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How to Live: Growing Up as a Brown Gay Boy in a Conservative, Traditional and Christian Homophobic Family

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HOW TO LIVE: GROWING UP AS A BROWN GAY BOY IN A CONSERVATIVE,
TRADITIONAL AND CHRISTIAN HOMOPHOBIC FAMILY

A Thesis

by

FELIPE VASQUEZ

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

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May 2017

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TRADITIONAL AND CHRISTIAN HOMOPHOBIC FAMILY

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May 2017

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ABSTRACT

Vasquez, Felipe, How to Live: Growing Up as a Brown Gay Boy in a Conservative, Traditional and Christian Homophobic Family. Master of Fine Arts (MFA), May, 2017, 107 pp., references, 28 titles.

How to Live: Growing Up as a Brown Gay Boy in a Conservative, Traditional and Christian Homophobic Family chronicles the life of one brown, gay boy as he navigated culture, racism, religion and traditional family values growing up. Felipe Vasquez, the boy, narrator and author, analyzes events in his life which guided his choices and left lasting impressions. In the chapters hereby presented, he deals with being gay in a machismo culture, being Latino in the 80s, 90s and present day United States and dealing with mental health in a culture that tends to misunderstand mental illness.

DEDICATION

This is dedicated to all my family – brothers, sisters, nephews and nieces – for the continued physical, academic, mental and spiritual support. I owe more to all of you than I can even fathom. To Steven, for the countless hours you spent listening to me rambling about this, the advice you provided and the unconditional support during the times I became overwhelmed.

Estoy especialmente agradecido con Má y Pá: Son ustedes la razón por cual sigo luchando. Los quiero mucho y esta obra sirve como testimonio de todo lo que ustedes han sacrificado por mí.

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CHAPTER I

CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

Part I - Hope

Every summer of my childhood my family packed the car and off we went to Michigan for seasonal work, leaving our South Texas home behind for a few months. The three drivers, Pa and two of the older boys, squeezed into the cab of the brown '83 Ford F-150 pickup – the rest of the family, six children and Ma, squeezed into the campered bed of the pickup, which was portioned out strategically. The forward part of the truck bed had a 5-foot-wide sheet of plywood suspended off the ground that served as a makeshift bed for four of us when layered with blankets and pillows. Under the plywood bed mom and dad carefully packed bags of clothes and boxes of other things we would need once we reached our destination. They were masters of packing as all our belongings for summer somehow fit Tetris-style in a small space; some food, hard to find Mexican items and ingredients, also traveled with us. Toward the back of the pickup bed, on the floor, was another makeshift bed where the remaining three family members traveled mostly in a sitting position.

On our way to Michigan and on our way back to the Rio Grande Valley (The Valley) we stopped at Hope Migrant Center in Hope, Arkansas. Though I enjoyed traveling in the back of the pickup, feeling the heat of the summer sun as it turned the back of the camper into a solar oven, nothing excited me more than arriving at the Migrant Center. As the long stretches of empty road gave way to small towns, signs announcing the city of Hope, the childhood home of

former President Clinton, filled me with anticipation. *How much longer*, I'd ask every couple of minutes. I looked out the window eager to catch the first glimpse of the buildings.

The center, a cluster of small rooms surrounding a common area, hosted families for a night or two as they made their way across the country. Each small cinder block room had two sets of steel bunk beds with firm mattresses and very cold air conditioning window units – travelers supplied their own sheets and pillows. The center also had community showers and a play area for children. In a building across the street various members of the Arkansas Baptist State Convention offered their guests “a personal witness concerning Jesus Christ, clothing, personal hygiene articles, and refreshments.” I sat restlessly through the 20-minute sermons, most dealing with biblical wanderers and good Samaritans, greedily waiting for them to end because afterward every visitor received a small fabric bag with toiletries. Children received school supplies and occasionally books. I cherished those supplies and especially the books for the months to come – books not being a priority on the family budget.

The promise of a gift at the end of a sermon reinforced immediate gratification. Along with our take-home items we were promised the gift of eternal life should we accept it. For me, this promise, being wholly dependent on my behavior for the rest of my life and regardless of any adverse circumstances, be it another 8 days or 80 years, seemed too much sacrifice to ask of someone just met 20 minutes prior, especially of a young boy. Once the preacher invited us to join him in prayer, I knew the time was near. Within minutes I would have my hands on a much coveted two-pocket folder.

School introduced me to literature, but Hope Migrant Center gave me, appropriately, hope of one day owning my own collection of books. I remember receiving the cheap paperback books in the folders, and occasionally a few hard cover books, and feeling the crispness of the

new paper. Often I held the books to my face to feel the cool of the glossy covers. The slight cracking of a new book felt gratifying as I knew no one else had ever opened it before. They were my books and no one else's. Each page I read gave me a sense of accomplishment. To this day, I enjoy the many positive feelings a book brings.

