselves as I embark in this project. One questions my commitment and authenticity as a writer, and the other questions my loyalty and integrity to my family. I feel compelled to both acknowledge these dilemmas and offer some explanation to pacify any negative feelings that might tarnish the project. So, let us exorcise these demons.

Rather than thinking I wasted so many years without taking writing seriously, I like to compare my stories to human female egg cells. A baby girl is born with all the egg cells she will ever have. At puberty, she begins maturing an egg cell each month. The stories in this collection have been inside me for a very long time; and, now the part of me that reproduces and creates, releases them.

As an agnostic, I question religious matters both through my characters and in the stories themselves. Because of the mutual love and admiration my family and I have for each other, my questioning of faith has not severed the ties between my family and me. I still attend church, and I suspect Christians in general allow some space for doubt. Forming part of this religious community gave me an insider's view to these stories, and the exposure to the world through my education allowed me to revisit them and see the irony and humor in my upbringing. I don't foresee all of my future writings to entail wrestling with questions of faith, but the connection between how I became a writer and religion is strong, and merits the honor of spearheading my first project.

For me, a connection between writing and my identity also exists. Hitherto oblivious to race or ethnicity, I entered the fifth grade gifted and talented class at Crockett Elementary in McAllen, and I encountered my first white classmates. The test that got me into this class exposed its own identity crisis. Selected students from all-Hispanic Navarro Elementary took an

IQ test that involved pattern recognition and vocabulary context clues. When my Navarro friends described the test as too difficult, I acted dumb and pretended the test was problematic for me as well.

Having white classmates manifested new challenges. My parents only spoke Spanish, and I had not absorbed the English grammar and vocabulary my peers absorbed at home. My family had no television because of the religious thing, and this made a huge dent in my knowledge of American pop culture. Finally, I lacked the comforts wealth afforded my classmates. Each day my teacher reminded me of my meager means and “free lunch” status by asking me to lie and yell “Paid!” when she collected lunch money.

All of this I internalized, not as a socio-economic issue, but rather, as gauging my intelligence compared to white students and students who shared my ethnicity; and my academic career became a struggle between seeking acceptance in the midst of feeling too smart or too dumb.

Because I learned to read and write Spanish at the same time as I learned to read and write English, I absorbed the grammar in both languages simultaneously, which created a morphed syntax in my speech and writing. This only created further insecurities for me as a student of English. I deemed myself atypical, but instead of exploring my uniqueness or trying to use it to my advantage in writing, I tried to mask it and desired to be “whiter” in my English skills.

I entered the MFA program in this state of mind, and I found it very difficult to imitate the writers I read in my American and British literature classes. A chasm existed between my American and Mexican selves, which prevented me from engaging in creative writing. But Gloria Anzaldúa’s words built a bridge across this chasm. “As a person, I, as people, we,

Chicanos, blame ourselves, terrorize ourselves. Most of this goes on unconsciously; we only know that we are hurting, we suspect that there is something ‘wrong’ with us, something fundamentally ‘wrong’ (Anzaldúa 67).”

After reading *Borderlands La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, I felt anger towards my parents, my teachers and anyone who had any part in my upbringing. No one told me that two worlds converged in me creating a border existence. Anzaldúa calls this border a “closed country”: “The convergence has created a shock culture; a border culture, a third country, a closed country (33).”

My formal education had been in English and my informal (home) education had been in Spanish. I couldn’t merge the two into an acceptable self. I constantly had to choose between the two and always felt inadequate, guilty and incomplete. Anzaldúa says, “I will no longer be made to feel ashamed of existing. I will have my voice: Indian, Spanish, white. I will have my serpent’s tongue—my woman’s voice, my sexual voice, my poet’s voice. I will overcome the tradition of silence (81).” To the Standard American English Speaker, the way I speak and write may be judged unnatural, but my speech and writing is a product of our borderland: “A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary (25).” This realization allowed me to fully express myself, and value myself enough to write.

I wanted to know more about this Chicanismo that could free my tongue (and pen to write). I found Jose Antonio Burciaga’s *Drink Cultura*, which further encouraged me to pursue my voice. Burciaga says, “Chicanos are children of exiles, children of revolutionaries, children of undocumented workers, children abandoned by the Mother Country, children of parents who sought work, sought bread, children they did not educate (53).” Burciaga and Anzaldúa both

used their writing to work through their thoughts and feelings about identity—their Chicano identity.

“Our bilingual, bicultural, binational experience is a form of schizophrenia, rich and poor, sun and shadow, between realism and surrealism. To live on the border is to live in the center. The center unites and separates the four directions. To live on the border unites and separates two cultures, two worlds, to be at the entrance and exit and to be able to accept both. These cultures cross each other not to assimilate one another but to ‘transculturates’ (Burciaga 66).”

This “border culture” makes for great storytelling.

At the onset of this collection, I had to make several decisions. Should I write Young Adult (YA) Literature or traditional literature? Should I write fiction or creative non-fiction? I was intrigued with YA because as a secondary English teacher, I had a vested interest. I would follow in the footsteps of Scott Westerfeld, author of the *Uglies* series, and Rick Riordan, author of the *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* series both of whom started as teachers and became writers.

I also considered writing YA literature because it mirrors traditional literature by including all the elements of fiction such as a plot, setting, theme, conflict, etc. Some of the characteristics of young adult literature include an adolescent protagonist; the plot matches the age and experiences of adolescents, and includes a “coming of age” theme. Two of the stories in my collection, “Combustible Sinners” and “Jazzy Moon Saves Jesus” fit the YA description, but it concerned me that YA might not fit a literary label. Most academics would judge Westerfeld and Riordan to be genre writers. However, further inspection revealed the following, “Some still believe that YA literature is merely a secondary category of childlike storytelling—didactic in nature—and unworthy of serious literary evaluation, when, in fact, it is really an overlooked and underappreciated literary genre that has only recently begun to attract the critical attention that it deserves (Daniels 78).” Don’t *Alice in Wonderland* and *To Kill a*



*Mockingbird* fall under the YA label? If Lewis Carroll and Harper Lee wrote YA literature, then I too embrace the label proudly.

I set out to find other YA writers, which couldn't be pegged as genre writers. The following authors include not only the traditional literary elements, but also aspects of South Texas local culture. They don't fit the prescribed genres and transcend into the more literary side of the spectrum.

In Viola Canales' *The Tequila Worm*, Sofia, the adolescent protagonist, faces the choice of either conforming to the expectations of her ethnicity and gender, or risking solitude and rejection. Canales' writing includes dynamic characters in thought-provoking and culturally rich situations. "I thought of Papa's bean cleaning and cooking, about the Christmas nacimiento, and about the nine days of rosaries to get Papa's soul to heaven. These were all rituals that connected me to something higher. And now, eating the tequila worm had worked its own power (193)."

Canales offers a view of our South Texan Mexican culture and captures what many young Chicanos experience in searching for their identity. The symbolic eating of the tequila worm connects Sophia to her cultural inheritance and empowers her to boldly accept the challenge of excelling in a white favored world.

Writers like Canales convince me that our border culture has enough worth to write about. I only need to sit down and chat with the out-of-town-Teach-for-America teachers about subjects like giving someone ojo to realize how our crazy beliefs sound interesting to a mainstream audience.

In *The Jumping Tree*, another YA book, René Saldaña explores complex subjects such as gender roles in our culture. What makes a real Mexican man? American culture accepts blurring of gender roles, but South Texan Mexican culture expects men to behave a certain way. Ray, the

main character in *The Jumping Tree*, experiences the pressures men feel to drink, have girlfriends, and do daring things such as jump off trees to prove their manhood. In the title chapter of the book he says, “But I am Mexican. I could not- strike that- would not back down. I would do the deed. It was a question of manhood. Macho o mujeringa? Pues macho! (69)”

In “Her Other Son”, David Rice points out the socioeconomic issues in South Texas. Not only do Mexicans come in all shapes, colors, and sizes—we also come in all socioeconomic levels. Romero, the main character, lives in a white frame house that by American mainstream standards may seem on the lower end of the wealth spectrum; yet, his family employs a full time maid. When Romero visits his maid’s home in Mexico, he witnesses true poverty. The disparity of wealth, a universal theme, fuels Rice’s story.

My story, “Combustible Sinners,” joins these YA stories by other Chicano writers in that my teen protagonist faces internal “coming of age” conflicts. Lissi fears punishment from God, public humiliation, and ostracizing from her church community for partaking of Communion in an unholy state. By the end of the story, she realizes nothing bad will happen to her for kissing a boy and breaking her purity vow. The rules and fears placed on her by people in power prove ridiculous as she ponders on the literal meaning of Communion. “Combustible Sinners” marks Lissi’s awakening in to free thought.

The second decision involved the realm between creative non-fiction and fiction. I cheated on my first fiction workshop assignment. The first draft of “The Printed Fabric” was a true story, which I submitted as fiction. Ironically, my workshop class judged it unbelievable. Flabbergasted, I writhed in desire to expose it as a true story. Eventually, I had to fictionalize it to make it believable.

So, what is a good balance of fiction and non-fiction? Does the saying “all good lies contain some truth” translate to writing fiction? What are the ethical standards with regard to fiction/non-fiction ratios? If good writers write about what they know, their fictional stories must be inspired by real events. But by the same token, why do TV shows flash the disclaimer that any resemblance to real people or events is strictly coincidence? Despite all these questions and the debacle of my first official attempt at literary writing, I discovered the art of fiction. Never has the advice “write what you know” been truer than when I wrote “Combustible Sinners,” the story that birthed this collection. For this, my second attempt for fiction workshop, I created characters based on people that visited my father’s small Mexican Pentecostal church. Over the years, hundreds in soul wrenching states, passed through our church doors, looking for redemption, forgiveness, and affirmation. These people provided character traits and colorful stories. With my bold new perspective on dogmatic matters, I played with these characters and the stories I remembered from my father’s church. For example, one character is actually the combination of five different people further combined with aspects pulled from my imagination and thrown into situations based on several real events combined with how I imagined it could have gone differently.

With “Combustible Sinners,” I received positive feedback and requests for more stories about peripheral characters. This convinced me my first collection should honor my discovery of writing fiction all the while working out my thoughts about my upbringing, what I learned about God from my parents, and the questions that have plagued me my entire life.

The adage “Talent imitates; genius steals,” is attributed to greats such as T.S. Eliot, Oscar Wilde, and Pablo Picasso, and I’ve heard more than one writing professor advise students to read because this improves writing. As a field independent learner, I found it difficult to learn to write

from reading. I'm an avid reader because I get lost in the story. I can block out everything around me five minutes at a time while waiting in line at the bank. However, I wasn't trained to notice all the details a good writer should notice. It's kind of like watching a blockbuster movie and not wanting to know how they managed the special effects. Unfortunately, to become a good writer, I had to start looking at the man behind the curtain. I began reading with the purpose to learn about writing.

At this point I had only written the title story "Combustible Sinners", but I knew I had more stories to tell involving these characters. Did I want to write a novel? I wasn't ready to commit to this quite yet, but Amy Tan gave me an idea. I read *The Joy Luck Club* as I decided on a thesis project and realized that this novel could easily be broken up into short stories. I discovered the perfect compromise: a collection of short stories with interconnected characters.

Then I found out my idea echoed Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, and that Sherwood Anderson inspired writers such as Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner. I read *Winesburg, Ohio*. I liked lines such as "The lid of the left eye twitched; it fell down and snapped up; it was exactly as though the lid of the eye were a window shade and someone stood inside the doctor's head playing with the cord (49)." I saw the same simplicity of plot in Anderson's stories as I had seen in Hemingway's. Although both are acclaimed writers, I didn't like their stories straight away. But then I realized that their stories merited rereading and thoughtful extracting of meaning that a single reading could not give.

What I learned from Anderson was the format of interconnected short stories, which laid the significance in the literary world for characters such as George Willard. Had Anderson published these stories independently or had he written a traditional novel, he may not have received critical acclaim. I was definitely on the right track with *Combustible Sinners*.

The stories in my collection have characters who attend Pastor Rogelio Linares' Nueva Vida Pentecostal Church. They all want a new life. Rogelio and Emma Linares serve as pastors and their daughter Lissi, although visibly active in the church, often questions the church's teachings. Linda in "Zombie Love" is Rogelio's sister and Naida's mother in "The Printed Fabric." Although after coming to the U.S., Gilberto and Linda value their jobs more than church, the ties to church still remain through their extended families. They have a close relationship with Rogelio Linares even to the point of calling him when Gilberto accidentally hurts Linda during sex. The other characters who are not related to the pastoral family are members of the church.

As I worked on this collection, I gradually went from writing YA to writing for a more mature audience. If I had to label each of my stories, I would say "Combustible Sinners" and "Jazzy Moon Saves Jesus" could fall under the YA label because the protagonist in these stories is a teenager who deals with coming of age issues. The new ending in "The Printed Fabric" tips it over to the mature audience side. "Zombie Love" and "Bible Bookstore Brawls" are also for a mature audience. That only leaves "Surprise Quinceañera" which has an adult protagonist, but has two strong teenage characters. Hence, I consider this story a hybrid.

As the popularity of books such as the *Harry Potter* and the *Twilight* series has shown, many adults enjoy reading YA. The YA stories in my collection will appeal to adults as well because they include the characters that form part of this church community. My collection shows the perspective of young and old, and people with different degrees of devotion and sanity, which makes for a 360° view of this church community. I plan to continue writing both for young adult and mature audiences as writers such as Sandra Cisneros and Joyce Carol Oates have done before me.

After reading Junot Diaz's "Aurora", I realized I hadn't read many contemporary writers. I immediately purchased *Drown* and *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. His innovative format matched his riveting writing:

How much of this do we need? I asked Rafa.  
All of it.  
Can't we buy something to eat?  
Save it for a drink. You'll be real thirsty later.  
Maybe we should eat.  
Don't be stupid.  
How about if I just bought us some gum?  
Give me that money, he said.  
OK, I said. I was just asking. ("Ysrael" from *Drown* p. 10)

But then I read Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men* and noticed the missing quotation marks in his dialogue as well. Tim O'Brien also uses this format for dialogue in his book *The Things They Carried*. Diaz didn't invent this format. He probably got it from McCarthy. Or who knows? I imitated dialogue sans quotation marks in the first few drafts of "Zombie Love." However, I finally decided to include them because although I liked the disconnected feeling it gave my main character, the quotation marks moved the dialogue along and made it more dynamic. I have to admit, that even though Cormac McCarthy is a great American writer, some of his dialogue confuses me. I've had to reread several passages to know who is talking when.

This brings me to another issue I encountered while writing. How much do I want to be like other writers? According to Harold Bloom, Oscar Wilde "knew he had failed as a poet because he lacked strength to overcome his anxiety of influence (6)." In his essay, "Corn-Pone Opinions" Mark Twain says,

"We notice this in literature. Shakespeare is a standard, and fifty years ago we used to write tragedies, which we couldn't tell from—from somebody else's; but we don't do that any more, now. Our prose standard, three quarters of a century ago, was ornate and diffuse; some authority or other changed it

in the direction of compactness and simplicity, and conformity followed, without argument. This historical novel starts up suddenly, and sweeps the land. Everybody writes one, and the nation is glad. We had historical novels before; but nobody read them, and the rest of us conformed—without reasoning it out. We are conforming in the other way, now, because it is another case of everybody (719).”

Now the trend includes quotation-less dialogue and shocking plot twists, which reveal deviant behavior. In my original version of “The Printed Fabric,” the romance between Naida and Jaime remained a mystery at the end of the story. I rewrote it to include a more “shocking” explicit revelation. Writing demands a constant series of decisions. Sometimes I conform to trends and sometimes I don’t.

I also read a collection of short stories by Anton Chekhov. My stories resemble his in that they give a brief, sometimes mundane, glimpse into the life of a character— something that happened once in their lives. Aren’t most of the stories we tell like that? In “The Huntsman,” Chekhov shows us an encounter in the woods between an estranged husband and wife. The husband considers the wife beneath his station and treats her accordingly. Chekhov gives us background information as he unfolds the conversation between the two characters. In the end, nothing changes for the couple; and yet, Chekhov exposes the values of two lives. For example, in my story “Zombie Love,” Gilberto fears that a real miracle will finally happen and his diseased wife will be brought back to life. She doesn’t come back to life and in the end nothing changes, but we get a glimpse into Gilberto’s insecurities, desires, views on religion, and finally his most selfish act in letting his wife die while choking on a pill.

In “Small Fry,” Chekhov writes: “‘Maybe try stealing?’ he thought. ‘Stealing’s not hard, I suppose, but the problem is hiding it... They say people run away to America with what they steal, but, devil knows, where is America? In order to steal, you also have to have an education.’” This reminded me of an advisory email I got from the State of Texas warning me

that my students were being recruited by Mexican drug cartels. More than one student has expressed the desire to “make it” and get in with the cartels. I told them the cartels were starting to look at TAKS (state test) scores. They didn’t want any dumb criminals working for them. Although my school principal would frown at my comments, Chekov is right—in order to steal, you do need an education. I want the readers of my stories to make connections with their own lives as I did with Chekhov’s.

In “Bible Bookstore Brawls,” Pastor Linares hopes Don Fernando will build him a new church even though Don Fernando appears to be a shady individual. In order to do God’s work, do you sometimes need the help of the devil? Pastor Linares chose wisely and kept his integrity. In real life, despite exciting events happening, normalcy usually ensues to balance things out. Maybe Chekhov and Anderson would appreciate the anticlimactic ending?