One year the center was giving out new sets of encyclopedias to school-aged children, each volume individually wrapped in cellophane to protect the gold-edged paper, the entire set in a sealed box. The center gave us two complete sets, one for me and the other for my twin brother, Nando. I don't know how Ma and Pa did it but the boxes were put into the already-crowded vehicle. Besides adding to my collection, the Encyclopedias opened up a world of knowledge and I often consulted with them when I had questions. Currently, my set of Encyclopedias, now 23 years outdated, sits on my bookshelves. Still a prized possession, their presence reminds me how far I've come and a promise of how much further I've yet to go. The encyclopedias introduced me to the wonders of the world and how much there was to learn. Having all this information within reach fascinated me.

Presently, I long for Hope Migrant Center. Though I never told the personnel, they made a difference in my life. Occasionally I wonder what it would feel like to go by again, after a 16-year absence, and experience the center as an adult.

Estudien para que no tengan que trabajar tan duro, I remember Pa and Ma saying, pushing us to continue our education. Although we began working in the fields as soon as we turned twelve, their intentions were for me (and the rest of my siblings) to at least finish high school - once the school year started our education became our priority and not the field work. In the 1980s and 1990s a great number of the people of our community in The Valley mostly worked in arduous jobs such as harvesting crops, construction and other such trades. The idea of

anyone going to college was foreign to my parents as their circle of friends and family didn't include any college-educated people. Still, they pushed education, hoping we would break the cycle of poverty. On numerous occasions Pa and Ma have vocalized their hopes that all their children surpass them in their successes.

My mother only went to 3rd grade in Mexico and my father only to the 1st grade. Their families required workers and they couldn't wait for an educated hand. An education in Mexico in the 1950s also cost money that was needed for other basic needs. Ma, fortunately, stayed in school long enough to learn to read, write and do some simple math. Pa, however, never learned to read or write and can only add a few digits at a time. The extent of his reading and writing capabilities is signing his name. He recognizes a few words but they mean to him what the Nike swoosh means to us – a symbol with an attached meaning, though he lacks the key to decode any new meanings.

Although a natural-born citizen, Pa spent his childhood in Mexico. My grandfather had been a *bracero* (Mexican workers contracted by the United States beginning in 1942 until 1964) and in 1948 my dad was born just down the street from where he currently resides. His family had little money. He tells us of having to use *maguery* leaves on his feet for lack of shoes. Dad quit school before second grade in order to help the family by working. He never learned to read or write Spanish. Mom mentioned his illiteracy all my childhood but I didn't realize what she meant until one day when the telephone rang and he asked me to read to him the name of the caller on the caller ID box. I said something like, *it says the name here Dad, look*, at which point he repeated his command. At that moment I understood the severity of his illiteracy. I wish Pa had learned to read and write. I wonder how different his life may have been. Perhaps his hands might have been softer because he might have found a less physically-demanding job. Perhaps

his skin would be lighter because he might have avoided the damaging rays from the sun.

Perhaps all his children may have found greater success because they received homework help from a dad who could read. Perhaps he might have found better-paying jobs that would give him the money to buy us books. Perhaps he may have found joy in reading the paper, the stupid billboards alongside the roads and writing letters to his children. He may have found a way to write his stories and those of his family for the rest of us to enjoy. I now consider the multitude of opportunities I've inherited from being literate and I feel a sense of loss for my dad.

My mother noticed my father's daily struggles, as opposed to the many fewer struggles she had due to her ability to read and write, and so hoped and worked to give us the gift of literacy.

When I was in 3rd grade my teacher, Mr. Martinez, who makes an appearance in my essay "Brown Boy", introduced me to the Book It! Program, a Pizza Hut community engagement initiative begun in the 1980s to promote reading. For every teacher-predetermined amount of points I received from reading and testing, I received a coupon for a free personal pizza – we couldn't afford to buy pizza so the incentive was huge. The first bite hooked me. The free pizzas from Pizza Hut tasted nothing like mom's pizza – tortillas smothered in tomato sauce, sliced hot dogs for pepperoni and processed yellow cheese. From that point on I read to earn those pizzas, never sharing with my twin brother Nando – he had to earn his own. Our desire for pizza turned into a competition which then turned into a love of reading. Two years later we were the top readers at our school. I beat him by half a point. Pa and Ma both made it to our 5th grade awards ceremony and watched as we received our prizes – cameras which would never be used due to the price of film and batteries. That year, it seems the cosmos or a higher power

conspired as I would receive the set of World Book Encyclopedias that same summer, inspiring me to continue my education.

In high school I began writing to cope with teenage angst. I hated all the rules and restrictions and so on my own time I wrote freely without worrying about getting a failing grade for ignoring the teachers. During my English classes I sat, as usual, in the back of the room and quietly completed my assignments without needing any attention, good or bad, from the teacher. When I completed my assignments I sat quietly and wrote short sentences, occasionally entire paragraphs, and a few times short essays, sometimes with accompanying drawings. At the time I wrote mostly out of frustration. Being a gay, Christian teen who fought my own instincts kept me in a perpetual state of inner turmoil. Often, my teenage words, the pages pulled from notebooks and now stored in a box, make me feel sorry for the boy who had to pretend to be someone his culture and family expected - the scribbles expressing the frustration of hiding my sexuality and the guilt that came from it. I'm glad no one else got their hands on them.

My desire to write down my thoughts and feelings continued into adulthood. During difficult times I turned to pen and paper or my computer to record my thoughts and feelings.

On the first day of my second semester in the MFA program a professor tasked me with introducing myself to the rest of the class with a writing sample. Besides the usually requested information we also had to state our reasons for joining the program. My peers read the introduction and everyone jotted down nice comments making me feel welcome. My professor, on the other hand, responded critically. In that introduction I wrote that publishing and money had no factor in my joining the program and that I simply wanted to write to release my thoughts. *You don't need an MFA for that. You can do that without a degree or spending so much money.*

I nearly quit then. I felt embarrassed and out of place – the majority of the class mentioned publishing. In all honesty, I never thought to publish because I didn't feel I'd ever be good enough. I felt intimidated by my peers so I sat quietly in the back of the classroom the rest of the semester hoping to just get by without being called. I pressed on hoping that one day I'd learn enough to write something, anything, worth reading. My professor's comments made me think critically about why I had joined the MFA. I knew that an additional task on the journey to the degree was to answer the question: Why do I want this degree?

I struggled initially with determining the topic of my thesis. I attribute this challenge to the fact that I could not answer the question raised by my professor. I had no clear direction and I knew it would be difficult to continue my trajectory to graduation until I had a clearer idea. Initially I joined the program with the idea I would write about my 2010 battle with depression. I also considered writing about my time in the US Navy and also about being gay. Each semester I explored a new theme and I wrote essays on those themes. Each essay I wrote felt inadequate, however – something was lacking and I couldn't figure out what. It wasn't until my final semester (my sixth year in the program – my struggle with a unifying theme held me back) that I decided to let my writing take over.

I sat down and began writing a line at a time, letting the ideas flow organically. As I wrote I realized that I had answered the question of why I was writing the thesis. I have had to deal with many personal struggles, some greater than others, and so I decided the focus of this thesis was to study how all these factors – being a brown gay boy in a traditional family that values masculinity – affected my growth as a person.

As my essays took form I realized my culture and my family's values, primarily, affected me as I transitioned from boyhood into adulthood. In my thesis I explore how living in a

Mexican American culture affected me both positively and, in some cases, negatively. Other themes that make an appearance are family relationships, religion and mental health.

While I don't consider these firsthand account nonfiction essays to be in their final form (I don't think I'll ever be completely satisfied with them), they are true to my thoughts and my experiences. I feel confident now that I write because I hope someone, one day, somewhere, will take heed to my words and my experiences, and provide support to their child regardless of their expectations or those of their culture.

Though my parents worked diligently to get us ahead, at times their loyalty to the expectations they learned growing up impacted my own growth. It is my hope that my words will one day prove useful to parents of brown gay boys and guide them in supporting their children despite the push back of culture, religion or traditional family values. In publishing I fulfill my needs for self-expression and also the needs of a child who needs the unbridled support I wish I'd received.

Recently a long-lost memory resurfaced as I contemplated my time in the Navy. My third year in I boarded the USS Dewert with Helicopter Anti-Submarine Light Squadron 46 (HSL-46), Detachment 5 for an anti-piracy six month deployment. Our journey across the Atlantic Ocean, the Mediterranean Sea, the Red Sea and then the Indian Ocean presented me with time to think. While endlessly spot-treating the helicopters for rust I'd reflect on life. Almost nightly after my shift and a shower I returned to my rack ready to record the many thoughts which had occupied my thoughts as I worked. I kept most of my thoughts private and shared them only with myself in my digital journals – now lost, unfortunately, after I failed to back them up and my computer suddenly crashed.

One evening the guys on my shift and I were mostly caught up with work and had some time to sit back, relax and catch up with each other. Usually the conversations centered on their families – relationship issues, worries, missing their toddlers’ first steps and so forth. On that occasion, however, one of my close friends, Hartgraves, turned the focus to me. *Squeeze*, he said, the nickname derived from the ending of my last name, *tell us about your life back home. What do you wish you could have right now?*

Well, I miss my mom's mole. I haven't had that in a while.

What's mole?

It's a kind of sauce, usually paired with chicken. I described the complexity of the mole flavors with the chocolaty taste and the mild spiciness from the peppers and the aromatics of the herbs and spices which lingered in the background. The guys listened intently, some immediately dismissing the dish as something they would never eat. I continued listing the things I missed, many of which they found fascinating. Though many of my experiences seemed normal to me and to those I grew up around, to my shipmates, a sampling of American boys of varied races and from across the country, my culture was foreign and off-putting. This memory reminds me of the importance of sharing my culture with diverse readers.

Part II – Craft

Under the Magnifying Glass

In the act of writing I find that I am constantly forced to stir up my emotions, both good and bad. Thomas Larson, in *The Memoir and the Memoirist*, states that authors must be “willing to put themselves on the couch, under the lamp, into the darkness, sometimes as [we] are living or soon after [we] have lived the emotional mire [we] are working with, and, perhaps waking up

in” (p.18). As I write my mind begins to filter different past experiences through a sort of writer’s sieve. I realized, for example, as I contemplated memories for writing, that the conversations I overheard as a boy about *jotos* had a much greater effect on me than I originally perceived and I’m forced to confront the pain associated with that memory. On the other hand, I have realized through the act of writing and going through past experiences that losing out on a sale for a Sega Genesis video game console had been silly though it devastated me as it happened. I learned to evaluate the weight of my memories and understand that not all of them require the same attention.