As a Chicana writer, I knew I had to make my code switching as authentic as possible. How a writer formats code switching often relates to the decade the writer publishes and their political affiliation. Three writers I admire who use code switching in their writing would label themselves as Chicanos, but they all have a different approach to how they format it. For example, Gloria Anzaldúa who published *Borderlands* in 1987 used italics to show the reader she realized she used Spanish words: “*La consentida, la rancherita que se avergonzaba de su cuerpo* tried not to show pain but the kids could read her face (65).” A monolingual reader would get the gist of what she was saying, but only a bilingual reader would get the full meaning. Maybe it was another way she rebelled? Even though Anzaldúa pioneered the movement to accept Spanglish as a valid academic form of expression, she still had to use italics.

Sandra Cisneros’ *Woman Hollering Creek*, published in 1991, goes a bit beyond the italics. She also uses in context translation: ““*Quieres chicle?*” the lady asks in a Spanish too big



for her mouth. ‘*Gracias.*’ The lady gives him a whole handful of gum for free, little cellophane cubes of Chiclets, cinnamon and aqua and the white ones that don’t taste like anything but are good for pretend buck teeth (20).” Did Cisneros feel pressure to make her book more appealing to a mainstream audience? Should I do the same?

Richard Yáñez, who published *El Paso del Norte Stories on the Border* in 2003, doesn’t use italics and he doesn’t translate either: “If the dog wants a place to sleep, he thought, then the mugroso can have it. The yard might as well be of some use, not just a cemetery for all these pinche llantas (41)” or “Wanting to be the one to ask the questions, he put the squeeze on Shorty. ‘So, you and this ruca getting it on?’ ‘Naw, we’ve come close, pero tú sabes.’ A big smile crept up on his face. ‘Maybe tonight.’ (29)” Yáñez doesn’t use so many Spanish words that it becomes unintelligible to the monolingual reader, but the point is he doesn’t format the Spanish words differently to indicate they are foreign words. This is a great leap in formatting.

I have used enough Spanish in my stories that it merits thoughtful decisions as to formatting. I have decided not to italicize Spanish words. I considered using footnotes, but feared that the list of notes at the bottom of the page would skew the overall look of the page. By not italicizing words or using footnotes, I join contemporary Chicano writers who promote the various forms of Spanish code switching as a valid form of expression.

Other issues of formatting and content plagued me. The first few stories I wrote were sprinkled with internal thought (I even italicized it). My committee chair said, “NO INTERNAL THOUGHT WHATSOEVER.” Or something to that effect. I had already read *How Fiction Works* by James Wood, but I didn’t really understand free indirect speech until I realized it was my salvation for my internal thought woes. He says,

“Note the gain in flexibility. The narrative seems to float away from the novelist and take on the properties of the character, who now seems to

‘own’ the words. The writer is free to inflect the reported thought, to bend around the character’s own words... We are close to stream of consciousness, and that is the direction free indirect style takes in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries...(9)”

I employed this technique with Lissi’s character in “Combustible Sinners” as she questions the sacrament of communion.

Clichés plagued early drafts of my work. I’m comforted when Wood says, “Metaphors become dead through overuse, but it would be insane to charge metaphor itself with deadness. When the first caveman, shivering, said that he was as cold as ice, his interlocutor probably exclaimed: ‘That is pure genius!’ (And after all, ice is cold.) (236)” Now instead of using clichés, I wish to create quotable lines. One story I cut from the collection included a metaphor comparing crossing the Rio Grande River to a baptism that washes away your old life. I vow to rewrite the story just to make that metaphor work.

James Wood argues that we all read out of pleasure:

“We read fiction because it pleases us, moves us, is beautiful, and so on—because it is alive and we are alive. It is amusing to watch evolutionary biology tie itself up in circulation when trying to answer the question ‘Why do humans spend so much time reading fiction when this yields no obvious evolutionary benefits?’ The answers tend to either to be utilitarian—we read in order to find out about our fellow citizens, and this has a Darwinian utility—or circular: we read because fiction pushes certain pleasure buttons (170-171).”

I read William Shakespeare out of sheer pleasure. But Shakespeare is at the top of the canon of English literature. I’m a Chicana-- can I love Shakespeare and still love myself? Joking aside, I first fell in love with Shakespeare after I saw a one man show in high school. My freshman English honors teacher thought it was best to see Shakespeare performed than to read him, and she was right. Since then, I have been to The Globe in London to see performances of *King Lear*, *As You Like It*, *Macbeth*, and *A Midsummer’s Night Dream*. I’ve also seen the Royal

Shakespeare Company perform *The Merchant of Venice*, and I've attended a workshop on *Macbeth* given by top British scholars at The Globe. I read the plays before the performances, so that I understand what happens onstage. I keep coming back to his works because of their insight into human nature; understanding why human beings do what they do gives me great pleasure. This is another aspiration of mine—to show insight into human nature through my writing. I tried to do this with my main characters in “The Printed Fabric,” “Zombie Love,” and “Surprise Quinceañera.” Each of them behaves in a strange way that to most outsiders seems inexplicable. In these stories I try to show why Naida wears a pilgrim-like costume every day of her life, why Gilberto lets his wife die, and why Sister Gracie feeds the pastor a cake that had mold on it.

I can learn many things from Shakespeare that I can use as a writer. He based his stories on stories that already existed: something that happened in politics, a story he'd heard from someone, etc. A tour guide at The Globe ventured to say that none of his plays were completely original. This confirms my choice to write stories based on true events and people. For future projects, I plan to expand this and write about people and events outside my church community.

On the subject of pleasure, Roland Barthes raises the standards of good fiction in *The Pleasure of the Text*. He says to the writer, “The text you write must prove to me that it desires me (6).” I imagine my stories doing a strip tease for Barthes. I've heard about the connection between the writer and the reader before, but Barthes certainly takes it to another level. Although Barthes' description of the experiences of pleasure and bliss from reading should intimidate me, he frees me to enter into this dialogue with the reader without feeling rejected if the reader happens to put my story down. Barthes admits to becoming bored with even the greatest of writers. He explains that each reading of the text can bring a new experience.

The standard Barthes sets for me that I would like to reach is this: “Text of bliss: the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader’s historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language(14).”

Barthes is a Frenchman and although I only spent a few days in Paris, I could tell the French think differently from Americans, Mexicans, or even Chicanos. The immigration guy didn’t even look at my passport as I entered the country. The hotel clerk handed me keys to my room without payment, and didn’t check my I.D. The French value their aesthetics and their food. Everything else can wait. Roland Barthes throws the rules of criticism out and sets his own rules. He says, “With the writer of bliss (and his reader) begins the untenable text, the impossible text. This text is outside pleasure, outside criticism, unless it is reached through another text of bliss: you cannot speak “on” such a text, you can only speak “in” it, in its fashion, enter into desperate plagiarism, hysterically affirm the void of bliss... (22)” I remember my workshop class discussing the first draft of “Combustible Sinners” and the conversation they entered with my characters. I want more of that.

I want the mainstream audience Junot Diaz has. I want my Mexican Pentecostal stories to be published in *The New Yorker*. I want to write a story about my güelita’s bendiciones that wins a Pulitzer. I want retirees in Harold Wood (a borough of London) to go to their local public library and see my book on the shelf. I can dream.

I started this program wanting to become a better English teacher, and on the way, I became a writer. The key question is: can writing be taught? The answer is a resounding yes. I would suggest to any professor who denies this fact to brush up on their writing instruction skills. Talented people are often at a loss to explain their creative process because they have

never experienced not having this talent; however, those of us who have more desire than talent can pinpoint key elements in the development of our craft.

Ultimately, you, my reader are my desire. I offer this collection for your pleasure—your bliss.

## COMBUSTIBLE SINNERS

Lissi sat on the stage waiting for church to start. She adjusted her light blue skirt and crossed her ankles, noticing the pantyhose already bunching up around her feet. When she turned fifteen, her mother insisted she start wearing panty hose -- she still had to remind Lissi to close her legs so she wasn't showing her underwear. Lissi's father would laugh, reminding her that she didn't want to be like Hermana Gracie who still didn't know how to sit. Everyone, especially Lissi's father, who as the preacher stood behind the pulpit, knew what color underwear Sister Gracie wore on any given day, usually white on Sundays. Regardless of any weight gain, Sister Gracie insisted in wearing size ten dresses which would hike up to cover her considerable width. Lissi looked down at her own skirt to make sure it covered her knees. She hated her dark knees and thought about rubbing them with lemon to make them a lighter shade. She chuckled, thinking; see Mami, I do pray. I have black knees from kneeling so much. Her poor mother would probably use the line as an example of piety at her next meeting with the church ladies.

Before she left for church that morning, she saw her parents walk in from the grocery store with grape juice, unsalted crackers, and candles, and she knew that time of the month had come again. At least she wasn't Catholic; Catholics had to take Communion every time they went to church, but they didn't burst into flames if they took Communion while being unholy.

As she sat on the church stage waiting for people to arrive, Lissi thought about the differences in the sacrament of Communion among churches. She asked her mother about it since she was a little girl.

“Mami, why do we use grape juice and crackers for communion?” Lissi asked her mother. “My friend says she eats the white stuff from that candy we get in Mexico. You know... the caramel patties. How come she gets to eat candy during communion?”

“In the Bible...” her mother began.

Lissi and her sister kept a daily count of how many sentences her mother set up with “in the Bible” or “the Bible says”. The record to beat: one hundred and fifty-eight times. Her parents argued over church members that particular day, and her mother, who had pharisaical tendencies, always consulted the Bible during arguments.

Lissi’s mother, continued: “...Jesus ordered his disciples to drink of the wine and eat of the bread.”

“That still doesn’t explain the grape juice and crackers,” said Lissi.

“Well, during Jesus’ time wine wasn’t fermented.”

“So why does that wedding miracle talk about drunk wedding guests... you know the one where Jesus turned the water into wine?”

“Mira, Lisita. Grape juice and crackers are the closest we can get to wine and unleavened bread.”

This morning, after seeing the paraphernalia for Communion, Lissi rushed over to the Nueva Vida Pentecostal church, hoping to confess all her sins and be fit for communion before the service began. Too bad she didn’t have a priest to confess to; she would have to wing it on her own and hope however long she prayed prevented her from bursting into flames. Living near church proved perfect for these occasions; she had walked to church by herself since the age of eight. The building had once been a motorcycle shop. Her father had boarded up the garage door with plywood and planned to cover up the large display windows; keeping them clean took too

much effort. But Lissi loved those windows. She would spray snow foam on them at Christmas time and string Christmas lights all around them.

Lissi didn't fear an empty church. She would sweep and mop the concrete floors and line up all the folding chairs into rows. An empty church was harmless. Church got scary when evangelistas came to preach. They would jump and shout and send even the abuelitas to hell. God only knew what sins grandmas committed these days. One preacher from Odessa screamed louder and louder and became hoarser and hoarser; by the time he finished he sounded like the voice actors used when they played the devil in movies. Lissi always felt guilty thinking that. I shouldn't compare the things of God with the things of the devil, she thought. She worried she committed blasphemy, the unforgivable sin. She didn't know the exact definition of blasphemy, but saying a preacher sounded like the devil had to qualify as blasphemy in some churches.

Lissi usually managed to hide from most of the visiting evangelistas. They had the habit of calling people to the front and then they would tell that person's secrets in front of the whole congregation. As she sat on the stage, dreading Communion, Lissi thought about the many evangelists that had stood on this very stage.

"You have anger in your heart!"

"Yes," the person would nod, crying.

"You have not forgiven your father!"

"Yes." More crying with a little bit of shaking.

"You have lustful thoughts of a woman that is not your wife!"

At this point, a second person would break out crying—usually the wife. The entire family would hug and cry together for a long time. They would come to church every Sunday for at least a month after that too.



One time a preacher called Lissi to the front. Her breathing got shallow and the elastic ruffle of her blouse pinched her arms. She ran a list in her head of everything the preacher could accuse her of. Cheating on her chemistry test. Hoping Carlos didn't like her friend Lila. Dancing in the school musical.

"Come here," the preacher said.

Lissi walked down the center aisle towards the stage. The evangelista jumped off the stage and pulled the microphone cord, reaching the front row where people sat.

Lissi stood before the preacher and bowed her head.

Here it comes. Anyone have that hotline for runaway kids?

"God is telling me he wants to give you a gift tonight."

Lissi only half listened; she waited for the revelations to start.

Patty hasn't returned my duffel bag. I don't even have a bag to pack my stuff.

Lissi started to cry. She could hear her mom start to cry too. The entire congregation started praying louder. She heard an hermana shout out, "Thank you God! Thank you God!" as she clapped her hands. They think I'm having a spiritual experience, Lissi thought. Boy will they be disappointed when they hear the truth about me.

The preacher grabbed her hands and "spoke in tongues" which sounded like gibberish sprinkled with English words.

"Wooooooooooooo!" the preacher shouted. "GOD WILL USE THESE HANDS FOR HIS GLORY!"

Lissi held her hands out without moving, squeezing her eyes shut.

"You see that piano over there?"

The preacher pointed to the piano in the far corner.

Lissi opened her eyes and nodded.

The congregation strained their necks to get a glimpse of the old, dusty piano. Lissi heard people whispering and metal folding chairs shifting around.

The preacher looked directly in Lissi's eyes.

“The next time I come to this place, you are going to be playing that piano.”

After making Lissi practice for an hour a day with little improvement, her father enrolled her in keyboard lessons. It took a few months for Lissi to learn the chords to the most popular church songs, but her father liked to tell people that she received the gift of playing the piano when the evangelist prayed for her.

And so, Lissi found herself on the stage behind the new electric piano on this Sunday morning, waiting for God to smite her the minute the grape juice touched her lips because of her latest sins: attending a Catholic quinceañera, dancing, and breaking her purity vow.

At the quinceañera, all her friends had divided into couples, leaving Lissi all alone. An older boy started talking to her and asked her to dance. After the third dance, the boy tried to kiss Lissi. Despite all the promises she had made God, Lissi continued dancing with the boy and by the fifth dance, she returned his kiss.

During her own quinceañera, Lissi made a purity vow and expected her first kiss to be during her wedding ceremony. She read the story in *Christian Youth* magazine of a girl who did just that. The bride and groom smiled happily in the pictures of their honeymoon slash missionary trip.

God had spared her too many times before. Now, her purity ring mocked her, reminding her that taking Communion in such a filthy state would only bring the wrath of God on her.

At least her grandfather made her laugh that morning after she had seen her parents come in from the grocery store with the items for the piety test known as Communion. When he saw Lissi's parents filling up the little communion cups with grape juice he said, "Nombre, M'ija. The first time I heard about the Santa Cena I was about your age. Qué Holy Supper ni qué nada. When my mother called me to supper, I told her, 'No Ma, the church is serving supper tonight. I'm gonna eat there.'"

Her grandfather chuckled.

"Imagine my surprise when I realized that Santa Cena which I thought meant Holy Supper was really Communion. It was the smallest supper I had ever seen! Esto parece cena de bodas, I thought."

Lissi's grandfather insisted he was a Christian and not a Catholic despite his drinking and smoking. Her mother prayed every night that God would free Grandpa from his vicios, but Lissi thought her grandfather's vices made him a lot more fun than her parents.

Lissi smiled to please her grandfather this Sunday morning, but she secretly thought of ways to avoid the entire sacrament. Maybe if she stayed with the children in Sunday School no one would miss her.

The church service would begin soon and she stood to push the button on her electric piano that made it sound like an organ. She played a few notes. This sounds ominous enough. She felt someone tap her shoulder.

"Little Joe wants to know if you have to be baptized to take Communion," her friend Maris said.

"Yes," Lissi hissed and furrowed her brow. "I think the entire church would get into trouble if he took it without being baptized!"

“We would? With who? Your dad?”

“What? No! Not my dad... with GOD... I think... I don't know for sure, but something bad would happen.”

“Okay, I'll tell him.”

Little Joe was only eleven and unlike the Catholics, the Pentecostals didn't baptize their children until they were twelve.

“How can an infant choose to follow Jesus?” her father would say during christenings.

Lissi continued playing her bleak tune on the keyboard and realized she didn't have much of a choice about baptism at twelve either. Even as a preteen she understood, if she delayed her baptism, her parents would think she harbored evil sins in her heart. Usually, baptisms were held during Easter, but the year Lissi turned twelve, her father, pleased with the growing numbers of new converts, decided to hold baptisms in November. Lissi hadn't had time to make her peace with God. She had planned to add prayer and Bible reading to her New Year's resolutions, hoping that by the time Easter came, she would have made some considerable points with God. Instead, her father only gave her one week to prepare. As she waited her turn to be dunked into the small swimming pool hidden behind the curtains, she paced up and down.

The church youth leader at the time had had a bad boy reputation in his day, but found la religión when he met the hottest girl in school. The girl happened to belong to a devout Christian family, and so he turned in his leather jacket for a sports coat and tie. He alone caught glimpses of Lissi's internal turmoil and thought it hilarious to tease her about it.

“Hey, Lissi,” she heard her youth leader say as she waited her turn to be baptized.

“Hey, Martin.”

“You nervous?”

“A little,” she said as she practiced holding her nose and wrist in the customary baptism pose.

“Relax. What’s the worst that could happen? It’s not like the water will sizzle as you step in. That would only happen if you’re like evil or something.”

Lissi stopped pacing and all the blood in her face fell to her feet.

Martin laughed. “I’m kidding!” He walked away to tell his wife, the hot girl who converted him, what he had told Lissi. She could see Martin’s wife slapping his arm and scrunching up her face. She looked at Lissi, twirled her finger over her ear and pointed to Martin. Lissi laughed. Martin was crazy.

The water didn’t sizzle when Lissi was dunked, but then again she was only twelve back then. God must have still considered her a child; children got a free pass to heaven. Damn! Sorry, God. She wished she’d known she held a free pass all that time. As a child, she tortured herself with thoughts of being left behind during the rapture. She kept listening for the trumpet that announced Jesus’ return. At night, she slept with her hand on her sister to make sure her sister hadn’t flown up to heaven in the rapture. She eventually realized her sister had even less of chance of making it to heaven and that she should come up with a better plan than sticking to her sister as she slept.

Lissi’s thoughts returned to her present Communion dilemma. She continued playing arpeggios on the electric piano as people started to fill up the chapel.

“Elizabeth!”

“I want you to play *Pecador Ven al Dulce Jesús* right before Communion.”

“¿Esa, Ma?”

“Just do it, Lissi. People have to repent of their sins. Do you know where the candles ended up?”

Lissi ran to the back room to find the candles. By the time she returned, people were already lining up along the stage, waiting for Communion. Lissi stood behind all the people, hoping she would get lost in the crowd. She started placing the candles in their cardboard wax catchers.

Her father began with the warning as usual.

“Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. Remember brothers and sisters that if you have committed any mortal sins for which you have not asked God for forgiveness you should abstain from taking communion. What are mortal sins you ask? Any serious sin would be considered mortal. Murder...participating in an abortion...engaging in homosexual acts ...engaging in sex outside of marriage or in an invalid marriage... having impure thoughts... lying...stealing...”

The list went on forever. The deacons walked around with silver trays carrying pieces of crackers and miniature plastic shot cups of grape juice and the brave who had purged their souls of sin took a juice and a piece of cracker. Lissi tried to make herself smaller so no one would notice she didn't grab a cracker and juice. She handed Maris the bag of candles, motioning her to pass them out.

“For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment upon himself,” her father continued.

She looked up to see her mother staring at her. Her mother's eyes bore into Lissi motioning her to hurry up and grab the sacrament. Lissi lit her own candle with a match and

shared her flame with the person next to her. She scooped up a grape juice and cracker with her free hand as the deacon walked by her.

“Jesus said, ‘This is my body.’”

People placed the crackers in their mouths.

Isn't that like cannibalism? thought Lissi.

“This is my blood.”

And vampirism?

Resigned to her fate, Lissi gulped the miniature shot of grape juice and swallowed the bit of cracker. She closed her eyes and waited for it to burn her insides like acid. Everyone would know her as a fraud now.

Lissi heard a scream from the hermana standing in front of her.

Is my face melting off?

Lissi touched her face and opened her eyes.

“Me estoy quemando! Me estoy quemando!” screamed the hermana.

Lissi's candle had dripped wax on Hermana Chanita. Unfortunately, part of Hermana Chanita's back was exposed because she wore an almost sexy dress. Hermano Roberto splashed his grape juice on Sister Chanita and grabbed her grape juice and threw it on her as well. The miniscule communion cups only managed to stain Sister Chanita's dress. She grimaced and groaned, looking back trying to see the damage. Hermano Roberto hurriedly peeled the soft wax off of her back, rubbing the red marks the wax had made.

Lissi sat in silence as the service came to a close.

On their way out, Brother Roberto and Sister Chanita walked over to a frazzled Lissi.

“Ay, M'ija, don't worry! I'm fine!” said hermana as she hugged Lissi.

Hermano Roberto caressed the spot where the wax had fallen on Hermana and she giggled.

During lunch Lissi's mother said to her father, "Ay honey, did you notice Hermano Roberto and Hermana Chanita didn't take communion?"

Brother Roberto, a sixty-year-old widower, escorted Sister Chanita, a forty-year-old divorcee to church. Their budding romance fueled the gossip at church for months.

"I bet you they're back visiting motels again," Lissi's mom said. "I wish they would just get married already."

Well at least Lissi wouldn't experience damnation on her own. She liked Hermano Roberto and Sister Chanita. They would make nice company wherever they all ended up. Why did she always like the sinners the most?



## THE PRINTED FABRIC

From the age of twelve, Naida wore the same style of clothes every day, everywhere she went. She even slept in these clothes. She wore a full skirt that reached her ankles and a blouse that had a pilgrim's collar. The flowered print on the collar always matched the flowered print on the skirt. Every year, when students prepared to go back to school, Naida would visit the fabric store with her mother and pick out five different fabrics. Her mother would then make the same outfit over and over again. When Naida turned fifteen, her mother cried and pleaded with her to have a quinceañera with a big, puffy, pink dress. Naida reluctantly agreed to wear the dress, but she refused to parade in front of people; she informed her mother that she would sit in her quinceañera chair before the guests arrived and she would not move until everyone had left. She frowned when the party rental people brought in the quinceañera chair; the white wrought iron curled into elaborate designs and stiff pink bows accentuated the arm rests.

Her relatives traveled from all over Texas and New Mexico to share in her joyful day. They commented on the delicious dinner and how the table centerpieces matched the quinceañera dress perfectly. Her sisters and cousins played *La Víbora de la Mar* as the band played faster and faster until they all collapsed laughing and panting. Naida allowed people to gather around her to pose for pictures her mother would put in the pink satin photo album. For a moment, she almost smiled while looking at the white Christmas lights hanging from the ceiling—that is until her uncle from New Mexico put his arm around her; then she just stiffened. When she got home from the party, she changed back into her pilgrim-like uniform.

Unlike her younger, popular sisters, Naida didn't participate in any extracurricular activities. Renee had long, flowing hair and loved wearing mini-skirts. Shy Maritza's discretion helped her juggle two boyfriends at one time. Elena got invited to all the parties and little Sally had already made the cheerleading squad at the Boys and Girls Club.

Once, her sisters almost convinced Naida to go out with them.

"You're going to have so much fun, Naida," Renee said. "You can borrow my jeans and pink sweater."

Although the thought of going on carnival rides scared her, Naida did wonder what she would look like in jeans. She wondered how lipstick would feel on her lips.

But she never went.

When her sisters had friends over, Naida would take her plate of food upstairs and wait for the boys to leave the house before returning to the living area.

Naida ate and ate and her uniform got larger and larger each year until her mother no longer had the ability to sew the fabric together. They took the fabric to Nena, Naida's cousin, because Nena could even make wedding dresses and not get lost in all the massive yards of fabric. When Nena worked on Naida's clothes, the fabric would drape over the dining room table and people could never guess what she made. Was it curtains? Bedclothes?

When Naida turned eighteen, she decided she didn't want to go to school anymore.

"But you're already a senior, Naida," her parents reminded her.

Naida simply closed the door to her bedroom.

"We won't sign the forms," they threatened.

"I'm eighteen, you don't have to sign any forms," she shouted back.

She'd stare at the curtains in her bedroom her aunt from New Mexico had let her keep as a memento of her visit as a child.

And so, Naida stayed home every day. She wouldn't go to school and she wouldn't go to work. Her parents didn't know what to do with her. They tried getting her a job, but not even their church friends would hire her. They never admitted that her appearance influenced their decision; instead they explained they needed someone with more experience in sales, or office work, or cleaning.

One day her father announced he would teach her to drive.

"You can at least help us run errands and take your sisters to cheerleading practice."

But before he could teach her to drive, Naida's father went away again on another construction job. Luckily, her aunt Emma volunteered to teach her to drive after church on Sundays.

"I'm already going to take Lissi, so I might as well teach you too," her aunt said.

Naida practiced in the parking lot near her house, and studied the driving manual every evening. Her parents handed over the keys to the gray mini-van and Naida maneuvered it expertly. Within a few weeks of ferrying her sisters, she knew the exact time she had to leave the house and the best routes to avoid traffic.

Soon the ladies in the neighborhood noticed she was available to chauffeur and started hiring Naida to pick up their kids from school. They paid her up to ten dollars a week each. What Naida had left over from gas, she would use to buy printed fabric. Sometimes the fabric was polka dotted, but mostly it was flowered.

Naida accepted her new life; that is, until she met Jaime. Jaime lived down the street with his mother, who worked long hours at two jobs. His mother worried he would pick up bad habits from the kids who rode the school bus.

“But Mom, all the other kids that girl drives are six or seven years old. I’m twelve and I really want to ride the bus with my friends.”

“M’ijo, please do this one thing for me. It will make me feel so much better knowing you are safe from someone who can hurt you.”

When Jaime entered the mini-van the next morning, Naida smiled warmly at him. “You can sit up front,” she told him.

That afternoon, Jaime came home to an empty house, grabbed a cheese sandwich and walked back out the door. He rode his bike around the neighborhood, passing by Naida’s house several times. From her bedroom window, Naida could see Jaime on his bike and she remembered how overprotective his mother acted; she probably prohibited him from going too far on his bicycle. Naida understood why Jaime’s mother worried about him. Bad things could happen to children.

Eventually, Jaime stopped going home after school. When Naida finished dropping off all the other children, she’d pull into her driveway and Jaime would jump out and simply stay outside Naida’s house. His friends from school started joining him; and before Naida realized, she had a whole swarm of pre-teens outside her house every afternoon. She dragged the old metal mecedora with the chipped paint to the front of the house and would sit rocking in it while Jaime and his friends talked about school or tried doing tricks on their bikes on her driveway. Naida was happy. She liked their music; she got their jokes. They felt like friends. Sometimes she would even buy them pizza.

Her sisters would tease her about hanging out with children.

“Naida, you hang around with the kids that go to Sandy’s school.” Sandy, Naida’s beautiful baby sister, had just made the junior high cheerleading squad.

Naida didn’t care if her behavior embarrassed her sisters; she still welcomed her little friends every afternoon.

During the summer, Jaime would hardly leave Naida’s side. Unlike other adults, Naida had time to have fun, and she could drive. They went everywhere together. At night, Naida would run upstairs and the phone would ring. Jaime had Naida all to himself when they talked on the phone. He could tell her anything. She understood how he felt about his overbearing mother; his absent father, and even problems he had with other girls. Things didn’t happen unless he told Naida about them. She would often fall asleep with the phone still in her hand.

Jaime never asked Naida why she always wore the same thing. He never acted embarrassed to have her around. When Naida braided her hair and buttoned her pilgrim blouse, she thought about the latest move Jaime had learned on his skateboard. How he liked the way she screamed when he almost fell.

One hot afternoon, as Naida let the water hose run down the tiled patio, Jaime lay on his back letting the water trickle around him.

“How come you never talk about who you like?” asked Jaime.

Naida smiled, “Because I don’t like anyone.”

Jaime turned on his stomach, his back soaked.

“How can you not like anyone? I like about fifteen different girls.”

Naida kicked the water hose.

“But you don’t love them.”

“Well, of course not,” he said, “I’ll only love someone when I get married. Have you ever kissed anyone?” he asked reaching for the hose.

Naida observed Jaime as he sucked in the water, splashing more of it than he drank.

“Well? Have you?”

“No.”

Naida got up to turn off the water. She rolled up the water hose.

Jaime hoisted his body up as Naida bent over to hook the water hose over the spigot. Her skirt lifted slightly showing a bit of her calf.

Naida turned and caught Jaime staring at her – his hand on his crotch. Naida rushed in the house and slammed the door.

She went up to her room, laid on her bed, and stared at her bedroom curtains, but the more she thought about it, the more she realized she had overreacted. She traced the flowers on the curtains with her fingers. She knew every curve of every leaf. All the patterns danced before her eyes. When Jaime called to ask for a ride to football practice the next day, she smiled.

That next morning, Naida took a shower, braided her hair and chose her Thursday dress; she liked the pattern on this one the most. Jaime carried nothing when she picked him up and turned on the radio to avoid the initial awkwardness.

She pulled up to the school parking lot and Jaime said, “I’m sorry.”

“Hmmm?”

“I’m sorry about yesterday.”

“Oh. Don’t worry about it.”

“It’s just that...”

“You’re going to be late to practice.”

“...since you had never been kissed...”

Naida wondered why he didn't have his duffel bag, why he talked about kissing, why his pink lips spoke to her this way.

“I know it's stupid now, but I wanted to give you your first kiss.”

First kiss. First kiss from a thirteen year old boy. First kiss from such an inappropriate source. And she cried.

“Naida, what's wrong?” Jaime moved closer. “Please tell me...Naida? Please... tell me...”

“Tell you? Tell you what, Jaime? That my uncle called me into the little room he had in the back of the house the last time I went to New Mexico? That when I went in the room he stood naked and aroused? That he laughed when I looked away? I called Mom and Dad crying and begging them to let me come home. Dad said to stop acting like a chiflada.”

Naida leaned back on the seat. “I froze. I didn't yell; I didn't run. I was eleven years old and he raped me. I couldn't wash the blood out of the flower print sheets. Tia thought I started my period. I had never even had a period.”

Naida stopped talking. She had done it. She had said the words out loud, and this beautiful boy sat listening to her with tears forming in his eyes.

“Naida, why haven't you told anyone? Why...”

“He's dead. He died three years ago.”

“I can't believe that bastard did this to you. It makes me so angry! I wish I would have killed him myself!”

Jaime's words made Naida happy.

“Calm down,” said Naida. She reached out her hand and placed it over his. Jaime didn’t move it. Encouraged she moved closer to hug him. Jaime put his arms around her, and she could feel his breathing on her neck. He smelled so good, and she closed her eyes. She pressed her lips on his neck and she felt him stiffen. She opened her lips and kissed his neck again.

“Naida...”

She pulled away and leaned in to kiss him on the lips, but Jaime pushed her away.

“But, you said...” Naida began.

Jaime scrambled for the door and jumped out of the minivan. As he turned to walk away, Naida saw a bewildered look on his face and the stiffness in his pants. She turned the ignition of the minivan and drove home.



## ZOMBIE LOVE

Gilberto placed the three a.m. pill inside his wife's mouth not realizing the lining of his wife's throat, covered in boils and the latest pustules would make it impossible for her to swallow the three a.m. pill. Linda shook her head biting on the rim of the hospital-standard plastic cup Naida, their daughter, had brought home after the last visit to the ICU. Gilberto continued to pour water into his wife's throat as Linda tried to fight him off.

Gilberto had moved out of the bedroom to make room for the hospital bed that Medicare had approved. Gracias a Dios Linda had qualified. Everyone always assumed nineteen-year-old Naida would care for her mother. Naida didn't have a real job. But tonight, Naida had slept through the alarm, so Gilberto ignored the vomit taste in his mouth as he reached for the once caramel, now toughened, black skin bedazzled in bluish-bordered, pearly spheres, and forced the three a.m. pill down his wife's throat.

Why Gilberto had not grown any taller than five feet and three inches, no one could explain. None of the men in his family were shorter than 5'10". His father was over six feet tall.

As he collected the new stools at Chito's shop for his father's church, he saw her for the first time. She crossed the street in green polyester shorts that just barely covered her huge nalgas. Thank God for the 60s and women's lib in the form of hot pants. No one believes him now, but he did say to himself, "I will marry that nalgona."

It didn't happen right away because her engagement to Ricardo prevented any meaningful contact, but thankfully Ricardo couldn't keep his dick out of cousin-pussy—his *own* cousin. Ricardo's uncle made him marry his cousin Petra in some freak rancho wedding. Ricardo's uncle got over the initial anger of having a puta daughter, and after a while, acknowledged she married someone he could control easily. Ricardo had a lifetime to make up for fucking with family.

The real victim in all this: Linda, the ex-fiancée. She was the *mujer dejada*, the abandoned woman. What did Linda do to make Ricardo leave her? ¿La dejó por ser sangrona? How could such a curvaceous girl be so frigid? Not a pretty girl, Petra had still snatched Ricardo away from Linda. It's not good for a girl to be a frigid snob. Looks will only get you so far. Sin probadita, long engagements grow tiresome.

Gilberto found Linda in these circumstances one Sunday afternoon in July. He had just left church wearing the black oxford wingtips he let the shoeshine by the placita polish once a week. He carried the Sunday Bible he'd bought last time he crossed the bridge. Its gold-leafed tissue-thin pages still crackled whenever he opened it. He'd whispered to those sitting around him in church, "My new Sunday Bible." The one at home, aptly tattered and worn, evidenced proper use.

Gilberto practiced alternating his shoulder movement as he walked – right shoulder back, left shoulder front-- just as the vinyl record, *Fake It 'Til You Make It: En Español*, recommended. As he turned the corner, he thanked God he resisted the temptation to loosen the knot in his tie because right before his eyes stood luscious Linda.

She splashed water on the front porch and accidentally got Gilberto wet.

"I'm so sorry," she said. "Come inside. I'll get you something to help you dry off."

She handed him a rag and fed him tacos de frijoles. She made him coffee, and right there, as she turned to pour more coffee, he proposed. He looked at her ass and said, “Te casas conmigo?” She handed him the blue spotted tin mug and said, “Está bien, but I don’t want a long engagement.”

Despite the fact that Linda belonged to a family of modest means, Gilberto’s father expressed pleasure with the match. He had not expected his son to marry so well. Besides, Gilberto’s mother babied him too much, and Gilberto had to take on the responsibilities of a man, he said.

Linda, an excellent seamstress, would make her own wedding dress, and Gilberto crossed al otro lado to buy the fabric. He had to lie to his mother, saying that Linda’s family had given him the money.

“Why would buying your future wife the most important dress she will ever wear upset your mother?” Linda asked.

“Amor, trust me. It’s just easier this way.”

Gilberto’s mother bought the suit he would wear to his wedding, saying renting a tuxedo would prove a waste of money. As a married man, he would need to attend different social functions; and so, purchasing a suit seemed like the best idea. She insisted a gray suit appeared the most dignified. As he tried on the suit for the first time, his mother straightened the knot in his tie, leaned over and whispered, “Don Gilberto.” He couldn’t help but smile. Linda would soon be his wife, and he would prove to everyone that he was a respectable man.