Sometimes it is difficult to have to relive some of the moments I have encountered. But I realize, as I am writing, that I now see things differently than I did at the moment or I begin to see them differently because of how much more closely I examine them during the writing. Since starting on this project six years ago, I’ve realized, for example, that many of my struggles with identity were caused by conflicts in the way my parents raised me to be (a heterosexual macho boy) and who I really was (a homosexual open-minded boy). I also learned, for example, that I have been exposed to racism since childhood, many times hidden as “appreciation” such as a catchy “Mexican-sounding” jingle on TV or Taco Tuesdays at schools. Throughout the process I have developed a greater sense of who I am by reflecting on the events that have shaped me and processing the information from a more objective standpoint.

Faulty Memory

It is, however, difficult to write about family issues which affected me. Although some of my experiences are now entirely in the past, and I can detach myself from them more easily, my family still remains geographically and emotionally close to me. In many ways by writing

this I feel I am rebelling against them by exploiting some of our shared experiences. I hate to be the “ax wielder” as Larson calls it (p.20), but these are the memories I have growing up in a Mexican American, Christian and homophobic household, and these are the feelings I have about those experiences now.

I considered apologizing beforehand to my family and those I may offend with my versions of memory. After careful consideration, I realized that it would be unfair to me, as writer and owner of my memories, to have to apologize for the way I perceived a situation as it happened. No doubt versions will differ between those who share the experience, but my memory will always be true to me and theirs to them.

G. Thomas Couser, in *Memoir: An Introduction*, states that “the obvious drawbacks to disclaimers...is that they devalue one’s manuscript in a marketplace that prizes true testimony” (p. 84). He also adds that a disclaimer, on the other hand, “helps to enhance a writer’s credibility” (p. 84). In essence, Couser asks every writer to make the best choice for their work. I may, in later writings, include a disclaimer for my readers (and family) but at the moment I don’t feel the need to do so. I remain committed to telling the truth entirely as I remember it. Philip Lopate, in *To Show and To Tell*, says, “I can try to recapture memories as crisply as language will allow; and then I can ask myself whether what I have written comes down to the truth, feels true. If it doesn’t I can keep going until I find the proper balance” (Lopate, p.79). In retelling those aspects of my life which have been thus far necessary for this creative work I find myself questioning what I have written. I have drafted, edited and rewritten the pieces, often starting from nothing so as not to taint my newly recreated thoughts, always keeping the truth in mind.

At family barbecues we love to reminisce and share memories that date from adolescence or even before my birth. Often someone objects to someone else’s stories. *That’s not how it*

happened someone says, at which point a different version of events is related which is equally objected. With a large family, ten including our parents, it is unlikely our versions of events will ever match. At times my versions of a memory have also been challenged and so I realize there will be resistance from some who remember things differently. As a result I've had to look at how fellow writers have juggled this inevitable problem when writing about human experiences through memory.

While writing I have kept a list of guidelines in mind, referring back to them at times when I question the truth in my words. Those guidelines, ironically devised in an essay by poet Andrew Hudgins in *An Autobiographer's Lies*, depict levels of lies often told by autobiographers and memoirists. Many memoirists, of course, wish to tell the truth, but it is an impossibility to tell the truth accurately every time as human memory is faulty. My aim then, knowing the limited capacity of my mind and memory, has been to work, if necessary only, in the less serious of offenses listed by Hudgins – the “narrative cogency” and “the lie of texture” – while maintaining my emotional truth, as defined by Dave Hood as referring “to the writer’s ‘felt experience’ in dealing with a person, place, thing, adversity, setback and so forth.”

The Voice

Besides writing honestly I have had to find the ever elusive “voice” to tell my story the best I can. I've never thought myself a talented writer or speaker, so finding a voice particular to me seemed daunting. Throughout my workshop classes I tried many different styles. I used long beautiful words, threw in some wit occasionally and I wrote hoping to impress others. It rarely worked. I received the most praise when I didn't try so hard and on the pieces which had been created when I allowed my thoughts to flow from my brain, to my fingers and into the keyboard

of my laptop – those sentences which made it to the document, often terrible and the ideas muddled, after some work took a more cohesive and pleasant form.

I have read many beautifully-written essays that overwhelmed me with the level of mastery in which the thoughts were put to words. I tried to imitate (with little success) the superb writing of modern writers such as Philip Lopate and Zadie Smith and I've confirmed I'm not one of those eloquent writers, at least not yet. Frequently I write straight to the point and then realize I missed something. This has been a consistent criticism from my peers – my writing tends to be vague and lacks detail. To overcome this I've learned to go back and read my writing as a reader. I look for gaps in thoughts or memories and fill them in with clarifying details. Often, I find I have to slow down the pace of the essay to fix the issue with pacing.