If his mother had her way, he’d marry someone other than Linda. Linda, who strutted around even though her family bought clothes by the pound from the man with a burro-pulled-cart; but, his mother didn’t understand how he felt about Linda. His mother didn’t understand

how his friends had completely changed in the last few weeks since they found out he would marry Linda. Linda who sewed weird shirts for her brothers. Beautiful Linda who at this very moment stitched lace to the dress that would make her his wife.

The sun melted into reds, oranges, and purples as Gilberto drove into the farm. He noticed his brother's truck parked outside, and realized he hadn't seen his brother since the wedding announcement. He couldn't wait to see his face.

Gilberto imagined his brother Pepe had liked Linda at some point. Every guy in Rio Bravo must have liked her, and now she belonged to Gilberto.

Pepe ran out of the farmhouse as soon as he heard Gilberto's car. He opened the car door and pulled Gilberto out. Pepe looked down at Gilberto and rubbed the top of his head.

"Is that a bald spot I see there?"

Gilberto pushed him away. "Cállate, güey."

"Mom just made some corn tortillas. Están para chuparse los dedos." Pepe grinned.

All the family sat around the table as Gilberto walked in.

"Look, Wela, Tío Gilberto doesn't have to agacharse to get in here," little Celia piped. His brothers laughed.

The doorway to the dining area marked the start of the older part of the house where the foundation hadn't been as strong and had sunken further into the Mexican soil each year. He didn't have to duck his head when passing through the doorway as his brothers did.

Unlike his brothers, Gilberto didn't have the good looks and charm required to preach the gospel. Subsequently, instead of enthralling congregations with moving sermons, he carried

equipment and set up rows of folding chairs. Marrying Linda wouldn't make him the next televangelist, but it would earn him respect.

His father hadn't come back from his campaña. Big Tent Revivals, the family's specialty, provided the miracle stories which fueled the local ministry. Just last month, his brother Chuy had healed a deaf man. Chuy instructed the man to run to the back of the church tent in order to test the man's new hearing. Chuy cupped his ear and leaned towards the congregation, using his now famous exclamation 'Ehhhhhhh!' when coaxing audience participation. The audience responded 'Amen!' every time. The man shouted back that he could hear everything Chuy spoke into the gravelly portable microphone. The retelling of the story at the next church service was even better than the actual event. Chuy's voice broke as he reflected on the difficulties of a seventy-two year old man who had trouble hearing his gallos sing in the morning. Chuy recounted the almost-deaf old man's embellished day in a crescendo until he howled how now the old man could hear the breathing of the sleeping chivitos in their stalls outside.

Gilberto had helped set up the tent and folding chairs during this particular church service. He did remember the miracle of the deaf-man, but he marveled more that his curly haired brother Chuy had managed to sneak a kiss with Patricia Sanchez behind the tent while the band played "My Joy Is Like a River" in a frenzied loop. When the deacon asked for Chuy, someone yelled he usually knelt in prayer away from everyone before continuing with the rest of the revival. Right on cue, Chuy jumped back on the creaky stage with renewed enthusiasm.

For the wedding, Gilberto's mother insisted they kill three goats, two pigs, and half a dozen chickens. The guests enjoyed cabrito asado, cabrito en salsa, guisado de puerco, mole and pollo en salsa. The church ladies made rice and beans and helped make sure everyone had plenty of tortillas to sop up the delicious dishes.

Gilberto promenaded with Linda as tradition dictated, greeting their guests a table at a time.

“We should thank Mami, Amor. I think our wedding turned out better than Pepe’s.”

“Did it? I didn’t go to Pepe’s wedding.”

“No?”

“Your mother didn’t invite my family.”

Gilberto reached down and placed his hand on Linda’s nalgas that swelled in her mermaid wedding dress. Her skin, light enough that he could see her blush, glistened under the photographer’s lamps. Another plus. Maybe her family would even nickname her güera. He laughed. Not güera. Morena a perlada.

“¿De qué te ríes?”

“I’m happy, Love. I can’t wait for everyone to go home.”

He leaned over and covered her mouth with his -- their second kiss since she wet him with the water hose and made him frijoles tacos.

Pepe moved to the states first; a gringo church had visited one of the revivals and asked that El Ministerio de la Familia Cervantes branch out to the U.S. Mexicans had the fire and passion for God that gabachos lost with all their material possessions and greed. Chuy followed and opened a church in Andrews, Texas, and at the urging of his mother, Gilberto and Linda followed with baby Naida.

Linda’s family had lived in the U.S. years ago, and some of her older siblings had been born in North Texas. Linda’s mother, Doña Linares, had met Linda’s father back before World War II near Kemp, Texas. Doña Linares, then a thirteen-year-old widow, alone and nowhere to

go, took up with a family of Mexican farmworkers. As she grieved for her husband and the miscarriage his death induced, her adoptive family introduced her to the new cotton gin worker, Baltazar Linares who quickly earned the owner's respect for having a knack for fixing equipment. Everyone joked Balta was part machine and could communicate with the cotton gin when no one looked.

Doña Linares took the miscarried fetus floating in the liquid the local patera had prepared and the rag doll she made when she found out she was pregnant, and she buried them under the house—as close as she could to the spot in the living room where the rocking chair stood. The next evening she invited Balta to her bed and they soon married.

By the time Gilberto and Linda crossed the border in 1974, the Linares populated the borders of South Texas and Mexico. Although Gilberto's mother boasted her children quickly became Americanos, Linda's family, not Gilberto's, had the resources and connections to help the new family in their quest for the American Dream. Rather than join his brother Pepe's ministry, Gilberto went to work with Linda's American relatives in construction.

The crossover equalized Linda and Gilberto. In America, Linda could work as a seamstress in a factory and spend her money on anything she wanted. She didn't seem as interested in doing the things he liked in the bedroom anymore.

When his mother visited she asked, "Why doesn't Linda iron your clothes?"

"She's tired, Madre. She's pregnant and she works."

"Pregnant with another girl I'm sure," his mother complained.

Linda had given birth to five girls. He knew exactly when they'd conceived the fifth girl because they hadn't had sex for a year.

While Linda worked bent over sewing blue jean pockets, Gilberto worked nine hours away, visiting only sporadically. He'd built Linda her two-story house so she had nothing to complain about.

"Two story house? It's so small the neighbors call it la casa de pericos," she argued.

"Your mother's house has more rooms and has a nicer kitchen."

"You've gotten fat, Linda. Climbing the stairs will help you. When you lose weight and keep this house clean I'll build you another one," he said.

"Why did you let your mother move in next to us?" She yelled.

"Who else is going to cook my meals when I'm in town?"

Things had not worked out as Gilberto had hoped. The respect he thought marrying Linda would get him didn't translate to this side of the river. While marrying voluptuous girls impressed rancho people, the construction workers he worked with only saw him as a balding, short man who had fathered only daughters. Also, he could only find steady work in Houston, Texas, but Linda refused to move so far away from her family. The girls rarely showed enthusiasm when he visited; maybe they sensed he regretted having daughters instead of sons. When his mother decided to build her own house next to Gilberto's, he welcomed the idea because at least he would have one person on his side.

Linda's weight gain had put dimples on her once smooth nalgas, and Gilberto longed for the girl who had sprayed him with water that warm July afternoon. He bought her diet pills, and although she yelled at him at first, he noticed she dropped a few pounds. After the pills, she tried diet teas, and even a self-duplicating mushroom whose consumption guaranteed she'd drop a dress size in one week. Gilberto was sure he'd have his luscious girl back soon. Didn't *Telenovelas* magazine have hundreds of stories of women who had restored themselves to their



youth? Whatever torture she put herself through with these diets would be worth it when she emerged as the curvaceous bombshell she once was.

But then Linda started to complain her hands hurt too much to work, and Gilberto felt pressure to make up for her income.

“You’re the man, Gilberto. You’re supposed to provide for me and your daughters,” Linda would say.

He thought Linda lied about the pain and he insisted she go to a doctor. The doctor said sewing for such long hours had triggered myofascial pain syndrome and the jean company awarded her a settlement of fifteen thousand dollars.

Just as Gilberto started to feel the financial pressure ease, Linda insisted they give Naida a proper quinceañera. He realized he would never see a penny of that settlement. Despite this, he liked that Linda’s dieting, had made her more receptive in the bedroom. One night, excited, he’d jumped from the chiffonier onto the bed and landed on Linda. She’d been laughing and when she howled, he’d thought it was from pleasure, but he’d cracked one of her ribs. He had to call his cuñado Rogelio to come pray for her. His cuñado couldn’t stop laughing all the way to the hospital.

“¿Te crees Súperman? ¿O qué?” he’d said.

But she didn’t stop losing weight. Now when he made love to her, he couldn’t grab her ass like before, and sometimes she’d wake up with bruises in the shape of his fingers. When he visited, he had to unclog the bathtub because her fallen hair wouldn’t let the water flow properly. He stopped asking for sex and when she mentioned it, he complained he felt tired from the long drive from Houston. He could barely look at her now much less make love to her. The doctors ran tests and they always heard the same results – inconclusive. They compared the rare disease

to lupus, the catchall disease when doctors didn't know what they faced. And her body deteriorated one organ at a time.

When her skin turned black, he blamed the diet pills. He blamed her suit against the jean makers; God punished her for lying about her hand aching. And at 3am he blamed himself as she gasped for air and he stood motionless.

When his brothers arrived at the funeral home, they pushed his cuñado Rogelio aside and brought out the printed programs with Linda's portrait in the front.

Let us take care of everything, Gilberto, they said as they set up the equipment they used for the campañas. Don't feel bad about your cuñado Rogelio; he's just a small time preacher. We'll give your wife a proper burial.

Gilberto's brothers spoke about Linda as a wonderful wife and mother. They said she now lived in a better place. They reminded the congregation they would never see Linda again unless they too accepted Jesus as their personal savior. God didn't heal her before her death only because he wanted to show his glory in a different way.

Chuy preached on the passage in Luke that tells the story about Lazarus and how Jesus raised him from the grave. How Jesus said he was the resurrection and the life.

Gilberto had heard this sermon many times before—especially at funerals. After the sermon, the band played “Y si vivimos, para El vivimos.” Gilberto's brothers, dressed in three piece suits and power ties, stood in a row near the casket. With eyes closed and hands raised they prayed fervently as the band played.

Chuy began shouting to God, crying and asking why God had taken his sister-in-law.

“What is your purpose, God?” he said.

Gilberto's other brothers joined in the pleading. Gilberto could hear them say that Linda died so young and left five young daughters behind.

"What do you want to show us through this?" Chuy screamed as his voice grew hoarse.

As their voices rose, people in the congregation joined in their prayers, and feeding off of the congregation, Chuy broke out speaking in tongues with Pepe following suit.

Chuy moved closer to the casket and placed his hands on it. Tears were streaming down his face. Pepe followed him and he moved the flowers that adorned the casket aside. Chuy continued shouting. Calling God powerful and mighty-- the giver of life.

In one sudden move, Chuy opened the casket. Those in the congregation who had not closed their eyes in prayer, gasped. Gilberto bowed his head not wanting to make eye contact with any of his brothers. With the growing commotion, more people opened their eyes.

"Gilberto, ven acá," Chuy called.

Gilberto remained with his head bowed, ignoring Chuy's pleas.

"Ven acá, Hermano," Chuy repeated.

Gilberto walked to the casket. His wife's eighty pound body lay there in a lavender dress with a flower pinned to the lapel. The few hairs left on her hair were neatly combed and her lips were stained pink. This was not his luscious Linda. This was a monster.

"Pídele a Dios que te la regrese, Gilberto," said Chuy. "The same Jesus that raised Lazarus from the grave is alive today!" Chuy shouted.

Several people shouted amen.

"He is here today! He wants to show his power! He gave us the power to do great things in His name!"

More speaking in tongues broke out in the audience.

“If you believe, IF YOU BELIEVE, great things can happen—can happen here today.”

Gilberto listened to Chuy. Not comprehending. He stared at Linda’s body and couldn’t remember the last time they made love. He shuddered.

Chuy moved forward and placed his hands on Linda, praying fervently.

“God, give us back our sister. Just like you rose Lazarus and your son from the grave... I beg you... show your power here today!”

Did Gilberto hear him correctly? Chuy asked God to bring Linda back to life? To make this deformed body alive again? Oh, God. Please, no. This can’t be happening. Gilberto’s heart pounded in his ears. He didn’t want this Linda alive again. He did not want to make love to a zombie. Please, God. Don’t punish me this way. Wasn’t Linda’s suffering over now? Hadn’t he only helped her get to heaven sooner? Why won’t Chuy shut up?

Vanquished, Chuy fell to his knees, sobbing. Pepe and the others lifted him and walked him towards a pew. People consoled Chuy as Gilberto witnessed the scene. He looked in the casket and there laid Linda’s decrepit body. Motionless as before. He breathed a sigh of relief. He had feared that today God would finally reveal himself through Chuy.

## BIBLE BOOKSTORE BRAWLS

Rain drops wormed all over the car windows as the car engine hummed. Pastor Linares turned on the radio and searched for Radio Buen Pastor; Lissi never switched the station back to where it belonged. He checked his watch. Eleven thirteen.

The call had come in a little after ten thirty. His wife tired of his being everyone's counselor, mechanic, lawyer, banker...

“Otra vez? Why do they always call you? They don't even go to our church!”

“Mujer, you knew when you married me you would have to share me with God. I do what He says. No questions asked.”

“God wants you to leave your family unprotected in the middle of the night so you can go meet some stranger?”

“First of all, I'm going to the church which is only two blocks away, and it's not the middle of the night. It won't take very long. I promise. The man sounded desperate.”

Pastor Linares turned on the interior light of the car and then decided against it. He didn't want to call too much attention to himself. Although he wanted to help people, he didn't want to open up the church building so late at night; someone had broken in recently and he suspected that the thieves had scoped out the place during one of the services. One day they'd have enough money to move to a better neighborhood.

A blue Buick Century pulled up next to him and a man wearing a tan raincoat stepped out. He opened the passenger door of Rogelio's car and got in.

“Thank you for meeting me, Pastor,” he said. The man wore a gray suit with a red tie under the raincoat and Brillantina in his hair. “I got your number from the radio station. They said you could help.”

“Of course. Tell me how I can be of service to you.” Although Pastor Linares often got calls in the middle of the night requesting prayer, he didn’t take his eyes off the stranger in his car. Despite Emma’s protest, he also kept a gun in the house, which, at this moment, rested under his seat. Not too comfortable with handling handguns, he preferred carabinas.

“Pastor, I am a man of many means.”

Pastor Linares looked over at the man’s car parked next to his.

“That’s not my car. I borrowed it about an hour ago.”

Pastor Linares nodded.

“Pastor, something has happened to make it impossible for me to go home or access any of my bank accounts. I need to borrow one hundred dollars tonight and in exchange I promise to build you the church of your dreams.”

Pastor Linares stared at the steering wheel and puckered his lips while nodding.

“I know this must not make any sense to you, but I am serious. I asked around after I spoke to the radio station and everyone I spoke to agreed you were the best pastor around. You have a benevolent heart and are very knowledgeable about Biblical matters. I was told your sermons inspire people to make life changing decisions. Don’t you think you deserve to get the church building of your dreams?”

Pastor Linares thought of the many requests for charity he’d gotten over the years. They always had a story. Someone got sick. Someone died. They needed a bus ticket to get back home to Mexico. They needed gas money to make it upstate to the job their compadre held for them.

This was not the first time someone had dressed up to make the request, but it was the first time they'd made such a lofty offer.

“Listen, friend, I appreciate your kind words, but frankly, I don't have a hundred dollars.”

The man looked out the window as the rain continued to beat down. He turned back to Pastor Linares and asked, “Do you have a twenty?”

Pastor Linares didn't see the man in the raincoat again until a year later. He'd shown up at his church with his wife and two children, introduced himself as Don Fernando Ramirez, and invited the entire Linares family to lunch after Sunday School. Pastor Linares found it odd that Don Fernando never mentioned that night. Maybe he didn't want to admit the low point in front of his wife.

Fernando Ramírez said he had converted less than a year ago. His family had accepted Jesus shortly after he did, and now he owned a Bible book store in Pharr, Texas. He told Pastor Linares he wanted his family to officially join church as soon as possible. Next week. During the morning service. He'd throw a party for the congregation after.

“Don't feel pressured to become members so quickly,” Pastor Linares said as he sipped iced tea. “You can visit for a few months and get a feel for our church family.”

“You hold a ceremony for new members, no? We're ready to join, Pastor. Look at my children! They loved the youth group and they get along well with your children.” Don Fernando pointed to the teenagers chattering away. Only Lissi had no Ramírez best friend. Even Emma and Mrs. Ramírez hit it off, laughing and nodding frequently during the conversation.

“Why don't you come down to my book store tomorrow so you can say a prayer of blessing over the place?”

The next day, Pastor Linares picked up Lissi from school and stopped by Don Fernando's Bible bookstore. The row of endless row of Bible commentaries and every version of the Bible itself charmed Pastor Linares.

"You know," Pastor Linares said, "I have a copy of the Vulgata."

"The Vulgata?"

"Yes, the Bible in Latin. My copy has a print date of 1534. Can you believe it?"

"That's amazing! The Catholic version, no? With the apocrypha?"

"Yes, of course."

"Hmmm.... I would have loved to have it here on display, but I don't have anything affiliated with Catholicism here."

Pastor Linares looked around. The beige metal racks in front of him had tambourines with long colorful ribbons used for Pentecostal singing and only non-Catholic wedding candles on display.