At times, when I've found that showing is more difficult than telling, I have taken Lopate's advice: "if you're going to tell the reader directly what's on your mind, you have an obligation to make the 'telling' passages as vivid and candid as possible" (p. 13). Because my writing tends to sway from the showing, I aim to tell more carefully and with greater attention to details.

After everything I've learned from my peers, mentors and the writers I've studied, I've come to realize I don't need a "voice" as long as I write the truth and I write it as best as I can. My writing speaks for itself and there is little need for me to stress about the "voice" that might never arrive.

Abstract vs. Concrete

Most pieces first began with an idea to represent a single event. As I continued writing, however, I realized that each event carried with it a greater, more universal idea. It took me

nearly my entire graduate career to fully understand the concept of the ladder of abstraction. Although I understood the theory, I didn't understand it enough to apply it to my writing. It wasn't until I read, "Once More to the Lake" by E.B. White that I truly understood it. Before I begin writing now, however, I think about times in life that meant enough for me to write about it and then dig deeper to understand what it was about those times that made them so important. The moment itself is the literal, whereas the reason why it was so significant tends to be larger, the more universal, the more human – the abstract. The universal in my life-stories ties me to my readers, allowing them to see themselves or a portion of themselves in mine

Being a teacher, we're often encouraged to "steal ideas" from other teachers and modify those ideas to fit our students' needs. Likewise, I hope to mimic White's examples and modify them to fit the needs of my writing. In no way do I wish to compromise my style but in mimicking I hope to polish my writing in a way that will engage readers and bring them pleasure.

During my writing, while aiming to write a personal story and finding the universal in it, I keep in mind that I am not just writing about myself. In writing my memories I inevitably write about others, usually family. This has posed several challenges: 1) how much should I disclose? And 2) how do I balance the needs of those I write about and the need to be honest?

To answer the first question I had to understand the purpose of my writing. What am I hoping to achieve with my thesis?

I have not retracted my original statement about why I joined the writing program. I insist, to this day, that part of the journey for me has been to be able to express myself and understand myself better than I had before. As Larson states, "I learned that anyone who could narrate his condition and its development within his family could be freed from that condition" (p. 8). I've had to dig deep to understand that my Mexican American culture and my family's values heavily

influenced my upbringing and that regardless of how I feel about some of the choices Ma and Pa made in raising me, I am me because of those choices.

I also write hoping that my writing does some work, as Couser says (p. 181), and that my it will eventually help others understand how culture affects them both positively and negatively – such as how machismo can be a benefit when it means the male honorably cares for his family or how it can negatively affect a family when the more negative aspects (a womanizing, aggressive man) of the term are observed. It is my hope, also, that a parent somewhere, after reading this, realizes that their child is more important than any one aspect of their culture or values– i.e. gender norms, religious beliefs or identity.

Character Development

The more difficult challenge, however, has been finding a balance that works for me, as writer, and those I write about, my characters. While maintaining my version of events I've had to also consider the others who have shared those experiences with me. Therein lies another problem. In my case, culture being the focus of my creative thesis, I must inevitably write about my family. Unfortunately, I cannot keep everyone happy and that is especially true for my family, some of who are major characters in my essays.

When writing about others I am creating characters. These characters “are not like fictional characters: they do not exist solely within the narrative. They stand (in) for real, mortal people who share a world with us, whose rights may be violated, and whose interests may be harmed in a way that is not possible, or even conceivable with fictional characters” (Couser, p. 171). I realize that some information may have repercussions for the real-life counterparts of characters I've created. That being the case, I ensure that only details relevant to make a point

are revealed. Lopate's two rules when writing about others serve as a guide: "(1) Never write to settle scores" and "(2) Try to write as beautifully as possible, because well-wrought prose invites its own forgiveness – from you yourself, if not from the offended party" (p. 84). I write not to be vindictive, but to communicate myself in the best way I know possible and in a way that will endure. In essence, as Lopate further states, my writing is a "gift" to others, especially to those who I write about.

Writers, specifically nonfiction writers, have a responsibility to the real counterpart of their characters to recreate them as honestly as possible. The writer must not only be truthful with their appearance (though some liberties may be taken to conceal identities at times) but with their personalities, their motivations and their ideas. Only when a writer is cognizant of these and writes according to these observations, will he truly do justice to his characters and their real-life counterparts.

Dialogue

One of the ways I've learned I can best depict those around me is to be as precise with their personality, including their words. In the afterword of Lucy Grealy's *Autobiography of a Face*, Lucy's friend Ann Patchet recounts Lucy's encounter with a fan.

"It's amazing how you remember everything so clearly," a woman said [to Lucy], her head wrapped in a bright scarf. "All those conversations, details. Were you ever afraid that you might get it wrong?"

"I didn't remember it," Lucy said pointedly. "I wrote it. I'm a writer." (p. 231)

Like Lucy, I too have had to recreate conversations from memories which sometimes only linger as wisps. Unlike Lucy, however, I do not feel comfortable recreating a conversation

and using quotation marks to designate what was said. While I understand most readers will assume dialogue in nonfiction is recreated, by using quotation marks it is implied that the conversation happened exactly as written. I prefer using italics and hope the readers understand that I have, to some extent, recreated the conversation while keeping the gist of what was said. That's to say that the meaning was kept intact while the words may have been paraphrased due to lapses in memory or to meet the needs of the text itself.