"What do you have there, M'ija," Don Fernando said to Lissi. Eight year old Lissi put down what she held and walked back to her father. Don Fernando walked over to where Lissi had stood and picked up a colorful children's Bible.

"Te gusta?" he asked.

Lissi looked up at her father.

"You like this one more than the Bible you have now?"

Lissi looked at her father again.

"Don't look at me, Lissi. He's not asking me. Go on. Answer him," Pastor Linares laughed.

Lissi looked back at Don Fernando. "I don't have a Bible."



“You don’t have a Bible? But you’re a pastor’s daughter! You should have ten Bibles!”

Don Fernando grabbed a copy still wrapped in cellophane and walked over to Lissi.

“Will you do me the great honor of accepting your first Bible from me?”

Lissi bit the inside of her cheek trying not to grin so big.

“Gracias, Hermano Ramírez. I didn’t even think Lissi wanted her own Bible. She can always use one of ours. We have dozens in the house.”

“No problem, Pastor. It is my pleasure. I have a daughter too and if I recall correctly, she insisted I special order her a hot pink Bible. She pretends to read it when I walk by her bedroom at night.” Don Fernando walked behind the display counter by the door and wrote something on a notebook. “Come to think of it, why don’t I give you a box of Bibles for the church?”

“A box of Bibles? No, Hermano Ramírez, I couldn’t accept such a gift.”

“Nonsense. The black hardback Reina Valeras cost me \$1.49 a piece. You can give them away to visitors or leave them on the pews for all to use. Angélica!” Don Fernando yelled.

From behind a curtain covered doorway in the back, emerged Angélica. Her long black hair looked as if it dared any brush to tame it. Two barrettes at the side of her head held back hair that might attack anyone addressing her. Her eyeglasses covered most of her pale face and because of the prescription, her eyes looked as big as walnuts.

“Qué pasa, Nando?” she yelled back.

“Where is the box of Bibles we received last week? I want to give it to the Pastor for the church.”

Noticing the pastor, Angélica’s expression softened. “Pastor!” she purred. “I have heard so much about you! Nando... Hermano Ramírez says you are a great Biblical teacher. I am so sorry I was not able to attend mass yesterday.”

“Service, Angélica. Not mass,” Don Fernando corrected. “Angélica is my secretary, Pastor.”

“Sí, soy su secretaria, Pastor,” Angélica said as she removed her eyeglasses. She clipped them on her dress pulling down and revealing a smidgen of cleavage. “Pastor, you know, I have a notary’s license. If the church needs anything, please feel free to ask me.”

“The Bibles, Angélica?” Don Fernando reminded her.

“Claro. I’ll be right back,” she said as she wiggled away.

Against better judgment, Pastor Linares allowed Don Fernando to take him on lunches several times a week. The Linares and Ramírez families barbecued together often; Pastor Linares even allowed Don Fernando to take home the church’s industrial size barbecue-pit-on-a-trailer he’d welded out of old propane tanks.

The Ramirez family lived in a new subdivision in Pharr, TX. To the Linares family, the Ramirez clan lived in a mansion. Over three thousand square feet, a pool, and a second living room they called a family room. Pastor Linares would daydream Don Fernando would remember that rainy night when he promised to build him a new church.

That’s why Pastor Linares ignored the criticisms of the congregation that the Ramirez’ had become his favorites. And when the Gutiérrez girls complained that Don Fernando never returned the jewelry they’d taken in for repair at Don Fernando’s new shop, he didn’t worry. Pastor Linares figured he had too much work at the Bible bookstore or felt nervous about his first jewelry repair job, and he ignored the uneasy feeling he sometimes got when he thought about these things.

Only a few months into his friendship with Don Fernando, Emma came into his home office and said, “Rogelio, when you have a moment, can you please come into the kitchen? I have to talk to you,”

Pastor Linares drew a dot next to the last sentence he read and stuck a piece of scratch paper in the book he read.

“Qué pasa, mujer?” he said as he got up from his office chair and followed her into the kitchen.

“Quieres un cafecito?” she asked.

“Yes, that’d be nice. No hay un panecito pa’ el cafecito.”

Emma walked over to the microwave and put in a cup filled with water. She set the cooking time on high for two minutes. She opened the brown paper bag on the counter and removed a concha.

“Is this okay?” she said pointing to the Mexican pastry.

“Perfect.”

The microwave beeped and Emma added a spoonful of instant coffee to the water. She carried the cup with the sugar bowl to her husband.

Emma offering him a merienda was not unusual; what was unusual was that she remained quiet as she prepared his coffee and pastry.

“Okay. Go on. ¿Qué se quemó?” Saying something got burned was their code for “something bad has happened”. They started using it after a sworn-to-secrecy five-year-old Lissi divulged her mother burned dinner and tried to cover it up with a quick trip to the grocery store. Rogelio hated wasting food.

Emma sat down. “Jr. heard some rumors in school today.”

“Rumors?”

“Yes. About the Ramírez house.”

“Ya dime, mujer. What did Jr. hear?”

“Hermano Fernando’s house got raided last night. They took his cars and other things. They say he’s a drug dealer.”

“A what?” Rogelio shot up from his seat bumping the table and spilling his coffee.

“I know. It’s awful.”

“Madre, this can’t be true. I don’t believe it.” Rogelio walked to the living room looking for his car keys.

“Where are you going, Rogelio?”

“To clear all this up!”

Pastor Linares jumped in his car and drove east towards the Ramírez house. When he arrived, he noticed no cars parked out front, but he figured they could all be parked in the garage. He rang the doorbell and the teenage daughter explained she had just gotten home from school, her mother left to Mexico and she could only guess the whereabouts of her father. What happened last night? Pastor Linares asked. I don’t know, she said. She’d spent the night at a friend’s.

Wouldn’t the police have left some sign they had raided the house last night? Yellow caution tape around the property? Not satisfied, Pastor Linares drove to the Bible bookstore.

Just as he feared, the closed sign hung on the bookstore door. He drove around to the back of the alley unsure of how to get the answers he looked for. A beige Ford Ranger idled in the alley near the door labeled Bible Bookstore, and whoever drove the truck there left the engine running and the windows rolled down. Pastor Linares got off his car to take a closer look.

Fast food wrappers and a ladies' brown pump littered the inside of the truck. He heard a door slam and looked up to see the wind had pushed open the back door to the bookstore. Pastor Linares got closer and ventured in. He took a minute to adjust his sight to the darkness, and he heard what sounded like boxes being shifted around.

"Hello!" he shouted. "Hermano Fernando?"

Boxes fell and he heard whispering and fumbling around.

Pastor Linares ran in the direction of the sound and found Don Fernando-- with Angelica.

As Don Fernando pulled up his pants, Angélica lay sprawled on a wooden table-- her skirt around her waist exposing her sagging belly and caesarean scar.

Pastor Linares looked away and started to walk out, but Don Fernando followed him as he zipped up his pants.

"Pastor! It's not my fault, Pastor! She made me do it!"

Pastor Linares clenched his jaw trying to erase the scene from his mind.

"Pastor, you have to believe me. I'm not attracted to her. I don't know..."

Pastor Linares quickened his step and walked towards his car.

"Pastor! Me tiene embrujado." Don Fernando bent over, catching his breath. "She's a witch," he said.

Pastor Linares stopped and turned to face Don Fernando.

"It's true," Don Fernando straightened up. "I can show you. She has an altar here in the shop." He motioned for Pastor Linares to follow him.

Don Fernando led Pastor Linares behind a black curtain.

"¿Qué estás haciendo, Nando?" Angélica shouted. "You can't take him back there."

Don Fernando pulled the cord on a hanging light bulb and Pastor Fernando could see a desk with stacks of papers. Open boxes covered most of the walking space, and a Chinese screen room divider flickered in the corner.

“It’s back here,” Don Fernando said pointing to the screen.

Pastor Linares walked over the boxes filled with communion cups and children’s books. Don Fernando pushed the screen aside, revealing a three-tier altar covered in black satin cloth that sat on a small table. A statue of a hooded figure holding a scepter stood in the middle of the altar and over twenty votive candles burned around it. Two photographs adorned the altar—one of a woman in a blue dress with the corners of her mouth slightly turned down and another of a little boy on his bicycle grinning at the camera. The altar held a vase with wilting flowers and other small objects—a matchbox painted with the image of La Virgen de Guadalupe, a pink hair ribbon, and a rusted switchblade.

Pastor Linares tried to think of all the stories he’d heard from his minister friends of real life brujería. What was he supposed to do now? *The Ministers’ Manual* didn’t have a chapter on idol altar bashing.

He turned to Don Fernando and whispered, “Santo Dios! La sangre de Cristo nos cubra!”

Pastor Linares chanted, “Dios mío, Dios mío, Dios mío,” over and over again as he turned off the candles with his finger tips.

“I rebuke you, Satan! You have no place in here!”

Don Fernando looked on as Pastor Linares grabbed a trashcan and started filling it with the artifacts on the altar. Pastor Linares could still hear someone fumbling in the next room with boxes.

“Fernando!” Pastor Linares shouted. “¡Tráigame una Biblia! ¡Y el aceite también!”

Don Fernando scurried away to retrieve the olive oil used to anoint people during prayer. He came back with a vial of oil and a black Bible in his hands.

“I didn’t know what version to get you,” said Don Fernando. “Is the King James version okay? It’s has a black leather cover.”

Pastor Linares grabbed the hooded statue and smashed it on the floor. The pieces scattered under desks and boxes like bugs startled by bright lights, and hearing the crash, Angélica ran into the room. Seeing her Santísima Muerte in pieces, she charged at Pastor Linares.

Holding out the black Bible in front of him, Pastor Linares pushed it on her bent over head, as she flailed her arms trying to get at him.

“¡Te reprendo, demonio! I rebuke you in the name of Jesus!” Pastor Linares repeated over and over. Was he prepared to face this? Would the demons laugh at him, calling him a fraud? He backed away from Angélica until Don Fernando managed to pull her away and forced her down on a chair.

Angélica appeared to go into a spastic seizure as Don Fernando held her down. Pastor Linares raised his arms to heaven, begging God to deliver this woman from this affliction. Angélica gasped for air making a screeching sound and Pastor Linares continued praying. Suddenly she stopped. Pastor Linares opened his eyes, wondering if the prayer had worked. Angélica sobbed quietly and Don Fernando rocked her.

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“Pastor, it’s best if you don’t touch people when you pray for them,” said Officer Quiroga. Angélica had called the police after Pastor Linares left the bookstore. She accused him of assault.

“But, I didn’t touch her! I put the Bible on her head, but that is all.”

“Well, fortunately, right now, it’s your word against hers. We haven’t been able to reach Fernando Ramírez for questioning. I wouldn’t worry about it, Pastor. I know Angélica’s interview in the newspaper shed a negative light, but the people who know you won’t believe you tried to harm anyone. I know my grandmother loves coming to your church.”

“Gracias, M’ijo,” I appreciate you coming down here to take down my side of the story.

Months passed and the Ramírez family remained absent from church services. Pastor Linares was embarrassed that he had fallen for such a charlatan. Why did he ever believe Fernando Ramírez would give him the money for a new church building?

“Rogelio, we need to have a chicken plate sale soon,” Emma said that evening as Rogelio sopped up mole with his tortilla. “We won’t be able to make the rent for church if we don’t have one.”

“So let’s have one.”

“Rogelio, you know we need the barbecue pit. How else will we cook over a hundred chickens without taking all day?”

Fernando Ramírez no longer lived at his 3000 square foot brick home with a pool. A neighbor informed Pastor Linares that he heard Don Fernando now lived at La Lomita by the expressway in Pharr—government-housing apartments.

Emma insisted on accompanying Pastor Linares on his reconnaissance mission into La Lomita. Lissi needed new shoes for school, so they might as well get something useful done since they probably wouldn’t find the barbecue pit.



The cloned brown brick duplexes surrounded a weathered playground. Too hot for children to be out, the grassless area looked abandoned.

“How will we know which apartment it is?” asked Emma as Pastor Linares drove around the winding streets of the neighborhood.

“We could get down and ask someone,” he said.

“Isn’t this TCB territory or something?”

“I hope it is. I have a box of *Outcry in the Barrio* books back there written just for TCB gang members!” he said laughing.

As he rounded the last corner, he spotted it-- the Ford Ranger that had been parked in the alley that dreadful day.

“Allí es,” he said pointing to the apartment with the parked truck. He drove closer and could make out the barbecue pit out in the backyard.

Angélica answered the door. “Nando! It’s for you!” she shouted without greeting Pastor Linares.

After a few minutes, Fernando Ramírez appeared behind the torn screen door in a white wife beater t-shirt sporting a salt and pepper beard that needed a trim.

“¿Y usted, qué quiere? What are you doing here?” said Don Fernando. His t-shirt didn’t cover his belly; he’d put on weight since Pastor Linares had last seen him.

“I’m here to pick up the barbecue pit, Fernando.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” said Don Fernando. Pastor Linares could hear Angélica shouting obscenities in the background.

“Andale, Fernando. I already saw it out back. I know you have it.”

“¡Dile que se vaya a la fregada!” shouted Angélica. Pastor Linares could see her through the dirty screen as she pointed the remote control at the T.V.

“I think you better leave,” said Don Fernando.

“Fernando, don’t do this. You know the church needs it.”

“Qué iglesia ni qué iglesia. He’s probably getting rich off of that church!” shouted Angélica.

“I’m just letting you know I’m going to take the barbecue pit,” said Pastor Linares as he turned to walk away.

“Nando! You’re going to let him talk to you like that?” Angélica screamed. She raised the volume of the T.V. and the speakers crackled.

Pastor Linares heard the screen door squeak behind him and seconds later he felt the wind knocked out of him as he fell to the ground. He turned over quickly as Don Fernando aimed for his face. He jumped to his feet and put his fists up.

“You don’t want to do this, Fernando,” said Pastor Linares. “I am a man of God. You don’t want to suffer the consequences of fighting with a man of God.”

Don Fernando, ready to attack again, said, “Ha! Man of God?” he spat. “This is your fault,” he said as he circled Pastor Linares. “You didn’t get any demons out of her. I’m trapped here. I’ve lost everything. Man of God indeed. You’re nothing.”

Don Fernando lunged at Pastor Linares again, but Pastor Linares was ready. He hit him in the face making Don Fernando fall back. Don Fernando stayed on the ground bellowing for Angélica to come help him.

Neighbors started peering out of their windows and some ventured outside to witness the brawl. Pastor Linares unhitched the gate that led to the backyard.

Instead of helping him up, Angélica kicked Don Fernando, making him double up into a fetal position. She bent over and slapped his head calling him a pendejo and maricón.

After assessing the best access spot, Pastor Linares got in the church van and drove into the back alley. Emma instructed Lissi to keep praying, saying her daddy was fighting the devil himself.

Invigorated, Pastor Linares said, “I have a bunch of flyers for Sunday’s Revival back there. Want to hand them out to the people who came out to see me fight?”

“Tas loco, Rogelio,” was Emma’s response.

They heard police sirens in the distance.

“¡Ponle, carnalito!” Rogelio said jumping out of the van. By the time the cops got there, Pastor Linares had already hitched the barbecue pit to the back of the van. As they drove away, they could hear Angélica’s screams and Don Fernando’s yelps.

## SURPRISE QUINCEAÑERA

Hermana Gracie opened the icebox, the smoky cold caressing her sweaty face. She stayed a moment, feeling guilty she made her light bill bigger with every passing second. She moved aside some chicken drumsticks and the piña colada ice cream the kids' father had brought in lieu of child support back in November. She pulled out the frozen layer of white cake she baked a few months back. She placed the plate on the kitchen counter as she looked for a knife to even off the top of the cake. Imagining how Pastor Linares would thank her in front of the entire congregation for the cake, she removed the foil paper covering the cake and inspected the top.

Hermana or Sister Gracie loved referring to herself with a title. Everyone in her new church addressed themselves as Brother and Sister, which sounded even better than Doña because Sister had a saintly aura to it. And like Pastor Linares said, it didn't matter what you had done before. Gracie could have turned tricks as a prostitute before and still be considered pious now – especially when called Sister Gracie. Gracie chuckled. Good thing that her new church wasn't like the Catholics. Only the nuns were called Sisters. Gracie definitely did not want to be a nun.

The heat in the room wrapped itself around the frozen cake, squeezing foggy breaths out of it. Beads of sweat swelled on cake and baker. Sister Gracie plugged in the window fan. She lucked out she had a baked cake ready for Pastor Linares's birthday. Baking a brand new cake today would have felt like hell. Sister Gracie flipped the cake over. Greenish black fuzz crept along the bottom of the cake. Sister Gracie took the knife and with surgical precision removed all

the infected bits, and sliced off a sliver from the once again white cake and tasted it. Once it thaws out it should be perfect, she thought.

The back screen door yawned and in walked Lorenzo, Gracie's eldest son. His straight black hair covered most of his face and his lanky body melted on the chair near his mother.

“Y ese pastel?”

“Es pa'l Pastor Linares. Hoy cumple años.”

“Why is there smoke coming out of the cake?”

“Se está defrosting.”

Lorenzo was used to his mother's way of doing things. She'd hot-glue-gunned embroidered, sequined appliques to his aunt's wedding dress last year.

“You could just go over to H-E-B and get him a cake, Ma.”

“Why would we waste money like that? We have a great cake already. He will feel more appreciated because I made it myself.”

“Ay, Ma. Let me help you.”

Lorenzo took the knife and started shaping the cake into a perfect flat circle. Gracie grimaced as she observed her son's delicate hands working.

“Lorenzo, go help your brother. He's changing the oil in the truck.”

Lorenzo sighed and dropped the kitchen knife in the sink.

“What are you going to do when you marry and have to take care of your mujer and hijos? What will your wife think that you don't know how to fix a car?” Sister Gracie's face softened as she took a breath, “You know your father left us, and I need you to do your part as a man.”

“Pero Pablo already does the ‘man jobs’. ¿Qué no?”

“Lorenzo, go help your brother.”

Sister Gracie left the kitchen, hoping her son would simply obey. She went to her closet to get the red dress she would wear to the church service tonight. With a little bit of ironing it would do just fine. She tested the zipper down the side of the dress to make sure it didn't snag. She'd have to wear the big girdle with this one—she didn't want anything jiggling as she presented her cake. Now where did she leave her gold high heels? She looked in the back of the closet and under the bed. Larissa must have taken them again. She walked through her bedroom straight into the children's bedrooms. From under a chair, in the far corner of the last room, peeked the strap of her gold shoe. Lorenzo's room. Larissa must have used the computer in there.

Gracie looked at her hair in the mirror and remembered the auburn red hair dye she bought at Ruben's Grocery Store when she went to buy the menudo for Saturday. If she hurried she could dye her hair and squeeze into the red dress in time for church. Gracie finished up the cake adding “Feliz Cumpleaños Pastor” in the middle with blue icing. After sharing this cake, the ladies of the church were bound to ask her to get more involved. She could make a flower arrangement to place in front of the pulpit. In fact, she had some lilies from last summer she could dust off and turn into a great arrangement.

When she got to the church, Lissi, the pastor's daughter, played a soft, slow, hypnotic song on the keyboard. Sister Gracie didn't want to bring the cake in just yet. She surveyed the sanctuary, and noticed the president of the Women's Ministries hadn't arrived. Maybe she should wait a bit longer to bring in the cake. The new guitar player from somewhere in Central America sat on the back pew, talking with Lina, Hermano Raul's niece. Sister Gracie suspected the girl held on to her Catholic beliefs—for example, the way Lina knelt behind the pew instead of going up front after the sermon, and Sister Gracie swore she could make out a crucified Jesus

on her small, gold cross. The guitar player turned and smiled at Sister Gracie and she quickly walked back the way she came in.

“Mami, Cesar wants to know if we can go to the kids’ room in the back,” whined Fabian.

Sister Gracie absently nodded yes, and the two boys ran in search of any mischief that could entertain them.

Manzanita, the Women’s Ministries president, pushed through the door in time to see Sister Gracie pull her dress down. Manzanita always matched her purse with her shoes, but sometimes the style of the shoes didn’t match the outfit; she wore wedges with business suits and pumps with sundresses. Manzanita and her husband sported matching perms, and she invited the entire congregation at least once a month over to her house for a comida to celebrate some person’s or other’s birthday or anniversary. Of all the ladies in the church, Gracie suspected the pastors loved Manzanita the most.

Gracie’s girdle did wonders to press her hips down. She went from pear shape to near hour glass figure in less than ten minutes of tugging and tucking. But the girdle also made her dress inch up and bunch up just under her small breasts. If she could only take some of the extra from her hips and put in her breasts.

Gracie wanted to smile at Manzanita but instead she blurted out, “Le traje un pastel al Pastor.”

“Oh, ¿sí? You know he prefers chocolate, ¿qué no?”

Gracie pulled on the left side of her dress. “Pos le traje white cake. ‘Ta rico.”

Manzanita nodded, “He’ll eat anything.” Manzanita used a cane to walk these days. She’d fallen when carrying her newest grandson. The baby weighed eleven pounds at birth, and he only got chubbier with every guisado Manzanita fed him. Manzanita stopped and turned.

“Ah, Gracie, we’re having a chicken plate sale on Saturday. Can I count on your help in the kitchen?”

Gracie wanted to hug Manzanita and kiss her on both cheeks—but she didn’t.

“Sí, claro. What time do you need me?”

“Well the men fire up the pit at five a.m. That too early for you?”

“No, no. five is fine.”

With the excitement of getting in with the women’s club, Gracie forgot about the cake. The metal folding chair crackled and squeaked under Sister Gracie. She’d sat in the third row on the left hand side facing the pulpit for the last two weeks of services. She closed her eyes as Lissi began playing Gracie’s favorite song. The one that always made her cry and made her promise God that she would be a better mom, a better Christian woman, a better everything. The song that eased the guilt of divorcing her husband. The song that made her feel God really did see all.

Gracie opened her eyes. Lissi was such a pretty girl. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if Lissi would fall in love with her Lorenzo? If the pastor’s daughter became her daughter-in-law, the pastor would appoint Gracie the next Women’s Ministries president surely.

But Lissi was just a child. Gracie shouldn’t think like this at all. Well really not just a child. Lissi would be fifteen soon. And she’d have her quinceañera. Why Gracie herself had married at thirteen. By the age of fifteen, Gracie had already given birth to Larissa, and Lorenzo was on the way. Weren’t quinceañeras the original Mexican mating ritual?

With a surge of bravado, Sister Gracie walked over to the Pastor’s wife.

“Sister Linares...”

“Hermana Gracie,” said the Pastor’s wife shaking her hand and pulling her to kiss her cheek. It surprised Gracie that Sister Linares knew her name.



“Que Dios le bendiga.”

“Igualmente!” the pastor’s wife said with a smile.

“Sister Linares, I just wanted to say... if you need any help with Lissi’s quinceañera... well... please let me know.”

“Ay Sister Gracie. That is very sweet of you, but Lissi isn’t having a quinceañera.”

“She’s not?”

“No. Es que the church doesn’t pay my husband much.” Sister Linares paused. “I shouldn’t complain. I’m sorry. Forget I said it that way. We can’t afford a quinceañera right now, you see.”

Sister Gracie looked at the flower arrangement in front of the pulpit.

“Perdóneme Hermana Linares,” Gracie said blushing. I just didn’t think. I should have asked before bringing it up.”

“Nononono... how could you have known?” Sister Linares reached out and placed her hand on Gracie’s shoulder. “Like I said... it’s very sweet of you to offer.”

Pastor Linares thanked Sister Gracie for the cake in front of the entire congregation, and Manzanita reminded her of the five a.m. appointment for Saturday’s chicken plate sale. Even though the church service had gone better than Gracie had hoped, she felt as ill as if she’d eaten one too many tacos de trompo from La Calle del Taco in Reynosa. She looked at sweet Lissi kissing the old ladies on the cheek good-bye, and she glanced at Lorenzo picking thread balls off of his new shirt. She imagined Lissi in a big, pink dress – like a Southern belle, only Mexican of course. She carefully placed her Bible and hymn book in the crocheted bag she’d made in the shape of a cross. She pulled down her dress and went home to make dinner for her children.

The next Saturday morning, Sister Gracie didn't need an alarm to wake up. The gallo started singing as early at four a.m. usually, but this morning, she kept waking up every hour on the hour. She felt like praying to la Virgencita to help her with the ladies of the church, but she feared praying to anyone other than God or Jesus would bring her bad luck. Pastor Linares practically said as much every Sunday. Catholics angered God with their prayers to the saints. God was very jealous. He wanted to be the only one.

She got out of bed and washed her face and armpits. If her mother saw her, she would say she had given herself a baño de puta. Sister Gracie smiled and wondered what her mother knew about being a puta. She put on the short girdle with the frazzled edges and squeezed into a navy blue dress with white polka dots.

When they arrived at the church, Gracie motioned for Lorenzo to join the two men that nursed the fire in the barbecue pit. Pastor Linares had welded the barbecue pit from a huge recycled propane tank.

Most of the lights in the church remained off, but cackling laughter guided Gracie through the darkness.

Manzanita had over a hundred half chickens spread out on the folding table. She scraped the fatty tissue off with a knife, exposing the pink flesh of the true providers of the church.

“We're going to build our new church with chickens!” laughed Manzanita.

Hermana Petra put some corridos Cristianos in the tape deck. Manzanita took a few dance steps with her chicken-fat slimed hand to her eyebrow and the other hand on her belly.

“Ajúa!”

Sister Gracie looked away.

“Don't you like to dance, Gracie?”

“Pos no que dancing is a sin?” asked Gracie.

“Not when you dance with Jesucristo!”

Hermana Petra said, “Manzanita, don’t scare her. Don’t you see that she’s new en el camino?”

“Sí, you’re right, Hermana Petra. We don’t want to confundirla. Na’ mas estoy playing, Gracie.” Gracie started putting the prepared chicken into the aluminum basins that went to the men out by the pit.

Sister Linares walked in with an olla de frijoles and Lissi followed with a Tupperware bowl filled with potato salad.

“Lissi, ponte hacer the bread baggies,” ordered Sister Linares.

“Can I eat a potato salad sandwich with one of the tapas?” asked Lissi.

“Ay Lissi, vas a engordar if you keep eating like that.”

Lissi sighed and started wrapping plastic forks in napkins.

“Lissi, Lorenzo came because he said you all needed help delivering plates.”

“Sí, hermana! I usually get stuck doing most of it myself.”

“Well maybe you can show him how? I don’t want him messing anything up.”

“Sí, claro, Sister Gracie. I’ll show him what to do. Don’t worry, it’s super easy. I’ve been doing this since I was eleven. One time I delivered over eighty plates all by myself.”

The corridos kept playing as church people came in and out to drop off rice, beans, and more potato salad. Sister Linares sent Lissi out to buy a can of jalapenos, and Hermana Petra complained that the men left the chicken raw or burned it. By noontime, five on-fire-for-Jesus teens sat in the back of the youth group president’s pick-up truck along with fifty-three chicken plates packed four to each grocery bag. Forty-nine preorders and four the teens would try to sell

on the spot. Even though the delivering and selling part embarrassed them a little, all the teens enjoyed going along.

“Lorenzo, you’re going to help me. Is that okay?” said Lissi.

“Sure,” said Lorenzo and he looked away.

Martin parked in front of Mari’s Flower Supply and everyone jumped off. He grabbed the delivery list from his back pocket.

“Okay, las cuatas, you all take these two bags to Lamác. Jorge, you take this bag to the pawn shop, and Lissi and Lorenzo take these to JCPenny’s.”

The lady at JCPenny’s ended up asking for two extra plates and by the time Lissi and Lorenzo got back they only had one delivery to make.

“We’ll take it, Martin,” Lissi volunteered. “You go back to church and Lorenzo and I will walk back to church so you all don’t have to wait. That okay with you, Lorenzo?”

Lorenzo nodded.

“Ay, Lissi. Your mom is going to get mad.”

“Ándale, Martín. Es que quiero comprar una raspa. Mom never lets me eat anything.”

“¡Qué exagerada!” Martin rolled his eyes. “Ta bueno. See you back at church. Pero yo no sé nada if your mom gets mad.”

“Thank youuuu, Martín,” Lissi cooed. “Andale, Lorenzo,” she said as she pulled his arm.

They delivered the last plates to a wedding dress shop. Skinny mannequins in puffy wedding dresses adorned the window displays. The store owner had used every single inch of space to display flower girl baskets, pearl and crystal lazos, table decorations, and candles.

The storeowner helped a customer and Lissi walked around the shop while Lorenzo waited by the cash register with the chicken plates. Lissi ran her hand over the quinceañera dresses.

“Sorry kids for making you wait,” the shop keeper said startling Lissi.

“My hands are clean!” said Lissi holding up her hands in fashion faux pas surrender.

The shop owner laughed as she took ten dollars out of the cash register. She handed the money to Lorenzo and put the plates behind the counter. She walked around to the dresses Lissi fondled.

“No hay problema, niña. You want to try one on?”

Lissi shook her head and twisted her foot in exactly the way which would have aggravated her mother. “No, it’s okay.”

“I imagine you’ll turn fifteen soon, no?”

“Sí, pero I’m not having a quinceañera,” Lissi laughed nervously.

The shop keeper took the dress off the rack, “¿Y eso qué importa? Just try it on so you can see what you look like. The dressing rooms are back there. Yell if you need help.”

The shopkeeper went back to the counter and popped one of the chicken plates open.

“Mmmm... that’s why I always order from you guys. Your church makes delicious chicken,” she yelled.

Lissi grinned at Lorenzo as she dragged the dress to the back. “I’ll only take a few minutes. I swear!”

Lorenzo smirked.

“Are you making fun of me?” said Lissi as she stuck out her tongue.

“Why? Cause you’re trying on a dress you know you’ll never buy?” Lorenzo laughed.

“Yeah,” said Lissi from behind the dressing room door.

“Nah, it’s cool. If you’re not having a quinceañera, might as well try a dress on to see how it looks. This girl at school didn’t have one either and she borrowed my cousin’s dress so she could take a picture. You know, de recuerdo.”

“Yeah! Aw, man wish I had a camera with me!”

Lorenzo laughed. Lissi came out.

“Hey can you zip me up?”

Lorenzo zipped the back of the dress and they both looked at Lissi in the mirror.

“What do you think?”

“It looks nice.”

“Are you sure? I’m not too morena for it?”

“Nah.”

“When I was little, my mom wouldn’t buy me this pink dress I liked because she said I looked too prieta. So she bought me a yellow one she said went better with my skin color. Oh, and I couldn’t even get a long dress. I had to get the regular one so I could use it to Missionettes. Man, I hate the color yellow.”

Lissi stared at Lorenzo in the mirror. Lorenzo stood only slightly taller than Lissi, and Lissi had noticed his perfect skin before.

“Lorenzo, how much do you weigh?”

“I dunno, why?”

Lissi laughed. “I think we’re the same size!”

“No way.”

“Neta! I bet you this dress fits you.”

“Whatever.”

Lissi giggled trying to undo the zipper. “Help me!”

Lorenzo pulled down the zipper, trying to avoid touching Lissi’s bra strap.

“You’re going to try on the dress!”

“Pshh...”

“Andale, Lorenzo. I dare you! I soooo want to see if we wear the same size. Besides, with your light complexion, I bet you it looks better on you.”

Lissi pulled Lorenzo into the dressing room with her. She climbed out of the dress, revealing the jeans she wore underneath. Lorenzo stared at Lissi’s small breasts.

“What? It’s like wearing a bikini,” she said.

“Right. Like your mother would ever let you wear a bikini.”

“How would you know anything about what my mother lets or doesn’t let me do?”

“Umm... Lissi... hate to be the one to let you know... but... you and your mother are very LOUD.”

“Aiiii... ;Ya! Take off your shirt and you can keep your pants on.”

Lorenzo stepped into the center of the pile of pink chiffon, and Lissi helped him slip on the sleeves and zipped him up.

Lissi put her hands over her mouth. “I knew it!” She opened the dressing room door and pushed Lorenzo out. Lorenzo stared at himself in the mirror and pushed his hair back. He turned one way and the other. He looked at the grinning Lissi.

“I am so jealous! This dress looks better on you than on me!” said Lissi.

“It does, doesn’t it?”

“Let me go get a corona!”

Lorenzo tossed Lissi her t-shirt, and she ran to the window displays and pawed through wedding decorations.

“How did you like the dress, M’ija,” asked the shop keeper as she bit into a jalapeno.

“I like it! But I want to try it on with a corona. Is that okay?”

“Claro, M’ija. On that wall I have some on special. You know, my sobrina wasn’t going to have a quinceañera, pero le puso un gorro a mi hermana that we all finally pitched in and made one for her. I bet you if you beg your mom, she’ll make you one too.”

“Yeah, maybe,” said Lissi as she ran to the back.

Lissi caught Lorenzo staring at himself in the mirror. She placed the crown on Lorenzo and said, “There. You’re a complete princess.” Lissi bowed and Lorenzo laughed.

“Hey, do you think it would be weird if I asked you to take a picture of me with my camera phone?”

“Pos h́jole! Why didn’t you tell me you had one?”

“No s3. I forgot.”

“Give it here.”

Lissi made Lorenzo pose for five different shots. One of him looking away. One of him sitting on the floor with the dress spread around him and him looking up at the camera. One of a reflection from the mirror. One of him looking over his shoulder. And one a simple head and shoulders shot.

“I only wanted one picture!” Lorenzo said scrolling through the pictures and smiling.

“S3, pero, I’m an expert at taking those Glamour Shot type pictures. I saw it on Oprah. She makes photographers climb a ladder and take pictures as she looks up.”



“You kids okay back there?” shouted the store owner. “You better not be kissing or anything!” Lissi could hear the lady giggle.

“We’re fine!” Lissi shouted back and crossed her eyes at Lorenzo. “Eek! We better get you out of this before she comes back here.”

“What’s worse? That she sees me in this dress or that she’ll find me half naked?”

“Definitely the dress!” Lissi laughed. She helped him out the dress. Lorenzo carefully hung the dress back on the hanger and handed Lissi the corona.

“Umm, Lorenzo?”

“Yeah?”

“You looked very pretty in the dress.”

Lorenzo looked at Lissi. The hum of the air conditioning kicked in and the quinceañera dress rustled as Lorenzo shifted his weight.

“Thanks,” he replied and smiled.

Lissi and Lorenzo reached the church panting from running the entire way. Lissi said she didn’t care if her mom got mad at her for not coming back with Martin and the others, but she didn’t want to make matters worse by taking longer than necessary.

Lissi and Lorenzo went into the church kitchen laughing.

“Did you see how that lady starting eating the chicken plate before you even let go of the plate?” laughed Lissi.

“¡Sí! I was like, lady, careful with my finger. She almost bit me!”

Lissi’s laugh resonated throughout the church, reaching the omnipresent ears of her mother. Sister Linares walked in saying, “On ‘tabas, Lissi? I was worried sick!”

“Ay, Ma. I was delivering the last plates and the lady at the store had to help a customer and took forever to pay us.”