I wrote a piece, *Wekiva*, as part of my admission application to the University of Texas – Pan American's (now University of Texas Rio Grande Valley) MFA in Creative Writing program. My piece was dialogue heavy and at the time I used quotation marks for all the dialogue. The first scene in *Wekiva* is that of a nurse walking into my room at a rehab clinic and a conversation we had about my vitals, my reason for being there and information as to what I should expect happen throughout the day. I recreated the scene entirely from memory because, as Mary Dillon writes in *Magazine Article Writing: How to Write and Sell Short Nonfiction*, “memory has a marvelous capacity for failure” (pg. 107). I don't recall the exact words the nurse and I exchanged that day, but I recall clearly the gist of what she said and I recreated a dialogue from that. All dialogue (fictionalized and recreated) now is italicized while any cited and verifiable information remains in quotation marks.

In the book *Reality Hunger*, David Shields intentionally leaves out quotation marks when he cites works – often word for word – from other artists (writers, filmmakers, singers and so on). Although the book is fascinating, Shields' strategy is too bold for me. It is often said that imitation is the best form of flattery. In Shields' case, however, it is much more than imitation. This leads me back to dialogue. Dialogue in nonfiction is almost always a work of fiction. It is there where my conviction against using quotation marks is rooted. I feel an obligation to ensure

readers can distinguish that which is verifiable and that which is not and the reason why I choose to use quotation marks only when verifiable by a document, a recording or by means of a witness.

Code-Switching

In my case, and in the case of many other Mexican American and multicultural writers, we also come across the issue of words in languages other than English. Although I don't exactly write multilingual text at the moment, I do occasionally speckle my writing with Spanish words. I do so because either they add to the context of the writing, they help develop a character, there is no direct English equivalent or because the Spanish word has a different connotation than does its English counterpart.

The question of when and where to use code-switching in literature is dependent on the motive or the ultimate goal of the text. There seems to be a mostly non-debated understanding that code-switching shall not be used in official documents – e.g. contracts, will, policies, bills, etc. – unless, of course, it includes a term for which there is no English counterpart.

In nonfiction, the use of Spanglish and code-switching is not widespread yet but can be found in a variety of media. It is mostly used when it is advantageous to reach a specific group. It is prominent in fiction by Latino authors such as Sandra Cisneros, Gustavo Perez Firmat, Gloria Anzaldua and David Rice. Latino nonfiction writers, however, seem to be less prominent than our fiction peers. As a result it is important to me to use Spanish whenever necessary to make a point, whether it be to identify my connection with my culture or to identify where I disconnect with it, such as the machismo attitude.

According to Strunk and White's, *The Elements of Style*, 4th Edition, "The writer will occasionally find it convenient or necessary to borrow from other languages. Some writers,

however, from sheer exuberance or a desire to show off, sprinkle their work liberally with foreign expressions, with no regard for the reader's comfort. It is a bad habit. Write in English" (p. 81). As a writer I have made choice to use Spanish for the reasons already outlined only, often assisting the reader if the idea is too foreign or not easily extracted from context. Though I hope that my writing will have an impact on Latino readers I also wish to make my writing accessible to a diverse readership. In this text, the use of Spanish is unavoidable. Because the primary focus of this thesis is to explore myself as a product of my culture, Spanish, the language of my Mexican American, border town culture, inevitably shows up. Often, specificity is lost if it is written in any other language other than the language in which it was originally spoken. As a result my essays are peppered with Spanish to enhance and support my claims and not just to "show off" as Strunk and White advise against.

At times I replace conversations which would have taken place in Spanish with English dialogue because I realize that not every reader will be as familiar with Spanish as I am. In that case, I aim to convey the original message as closely as possible. Other times I might use a Spanish word or phrase but will give the reader enough clues to interpret the meaning.

Themes

During the course of writing this thesis I struggled, specifically, with determining a theme. I considered focusing on one theme for the entire thesis but found that as I wrote I inevitably touched upon many themes. I realized, finally, after many attempts, that the story of my narrator couldn't be thematic because, being a real person, the narrator didn't live a life of one theme. Instead, the narrator lived a life of and struggled with many themes: among them sexuality, religion, culture, family values and mental health.

At the moment the thesis is presented in four thematically-factored essays.

In the first essay, “Brown Boy,” the narrator, Felipe, navigates life as a brown migrant boy, enduring, at first, subtle racism at school and then more blatant and jarring racism as an adult, only to understand, as an adult, that racism exists even within his Mexican American community.

In the second essay, “Maricón,” Felipe explores what it means to be a gay boy who must hide the fact because it is seen, in his household, as both a sin against God and machismo culture. The narrator realizes, as he ages, that the information provided by the adults in his life was insufficient. He attempts to understand why the adults shied about talking about sex and realizes, through observation, that his culture and the religion practiced at home, likely kept parents and other adults from talking openly about it.