Lissi’s mom didn’t look convinced. Sister Gracie, who washed the aluminum bowls, cleared her throat.

Lissi’s mom looked at Lorenzo and said, “Well at least Lorenzo stayed with you.”

Lissi rolled her eyes at Lorenzo.

“Estas muchachitas, hermana, they think they can take care of themselves. They don’t realize it’s different with girls. They can’t go around walking down the streets by themselves,” said Lissi’s mom.

Sister Gracie wiped her hands on her apron and nodded. Maybe it was possible after all to get in the Pastor’s family. What would Gracie’s mother say then? What would her sisters say? What would the people from the old neighborhood say? She, Graciela Mendiola, related to a minister. No more chismeando about how embarrassing Gracie’s life was. They might even start asking her for advice.

The following week Gracie decided to put her plan into action.

“ Buenoooo...”

Sister Gracie scraped egg from the edge of the stove.

“Hermana Manzanares, this is Gracie Mendiola. Que Dios le bendiga.”

“Hola, Gracie. How are you?”

“Bien, bien hermana. I was calling to talk to you about an idea I have.”

“Okay...”

“Well you know how Lissi, the pastor’s daughter turns fifteen soon.”

“I didn’t know that, but sí, I think you’re right.”

“Well maybe we could put together a small quinceañera for her...”

Gracie turned the mouthpiece of the phone towards the top of her head and let out a long breath. She tried to breathe steadily.

“Well...”

“Lissi is such a good girl. You know there really aren’t any girls like that anymore...”

Gracie squeezed her eyes shut and bit her lip remembering Manzanita had two teenage granddaughters.

“I mean... there aren’t *a lot* of girls like that,” Gracie continued.

“Actually, Gracie, that sounds like a good idea. I know los pastores can’t throw Lissi a quinceañera right now. Let me talk to some of the other women and let’s see what we can come up with.”

Gracie put down the phone and went straight for the bridal magazines dating back to 1972 stashed in the bottom drawer of her dresser. Gracie collected bridal magazines like married middle-aged men collected Playboy magazines.

Gracie leafed through the magazines and folded a corner here for a wedding dress that could easily look like a quinceañera dress in a pink fabric, there a corner for a bouquet that looked easy to make, and now a corner for a cake that didn’t require too many mounting accessories. By the end of the day, the church ladies decided that Manzanita would go over to the Linares family home with bridal magazines saying that she would help her future daughter-in-law pick out a wedding dress. Although a complete lie, it felt less damning because Carlos, her son, planned to propose one day to his girlfriend, and well the lie was for a good cause—making a worthy, pure girl, Lissi, very happy. Manzanita would show Lissi the magazines and ask her

opinion on the dresses in order to get an idea of what kind of dress Lissi would want. Gracie thought the plan genius and believed Lissi would never suspect a thing.

Who decided the quinceañera would be a surprise, Gracie didn't really know. Planning it made Gracie feel as if she was fitting into the size-seven dress she sometimes took out to try on when she dieted. It made her feel like finding out her ex husband's puta left him and took his TV with her. It made her feel like seeing her son Lorenzo volunteer to fix the back fence, the car, or simply volunteer to get his hands dirty.

Gracie glanced out the living room window and saw Lorenzo into the front yard on his bicycle. He had such delicate features. Too bad Larissa didn't get those cheekbones and thin wrists. Larissa had bigger feet than anyone in the family. Gracie could always find her great bargains because the only other people who wore size 11 in women's shoes were drag queens, and not many drag queens lived in South Texas.

“Hola, Mami.”

Gracie wrapped florist tape around a Bic pen that had a pink silk rose at the end of it.

“ ‘On ‘tabas, Lorenzo?”

“At Pastor Linares's house, Mami.”

“Oh really? You and Lissi get along, no?”

“Yeah... she's cool.”

Gracie smiled as she placed the finished flower pen in the basket with the rest of the quinceañera decorations.

“I hope you haven't told Lissi about her surprise quinceañera, M'ijo.”

Lorenzo laughed. “No, Ma. Don't worry. Lissi will have a completely shocked face when she sees everything you've done.”

Gracie looked for the chiffon ribbon she needed for the bouquets.

“I hope so, son. Lissi is such a good muchacha...” Finding the ribbon, Gracie pulled a section out and felt it between her thumbs. “Lorenzo...”

“¿Qué, Ma?”

“Lorenzo... it would make me very happy if Lissi became your girlfriend.”

Lorenzo laughed. “Umm... Ma.... Lissi and I are just friends. We don’t like each other like that.”

Gracie wrinkled her forehead in the way that most irked her mother.

“Maybe you don’t like each other that way now... but...”

Gracie rubbed her forehead, erasing any evidence of prohibited facial expressions.

“You all are young... and... well... as you get older you’ll start liking boys and girls... I mean... you’ll start liking girls, and Lissi will start liking boys... and when that happens... you might like each other.”

Gracie smiled thinking she had effectively foretold Lorenzo’s future. One day instead of Lissi quinceañera, she would plan Lorenzo and Lissi’s wedding. And at that time, it wouldn’t be a surprise. Lissi would know all Gracie did for her. Pastors Linares would come over and sit in the living room, and after a few months, sit in the kitchen and they would talk about the children or who knows maybe even grandchildren. Would she call the pastors compadres? Gracie heard a soft thud.

Lorenzo bent down to pick something off the floor. Gracie squinted to focus on the small object.

“It’s Lissi’s,” said Lorenzo as he scrambled to unzip the side pocket of his backpack.

“¿Qué es?”

“Nail polish. I must have picked it up accidentally when I got my school stuff. She helped me with a school project.”

Gracie went back to her quinceañera decorations.

Gracie had arranged for her mother to make Lissi’s dress. Sister Linares had to tell Lissi that one of the ladies at church would donate a new dress for Lissi to wear to church. That explained the need for a seamstress to take Lissi’s measurements.

Gracie had been so busy freezing the layers for the cake, and making the decorations and bouquets that she forgot she had to get a new dress for herself. She’d go downtown to look at dresses when she went out to rent Lorenzo’s tuxedo this afternoon. She’d get a peach colored dress and dye her hair in that auburn color. Maybe Avon still sold the coral lipstick she got a few years ago.

Gracie went into Lorenzo’s room and opened the closet. She needed the size on one of his dress shirts, and she couldn’t remember the last time Lorenzo let her shop for him.

She heard a buzz behind her, and she glanced around the room— no signs of any wasps or other insects. She turned back to the closet.

She saw something peach sticking out from the bunch of hanging jackets. I should look for a dress in this color today, she thought. She pulled on it and with it came a t-shirt with silver glitter and a sequins design. The profile of a girl hid amongst all the sparkliness. When did Larissa get this shirt? She probably hid it in Lorenzo’s closet so Gracie wouldn’t get mad she spent her babysitting money on dumb things. This pretty blouse probably fit Larissa too tight. Maybe Larissa planned to get on a diet. Gracie smiled. Gracie would pick up some salad stuff on

the way home to help Larissa and pretend not to know Larissa had gotten on a diet. Every time Gracie got excited about anything, Larissa immediately got bored with it.

Gracie heard the buzz again. She looked around. Where is that coming from? It sounds like it's coming from Lorenzo's underwear drawer. Maybe an insect got trapped in there?

Gracie pulled on the drawer and jumped back. Nothing came out. She peeked in and saw a blinking light under one of Lorenzo's white boxers. Lorenzo's phone said five new messages. A, qué niño. He was always forgetting his phone. She flipped the phone open. The screen said: 4 text messages, 1 picture message. She clicked okay. Open stored pictures? Okay. Loading. She put the phone down and checked on Lorenzo's pant size. This boy was way too skinny. She'd have to make tortillas de harina tonight para la cena. Gracie went to the kitchen and jotted Lorenzo's shirt and pant size on a napkin and stuffed it in her purse. She had to hurry if she wanted to get a good parking space. She forgot about the opened phone she left on the dresser—the phone that loaded Lorenzo's pictures.

Gracie found the perfect dress for the quinceañera. Peach colored chiffon flowing skirt and the matching top that hid her lonjita. She'd still wear a girdle of course. The dress looked a bit aseñorado but elegant and she bought it at such a great price. Thirty well spent dollars. She'd have to wash it by hand or maybe send it to the cleaners. She didn't want the stitching getting frazzled in the washing machine.

“Ma? Is that you?” Lorenzo poked his head through the kitchen doorway.

“Si, M'ijo. Sorry I took so long. It's because I had to go get more pink ribbon, and my dress, and your tux, and some harina, and the lady at the florist supply store couldn't find the same shade of pink I had bought before. Did you know they had six different shades of pink? I think I got the right one. I'll start dinner soon.”

Lorenzo tiptoed bare footed into the kitchen.

“Did you go in my room earlier, Ma?”

“Ah sí, M’ijo. I had to get your sizes for the tux.”

“Oh, ok.”

Gracie boiled water for the harina. Lorenzo bit on the side skin of his index finger. Gracie glanced back at him and said, “The nail clippers are in the bathroom.” She turned back to her harina.

“Did you look at my phone?”

“What?”

“Someone left my phone on top of the dresser...”

“Ah sí, M’ijo. I’m sorry. Did I waste your battery?”

Lorenzo took a scrap of paper out of his pocket and threw it in the trash.

“Oh, nonono... I just wondered who went through my phone.”

Gracie laughed. “La mugre cosa scared me half to death. It kept buzzing and I thought it was a bee or something trapped in your calzones cajón.”

Lorenzo coughed out a tiny laugh.

“These tortillas won’t be ready for dinner. Comemos con bread. ¿‘Ta bien?”

“Sí, Ma, of course.”

The morning of the quinceañera, the gallo sung a sore-throated note and gave up after a few croons. Sister Gracie turned on her side and hugged the San Marcos colcha around her. Even though she didn’t feel cold, she kept the heavy blanket out to feel its heaviness on her through the night. She had to get out of bed soon to finish the cake early so that she’d have enough time to decorate the church for the quinceañera. The little reception would take place outside in the



back of the church and Brother Gilberto would hang strings of light bulbs. It would have looked more elegant had they rented a hall, but even if they had the money, it was too short notice.

Sister Gracie had the boys load up the pickup truck as she finished getting dressed. It still shocked her Larissa had fit into one of her old dresses. That girl would never find a boyfriend if she kept growing.

When they got to the church, Agustin, the guitar player, leaned against the church door looking out into the street. He glanced at Sister Gracie and smiled. Sister Gracie yelled at the boys to help her unload the truck.

“Hola, Gracie,” said the guitar player as he opened her door.

Sister Gracie touched her hair to make sure it didn’t move as she exited the truck.

Agustin looked at Sister Gracie as if she were good enough to eat. As if she was the answer to all his immigration problems.

“Usted no parece mama,” he said as he helped her off the truck.

“¿Qué?”

“Usted parece mamacita,” he grinned.

“Ay, huerco. Help us with the stuff,” she said as she shoved him playfully.

Gracie and crew filed into the church arms full with pink poufy things to turn the old motor cycle shop turned church into a dreamland worthy of a princess. Manzanita had gotten the Garza girls to paint the inside of the church. Gracie could smell the paint and she instructed everyone not to put anything down until they turned on the lights. The last thing she needed was to get paint on the decorations. Lorenzo ran to the bathroom in the back to flip the breaker that lit up the inside of the church. As the lights came on, Sister Gracie realized she had used the wrong word when she requested a paint color. She had said she wanted the church to look elegant, but

apparently the Garza girls thought elegant meant make it look like a funeral home in Rio Bravo. They had painted the walls an avocado-taupe color and the ceiling a grayish-taupe. The place had never looked dimmer- not even when it had been a motorcycle shop.

Pastor Linares walked in the door and laughed when he saw Sister Gracie's expression.

"You should see their house in Reynosa! It's three stories high and they painted the outside a dark gray. It looks like Dracula's house!"

"Ay Dios mío! How am I going to make this place look pure and innocent now?"

"Aww, Sister Gracie, don't worry about that. My baby girl will do that the minute she walks in." He walked over to Sister Gracie, and gave her a side hug. "I really appreciate you organizing all this for my Lissi."

Gracie wanted to say that Manzanita and the other ladies helped her, but instead she picked up some pink gauzy material and went up to the stage to start working.

The first guest arrived as Gracie taped the last miniature plastic, pink high heel to a pink plastic table cover outside. It looked a little like a boda de rancho, but Gracie had no doubt that Lissi would love it.

Gracie's brother, from Houston, drove the nicest sedan of all the guests, and would drive Lissi the three blocks from her house to the church. She hoped he had time to take the car to Manzanita's house so Manzanita's neighbor could put the big, fat pink bows all over the car. Although Gracie wanted to put Lissi's last muñeca on the car hood as part of the decoration, Manzanita convinced Gracie that the plastic doll might melt with the heat of the car.

"¿Ma?" Lorenzo waved a plastic bag at Gracie. "Do I need to give these to Lissi?"

Gracie snatched the bag away from Lorenzo and tore it open.

“Son los gloves. Go give them to Sister Chanita. She’s going to be the madrina de guantes.”

Sister Gracie heard some screeching brakes. Her brother and Lissi had arrived. I guess he hadn’t gotten around to fixing the brakes. She should have gotten a padrino de brakes so Lissi could ride in car that looked nice and had car brakes that worked.

Gracie and Lorenzo made their way to the front of the church in time to see her brother pop Lissi and her dress out of the car.

Lissi looked just like Sister Gracie had pictured—a massive floating cupcake.

“Lorenzo, let Lissi hook your arm like this. Don’t walk in until the flower girl gets to the middle of the aisle.”

Gracie felt someone tug at her sleeve. She looked at the padrinos participating in the ceremony waiting for instructions.

“Sister Chanita, you’ll walk in after the madrina de cojín,” said Gracie.

“Ma…” Larissa pulled her mother’s arm.

“What do you want, Larissa. ¿No ves que estoy ocupada?”

“Mom, I have to talk to you.”

“Can’t it wait?”

Larissa’s sweaty hands made a sucking noise as she gripped Lorenzo’s phone tightly.

“Mom, please…”

“What?”

“Ven conmigo,” Larissa said as she pulled Gracie towards her.

Larissa led her mother to the little room where the church children had Sunday School classes. Larissa’s press on nails made it difficult to flip the phone open.

“¿Qué pasó, Larissa?”

“I have to show you something.”

The music started playing, and Sister Gracie looked behind her surprised they had started without her.

“You can show me later, Larissa. I promise.”

Sister Gracie started to walk away and Larissa grabbed her wrist.

“No, Ma. You have to see this.”

Larissa pushed the open phone to Sister Gracie’s face. Sister Gracie squinted and moved her head back.

Sister Gracie didn’t react and gave no sign of recognition.

“Look at the picture, Mom.”

Sister Gracie saw a pretty quinceañera on the little screen.

“Is that Lissi?” Sister Gracie asked confused. It didn’t look like the dress her mother had made for Lissi. Wait, Lissi hadn’t even tried on the dress before today.

Sister Gracie walked towards the light and looked more closely at the picture. Lorenzo posed in a lilac colored quinceañera dress, and smiled shyly at the camera. Sister Gracie’s heart started pounding. What possible explanation could there be for this?

“¿Larissa, qué es esto?” she cried.

Larissa’s eyes started to water.

“I never get Lorenzo’s phone. He gets mad any time I touch any of his things. But I saw it on his dresser as everyone ran out the door... and I thought... I thought that maybe he might need it today cause of the quinceañera.”

Sister Gracie shut the phone, her back molars squeezing shut trying to hold her face together.

“You can never tell anyone about this Larissa.”

“I won’t, Ma.”

“You can never tell anyone, Larissa, you hear me?” Gracie grabbed Larissa’s arm. Larissa started to cry.

“I’m not going to tell anyone.”

Gracie could hear Pastor Linares reading out of the Bible. Larissa left and Gracie sat down on one of the kiddie chairs. She heard the muffled voices of the Pastor and Lissi promising to remain a good Christian throughout her transition into womanhood. She heard how Lissi promised to stay a virgin until marriage and promised to give her chastity ring to her husband on their wedding night. She heard how all the people clapped and the music started again signaling the end of the ceremony.

Gracie went out the back to check that the food was ready to be served. Church members spilled out into the church yard testing metal chairs to make sure they weren’t one of the broken ones. Children in shiny shoes ran around kicking up the dirt. Lorenzo and Lissi walked through the back door smiling, surrounded by youth group kids. Gracie stared at Lorenzo and Lorenzo’s smile faded. Lorenzo whispered in Lissi’s ear and walked over to his mother.

Gracie put slices of bread on paper plates and instructed one of the kids to start putting them on the tables.

“Hey, Mom... everything looks great.”

Gracie continued placing sliced bread on paper plates. Lissi walked towards them, picking up her dress unable to stop smiling or keep the back of her dress from sweeping the dirt and grass.

“Sister Gracie!” Lissi fell on Sister Gracie hugging her. “Sister Gracie, thank you so much!”

Sister Gracie tried to smile but her face looked more like she was trying to pass kidney stones.

“Sister Gracie, are you okay?”

She ignored Lissi. It all felt wrong. Today. Lorenzo. Dirt on pretty pink things. Dirt everywhere.

“Mom? Lissi asked you a question.”

Sister Gracie let out a growl. Lorenzo stepped back.

“Mom, what’s wrong?”

“This can’t be happening...” Gracie said under her breath.

“What?” Lorenzo froze.

“I saw your phone, Lorenzo. I know what you did.”

“What...what are you talking about, Mom?”

Sister Gracie was talking about about Sodom and Gomorrah. About men pounding on doors hoping to sample some fresh ass. About the biblical laws prohibiting men dressing like women and vice versa. She was talking about going to hell for acting in unnatural ways.