The third and fourth essays are more closely linked. In them Felipe deals with being an emotional boy in a household that values traditional masculine roles. The essays explore, first, machismo and the negative effects it can have on boys who are naturally more emotional. And, secondly, the misunderstandings of mental health and illness in Mexican American culture.

This thesis is a culmination of everything I’ve been working toward but it is by no means the end. Throughout the process I’ve had to reach into places I never expected and made decisions about what is to be written and how to present my memories and reflections. Ideas were scratched out, tossed, reborn. Many didn’t make it through. Countless sentences lived a premature life, each fail making me doubt myself. The essays contained in the following pages, though having been written and rewritten too many times to keep count, are not in their final form. I expect as I read them again in the future I will find areas where improvement is

necessary. I also expect more truths will come to mind and new pieces will be born, pieces that will fill the gaps found within this document. As memories continue to accumulate, and as I continue evaluating them, so too will my work.

On my journey through graduate school I heard Dad's voice encouragingly telling me to push on through the late and sleepless nights. I heard his voice telling me, as I restarted an essay for the tenth time, that starting over is better than never finishing. I heard his voice telling me that I deserve a better life.

Échale ganas I remember Dad saying as he helped me out on those never-ending rows of tomato plants in Michigan.

I can't Dad, no puedo. I'm tired. It's hot. I'm hungry. I just want to go home.

I know you can and I know you will, he said, obviously frustrated, but characteristically, patient and loving.

Even after helping me and after I fell behind again he'd come back for me. Still encouraging. *Échale ganas*.

Today, I'm *echandole ganas*, and giving it my best even though at times I fell behind again and again.

CHAPTER II

BROWN BOY

Every summer my family migrated to Michigan chasing the crops – cucumber in early summer and tomato in early fall. Somehow our parents found a way to make a family of ten fit into an '83 Ford F-150 with travel camper on it. In the cabin rode Pa and two older brothers. They were the drivers. The bed of the pickup carried the seven other members of the family - three children, two teens, Ma and the fourth driver (another of my older brothers) who slept waiting his turn to drive. Due to space my parents didn't allow me to take much with me. My toys, what few I had, remained stored in our boarded-up South Texas house as did most of my clothing.

In Sarita, Texas the pickup rolled to a stop at a small post. The drivers delivered the larger amount of information – *we're going to Michigan for work*. The white men in the green uniforms and dark sunglasses then walked around the truck tapping the glass windows and, depending on the time of day, shined their tiny flashlights into the pickup bed from the windows. Ma already had the camper open for our turn at interrogation by the time they arrived to the back gate.

One looked around, pointed the flashlight into the space, scanned the belongings lodged under the makeshift bed and in any other crevice and then pointed it in our faces. The second officer remained a few feet behind, one hand near his radio, the other hand close to his waist. *American Citizens?*

Ma told me to respond to the men in English. *Sabes ingles*, she trained me before leaving on the long journey, *úsalo*. When the men finally asked the question, I knew what to say.

Yes, sir, I answered with pride. Unlike Ma and Pa I knew the language and was able to answer in English. Sometimes the Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) agents made small talk and asked my age, where I went to school and so forth, but usually they said no more than those two words.

Ma quietly showed her residency card which the men took, looked over, turned around, examined the back and then once more turned over to look at the front before handing it back to her. I wondered why she didn't just say *yes, sir* as she had taught us. It would make things so much easier for her.

Ok, keep moving, he motioned to the driver.

The car rolled away and Ma always gave a sigh of relief. Though she had nothing to hide her nerves always got the best of her. In time I would also become nervous, though I had nothing to worry about because, having been born in Pharr, Texas, I am a native-born citizen. Still, to this day, I fear US CBP will detain me because they don't believe me, though I have never had any issues.

However, until the time we stopped going to Michigan, I often feared that mom or dad wouldn't be allowed past the checkpoint. They didn't know English like the rest of us. At an early age I learned Pa was also a native-born citizen so he had permission to move around the

country freely but Ma was born in Mexico and she didn't know English. Her residency status required more prodding by the CBP agents.

Ma tells us now that she tried learning English. Unfortunately she felt stupid using it primarily because being kids, and naively thinking English had to sound a certain way, we laughed when she tried practicing it at home with us. More than feeling stupid, she felt hurt because her own children laughed at her. She quit time and time again. She even took classes at a local school once to see if maybe she just needed instruction. She quit that too when we continued the teasing. Her *yes sir* sounded more like *jesser* and the mispronunciation elicited at least a giggle from us and more likely a bullying session in which we would not let *jesser* go for days at a time. In school, after listening to our teachers' correct pronunciation and *that's not how it's said* or *you're saying it wrong*, we understood that English must sound a certain way, and English any other way was wrong and by extension, the person who made the mistake, uneducated. Unfortunately for Ma, this lesson engrained itself in our minds and she suffered the consequences.

Through the years mom struggled to communicate with others who spoke English. Instead, we became her interpreters. Our mean-spirited laughter kept her from realizing her potential. I wish now we had helped instead. I can only imagine how different her life might have been and what opportunities passed her by due to the language expectations society embedded in us.

Pa, on the other hand, never took learning English seriously. Being illiterate in his first language, Spanish, he didn't bother to try learning English.