Lissi stepped in between Sister Gracie and Lorenzo.

“Sister Gracie, it’s my fault,” said Lissi. “I was trying out the dress and I thought it would be funny for him to wear it.”

Sister Gracie wiped sweat from her upper lip.

Lissi continued, “Sister Gracie, Lorenzo is a wonderful guy. I know you love him no matter what...”

Sister Gracie stepped back.

Lissi stopped talking and looked at Lorenzo.

Lorenzo clenched his fist and unclenched it. He grabbed the lapel of his tuxedo and looked away from Sister Gracie as she closed her eyes.

“I haven’t told anyone yet. Only Lissi knows.”

Sister Gracie looked at Lissi. How could Lissi keep this a secret? How could Lissi, the pastor’s daughter, be a part of this? Gracie ransacked her brain. What did Pastor Linares say about gays? Gracie was sure he’s condemned it. He had to. Lissi made him try on that dress.

“You’re the one who’s trying to turn my boy. Well it’s not going to work, Lissi Linares.”

“Sister Gracie... you’ve got it all wrong...”

“You’re just afraid I’m going to tell your parents.”

“I’m not! Go tell them! Es mas, I’ll go tell them what you’re saying.”

Sister Gracie grabbed Lissi’s arm and pulled her. “No! You’re not going to tell anyone anything.”

Lissi grimaced in pain.

“Do you understand, Lissi?”

Lissi looked at Lorenzo as he turned to walk away.

Sister Gracie held on to Lissi. Another person would not ruin Gracie’s life again. This girl would not be added to the list of people who had abused Gracie’s kindness.

“Don’t worry, I won’t,” said Lissi.

Sister Gracie let go of Lissi and dipped her hands into the baño filled with ice and took out two handfuls of soda cans to pass out to her guests.

Manzanita grabbed one of the sodas and said, “Everything turned out so great. Lissi looks beautiful y mira a Lorenzo! So handsome in his tux!”

The only parts of Sister Gracie’s face that resembled a smile were her open lips baring her teeth, “Sí. ¿Verdad? Le ando buscando novia.” In her head, she crafted a plan to make her son straight.



## JAZZY MOON SAVES JESUS

Pastor Rogelio Linares refused to follow suit with other churches that offered cantatas in lieu of pageant plays. Each year, as Christmas approached, he'd bring poems and plays which he'd typed on mimeograph paper and spread them out before his congregation in hopes he'd muster interest in putting on yet another production. The yellowed copies had seen better days. The people in his congregation worked mostly in the fields, and memorizing lines proved difficult. Furthermore, buying the material for the costumes they'd have to wear and finding a seamstress always proved a challenge as well. He and Emma would reminisce about the old days in Mexico when they found the time and money to put on Christmas shows. Rogelio had all but given up hope on the pastime that had brought him and his Emma together. He looked to his daughter Lissi to carry on the family tradition.

Although she liked the black and white pictures of her mother as the Hebrew princess who snuck out of the palace to welcome the Messiah, Lissi grew tired of the old plays. She learned a few things in drama class and wanted to give their small church a Christmas play make-over.

After searching fruitlessly for an adequate play not written in the antiquated Castilian Spanish, Lissi settled for adapting one from a short story she found about the Christmas star. This play would have it all—heart wrenching drama and special effects. Lissi recruited her friend Lina Luna, who was a senior at a different high school, but attended Lissi's church, Lina's brother Mike, and Lina's little sister Jasmine to be part of both cast and crew. Lina would play

the part of Mary, Mike would be both shepherd and narrator, and six-year-old Jasmine would make the cutest Christmas star ever.

A week before opening night and on the day the youth Christmas party was scheduled; Lina called Lissi to say her grandfather in Mexico had died. Conflicted between feeling sad for her friend's loss and for the loss of her play, Lissi chose to be the bigger person and muster as much sympathy as she could for the Luna family. Her altruistic sentiments were soon rewarded. Lina's mom asked Pastor Linares if Lina and Jasmine could stay with them overnight while she made preparations in Mexico for the funeral. Furthermore, Mrs. Luna had every intention of having her children fulfill their commitment to the Christmas pageant. Hooray!

A soft knock on the door woke up Lissi from her afternoon nap, and she looked around disoriented. Another knock catapulted her from her bed and she stumbled over clothes and books strewn on the floor.

"Hey, Lina, come in." Lissi pushed some Christmas ornaments with her foot to allow the door to open further. "I was just about to clean up."

A bereft Lina tiptoed and climbed on the bed, throwing her duffle bag on the floor. Something crunched as it landed and Lissi hoped the paper mache baby Jesus remained intact.

Lina drooped over Lissi's bedclothes and hugged a pillow, and Lissi joined her on the bed not knowing what to do. Stroke her hair? Say sorry? Lina started sobbing and her tears rolled down her face onto the pillow.

"It's all my fault," said Lina between sobs.

Lissi scooted closer. "What are you talking about?"

"Everything. It's my fault. God is punishing me."

Lissi got up, turned on some music and locked her bedroom door. “I don’t want my parents walking in.” Lissi got back on the bed. “Tell me what you’re talking about.”

Lina continued crying humped over the pillow. Lissi sat watching her, wondering what a good friend would do. Is it bad that I’d rather be getting ready for tonight’s party?

“My grandfather died.”

Lissi waited for more, but Lina resumed her crying.

“Yeah, I know. Is that why you’re sad?” Ay, Lissita, hasta la pregunta es necia, she heard her mom say inside her head.

“No. I mean yes, but,” Lina sat up. “All the bad things that are happening are my fault. It’s because of me.”

“It’s not your fault your grandfather died,” said Lissi. A tissue would come in handy right about now, thought Lissi. She looked around the room hoping to see a box of Kleenex underneath a pair of jeans or a school bag.

“God is punishing me for what I did. And now my grandfather is dead and my parents are fighting. Everything is such a mess. We don’t have money for the funeral and I don’t think my dad is sleeping at home.”

“I don’t know what to say, Lina. I’m really sorry.”

“It’s okay.” She hugged the pillow to her chest. “I’m glad I’m here. I was going crazy at home waiting for Victor’s phone call.”

“Victor? The guy you met at K-Mart?”

“Yeah. I think he broke up with me. He hasn’t called.”

“I didn’t know he was your boyfriend.”

Lina sighed. “I think he was. I don’t know.” Lina shook her head.

“Guys are jerks. Besides he’s not a Christian, is he?”

“No. I don’t think so. Do you have a Kleenex?”

“Toilet paper okay?”

Lina nodded. Within seconds, Lissi returned with a roll of toilet paper.

“Lissi...”

“Yeah?”

“I think I did it with him.”

“What?”

“I think I did it with him...”

“What do you mean you think you did it with him? I thought that... huh?” Although a senior in high school, the particulars of *it* had eluded Lissi, but she hoped she would if it she was having sex or not. Was it possible not to know for sure?

“I went over to his house and no one was home. We like to play luchitas. He said I was the Blue Demon and he was the Mil Mascaras.”

Ah. The infamous playful wrestling—teenagers’ excuse to fondle each other. Even Lissi knew better than that. Lissi suspected her mother had turned her into prude and as aloof as Lissi wanted to appear at this moment, her thoughts screamed, “SLUT!”

“We played on the floor of the living room and he got on top of me. We started kissing and then... it went in.”

“What?” Lissi’s eyebrows shot to through the roof and her jaw dropped to the floor.

“Wait. I don’t understand. How could it go in?”

Lina sniffled, her nose red and dripping from crying. “I don’t know! I wore these shorts that have really wide legs... they kind of look like a skirt. And he got in through there.”

“And it didn’t hurt? Wait. How did he get it out of his pants without you noticing? And your underwear? Where did that go?”

Lina slumped back on the pillow and got back to crying. Lissi suspected she wasn’t getting the whole story, but what did she know? Lissi pulled the pillow from under Lina; it was damp from her tears.

“Are you mad at me?” asked Lina.

Lissi stared at Lina. “All my friends are virgins. I didn’t think...”

Lina looked up at Lissi, biting her lower lip. Her mascara was smudged and her hair was coming out of her ponytail. Lissi wanted to be mean and tell her how ruined Lina’d be from now on. But she didn’t. Lissi had kissed one boy in her entire life. How could she give Lina advice about sex? Lina waited for Lissi to say something. The best thing for both of them was to keep busy, thought Lissi.

“Well... I have an idea for the Christmas Star,” said Lissi.

“Oh yeah?” Lina exhaled.

“If we staple Christmas lights on one of the white tunics the angels wear, we can plug Jasmine in so she lights up! Where is Jasmine? I thought she was coming too.”

“She stayed in the kitchen with your mom. Something about buttered flour tortillas,” Lina feigned a grin.

“Okay. Good. I still have to memorize my lines for my solo piece. Can you staple the lights on the dress while I do that?”

Lina nodded as she wiped her face on her sleeve. Tears continued rolling down her cheeks as she uncoiled Christmas lights.

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Turning on the lights in the church building presented its own obstacle course. Unlike modern buildings, this former motorcycle shop's electrical wiring ran outside the walls and connected to the breaker in the small bathroom stall. Lissi had learned to maneuver around folding chairs in the dark and most days she scattered cockroaches as well.

As soon as she flipped the handle, she heard, "Lissi! The curtains fell down!"

Pastor Linares had drilled a hole in the wall and installed a suspension mechanism for the stage curtain, but the suspension bit of the operation kept popping out. The stage curtain spent more time on the floor than on the wire rope.

"It's okay," Lissi yelled. "We should practice without a curtain just in case it falls down during the show."

Lissi emerged from the back room and her cast and crew awaited her command. Cut up refrigerator boxes lined the floor with what promised to be believable background sets.

"Okay, let's clear up the middle aisle. I want to practice the grand finale."

Lissi had the unorthodox and brilliant idea to end the Christmas pageant play with the crucifixion scene. She might sabotage next year's Easter play, but didn't Jesus dying on the cross bring it all into perspective?

Hermano Roberto had built the cross out of real wood-- the heaviness would add depth to Jesus' performance. Lissi sat in the back of the church to appreciate the entire effect.

"Okay... start the music," she shouted. Via Dolorosa emanated from the speakers and Eli dressed as Jesus made his painful way down the aisle.

"Get the sheet ready!" They would erect Jesus behind a white bed sheet to mask the platform he'd stand on. Lissi considered using a strobe light to rock it up a bit.

*Down the Via Dolorosa in Jerusalem that day, sang Sandi Patti. The soldiers tried to clear the narrow streets.* Lissi predicted people would start to tear up right about now.

“Lissi?” Jasmine tugged on her arm as she plopped down beside her.

“Hey, Jazzy,” said Lissi without taking her eyes off the stage. Two Roman soldiers whipped the wooden cross and Jasmine jumped.

“What are they doing to Jesus?” she asked.

“Oh, sweetie. It’s okay.” Lissi put her arm around Jasmine. “They’re not really hurting him. It’s not real.”

“It’s not?”

*But he chose to walk that road out of his love... for you... and me.*

“Well it is real in that it did happen. But right now we’re just pretending.”

Tears welled up in Jasmine’s eyes.

“Oh, don’t cry, Jazzy.”

“Why did they do that to Jesus?”

“They had to, baby. I think they had to. It was important... so that we could be saved.”

“Saved? From what?”

“From... sins... from yucky stuff.”

“My mom says my dad has to be saved,” said Jasmine. “I wish I could save Jesus.”

Lissi laughed and hugged her tight.

Unlike previous years, the sets were dry before the curtain went up on opening night and all the actors arrived on time. The line whisperer hid stage left, and Lissi suspected people would

talk about tonight's show for years. It dawned on her this might be her last Christmas pageant for a while. Next year's college demands might prevent her from engaging in the theatrical arts.

Lina paced up and down in her Mary costume and Lissi figured she might have to give her the 'everybody-feels-stage-fright' speech.

"Okay, let's get in a circle and say a short prayer!" Lissi motioned for everyone to gather round.

"Oh, Mike," Lissi said to Lina's brother. "I decided I want Jazzy lit up at the end of the crucifixion scene... since the play is about the Christmas star. We didn't practice it with her, so I need you push her out on the stage just as the song finishes."

"When the song finishes? Or right before it finishes?"

Lissi pointed to the stage. "When Sandi Patti sings Calvaryyyyyyyyyyyyyy and goes on forever with that last note, push Jazzy out there."

Lissi could hear her mother start to recite the welcome poem. Lissi would do her solo piece about the Jewish kids who celebrated Christmas next, and then, the feature play would begin.

Lissi remembered to spot her characters accordingly. The female protagonist lines she said to the clock in the back, and the little brother lines to the last light fixture on the left. She remembered to spit out her words when the Jewish kids were being bullied. When she said baby Jesus was Jewish too, the audience broke out in applause.

When she returned to the room they used for changing and props, she caught a glimpse of Jasmine running around in her star costume. The electrical extension cord trailed behind her as she hugged a towel to her chest.



“Hey, Jazzy, ready to go?” Lissi yelled as Jazzy disappeared behind mothers dressing their little angels.

“Jasmine said she has a surprise for you,” said Mike.

“She did?”

“Don’t get too excited. Even after she hands it to you, you may not know what it is. We’re still wondering what the cotton-ball-macaroni-glue mess was last Mother’s day.”

“Great! I’ll be genuinely surprised, then!”

Jasmine came out of her hiding place and took her spot on the stage. She recited her lines perfectly. When will it be my turn to shine? Lissi mouthed the words with her.

Lissi prepared to plug the electrical cord that would light up Jazzy for the manger scene. Everyone stood in place-- Mary, Joseph, paper mache Jesus, the shepherds, the angels, Mary’s pregnant belly... Mary’s pregnant belly? Too late: the curtain had opened.

Lissi pointed to her stomach, shaping out a belly, and Lina’s face turned as white as her puritanical Mary tunic. She looked down at the pillow under her tunic and looked back at Lissi. Lissi shrugged and motioned her to look back towards the audience. Lina looked at her stomach and then at the baby Jesus in the manger. The audience catching on to the theatrical faux pas, giggled and whispered. In one swift move, Lina stood up, put her hand under her dress, took out the pillow and threw it off stage. The audience erupted in laughter. Tears welled up in Lina’s eyes as Lissi plugged Jasmine in, and Jasmine shouted, “I’m shining!”

The curtain closed and Lina ran off the stage.

“Lina! It’s okay! It’s not a big deal!” Lissi followed Lina.

Lina tried to control her sobbing. What is it with this girl and crying with pillows, thought Lissi.

“Shh... calm down. The audience loved it. It’s okay. Don’t cry.”

Lina looked at Lissi. “I’m pregnant.”

Lissi grabbed a kiddie chair and pulled down Lina into the chair next to hers.

“When you made that motion of being pregnant... for a minute I thought you knew,” Lina said.

“I was talking about the pillow. You didn’t take it off for the manger scene.”

“Victor still hasn’t called me back. Lissi, I don’t know what I’m going to do.”

Lissi could hear the Via Dolorosa start to play. “Hold on, Lina. Let me just...”

Shepherds and angels took off tunics, wings and headpieces. Some remained in their costumes and snuck off into the audience to see the last scene.

“Mike!” Lissi shouted. Mike waved from behind discarded refrigerator boxes. “Is Jazzy ready?” Lissi asked. Mike disappeared again.

“The one thing I ask him to do!” said Lissi sitting back down. The Roman soldiers hit the cross and Lissi heard screams in the audience. “Listen, Lina. I know whatever I say isn’t going to make things better right now. But... I’m your friend and you’re not alone.”

Lissi could hear Sandi Patti sing the last verse and could see the Roman soldiers stand the cross up with Jesus on it behind the bed sheet.

“I promise we’ll talk about this later. Why don’t you spend the night again? Right now I have to make sure Jazzy makes her appearance.”

Mike walked in the prop room and said, “I’m sorry, Lissi, but I have no idea where Jasmine went. I swear I just turned for a minute.”

Lissi sighed. “It’s okay, Mike. It’s almost over. It’s going to be all right.”

Lissi, Lina and Mike walked out into the area between the stage and props room. Lissi's mom had hung a flowered bed sheet to conceal the entrances and exits by the actors from the audience. Props, costume bits, and background sets piled around the upright piano in the corner. Lissi's head was swimming with tonight's events. The excitement of the show and Lina's pregnancy made her hold on to the wall as she verified Jesus hadn't toppled over.

“OH MY GOD...”

Lissi looked towards Mike who held back the flowered bed sheet. Audience members turned to look where Mike pointed.

From the back door entrance Lissi detected a blur of color. Reaching the center aisle, Jasmine shouted, “I'll save you, Jesus!”

Jasmine stood her chest puffed out and fists on her waist. She wore the red tights her mother bought her to wear with her Christmas dress, and lace-bottomed, pink underwear over her tights. She wore a boy's white t-shirt with a big JM scribbled in blue marker across the chest. She had a brown towel tied around her neck and she completed the look with the remnants of a sheep mask; she'd pulled off all the cotton balls and cut off the ears.

“I'll save you, Jesus!” she shouted again and ran down the aisle.

“I think this is your surprise, Lissi,” Mike said.

“What the...” said Lina.

“JM for what?” asked Lissi.

“I think it's for Jazzy Moon. Get it? Jasmine Luna?”

Jasmine jumped on the stage and got behind the white bed sheet. The audience could see a little figure kicking Roman soldiers and pulling Jesus off the cross. Jasmine emerged from behind the sheet pulling a confused Jesus by the arm.

“This way, Jesus! I have bikes waiting for us!” Jasmine led Jesus through a roaring audience and ran out the door. The deacon reported they had jumped on bikes and rode away.

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