My older brothers and sisters learned English before my birth. I learned English from them and Spanish from my parents. I considered myself truly bilingual and often said both

English and Spanish were my first languages as I learned them simultaneously (unfortunately, my use of Spanish has decreased and I struggle to communicate effectively in my parents' native language – my time mocking my mother has come full circle as my Spanish is now not nearly as polished as it had been as a kid). However, my parents always documented Spanish as the household language during school registration so the school placed me in the bilingual classrooms.

I became aware of the issues concerning language at school when, upon returning from working in Michigan, Ma took us to school to register for the school year. I was starting third grade and at the school office one of the ladies taking care of the registration turned to me.

Mi 'jo, do you like English or Spanish better?

I liked them both equally, but at school I preferred English as the Spanish materials and books were worn out, torn at the edges, missing pages and at least a decade old.

English, I replied without hesitation.

Great. I'll put you in an English class then.

The office had never asked my preference before. The prospect of being in an all-English classroom like the ones in Michigan excited me. My mom sat at a chair and smiled when she saw me beaming with joy.

Gracias, she told the lady.

A second lady handled other documents. *Wait, she said, holding up a paper, he can't be in an all-English class. He's bilingual.*

I looked at her trying to understand what she meant. She looked at my mom and explained, in Spanish, that because Spanish was the primary language spoken at home, I was going to be put in a bilingual class.

But he speaks English with his brothers and sisters, Ma interjected in Spanish. He watches TV in English and he can read it too.

I understand, Señora, but because you speak Spanish at home, he will be placed in a bilingual classroom.

The lady turned to me and casually said, *you can't be in an all-English class, sorry.*

I felt cheated. I knew English well and all through second grade I compared my English abilities to those of my bilingual classmates and realized I knew it better. Also, I hated the Spanish workbooks which were too easy for me. Likewise, I compared my bilingual education to the mostly English education I received in Michigan and enjoyed the challenge much more than I did the easier instruction in the bilingual classroom which seemed watered-down.

When the time came to report to my classroom, I walked there already hating it. Mr. Martinez, the teacher I was assigned, was great, but I didn't like the classroom. I lost myself in books that year, reading book after book after book. Mr. Martinez didn't have a problem with me disappearing to the library and having my head stuck in books. I read a couple books a day going to the library at least twice a day, sometimes more.

When we returned to Michigan the following summer, I really began to understand my place – being a migrant student in a bilingual household meant I would be categorized accordingly, my worth determined by two labels and my classroom assignment, really my education, being handed out according to what policy dictated and not what was in my best interest. Being back in Michigan gave me relief though because I could learn in English alongside my classmates, and I wasn't placed in a different classroom. My Michigan classmates were all white with the exception of my fellow migrant classmates and Macho, the son of a white teacher and a Puerto Rican dad. Besides having a Spanish name, Macho had very little in

common with the rest of the Latino students. Macho blended in much better with the general population of the school than the rest of us. Besides his skin being lighter than ours, Macho's English had no traces of any other language and he also didn't exhibit any other cultural traits which would identify him as anything other than white. Macho had the privilege of claiming a different culture when it benefited him.

Our school, Watervliet Elementary, served a rather small group of us migrant students and typically, by late October, most of us were gone back to our hometowns either in South Texas or California. I have only good memories of all the staff there. In fact, during Hispanic Heritage month, the campus tried to make us feel at home.

Sitting on my spot in gym class one day I remember the coach giving a short lecture about the importance of acceptance of other cultures.

It's Hispanic Heritage Month and we want to honor all our Hispanic neighbors, friends and especially classmates. So, we're doing something special this week.

After a student asked, coach explained what a Hispanic was: a brown person who speaks Spanish. I looked at my skin and I spoke Spanish. I fit the description.

Are you guys ready to know what it is?

My eyes widened with anticipation, eager to hear what great activity she had for us.

We're learning a song this week to honor Hispanics around the country. I know our classmates will love this song, she said looking in my direction and then at the few other migrant students scattered throughout the large room. *I'm going to sing one line at a time and I want you to repeat.*

In my head I generated a list of Spanish songs I knew. I loved them and I figured my classmates would too. *Here we go*, I thought, smiling from ear to ear, to encourage the teacher to continue.

I can't remember much of what the song said anymore but I very clearly remember the main chorus.

Fritos, burritos completos my needooooos. Fritos, burritos, completos my needooooos. And Tabasco sauce, and Tabasco sauce, coach sang with gusto. *So nice and hot*, she continued, urging the children to sing along by signaling with her hands. *Cha, cha, cha*. The students loved it, especially the end. *Cha, cha, cha* got them all dancing.

I didn't know many curse words then, and I didn't use the ones I knew anyway. Though I lacked the vocabulary my thoughts were along the lines of *what the fuck is this?* The other Mexican-American students and I looked at each other in wonder. Our eyes communicated confusion. Did they really think this was the music we listened to?

Regardless, I sang along and in doing so may have perpetuated her ignorance. Perhaps my white classmates went home and sang the song and said, the Mexican kids sang it too, so it must be true.

During Hispanic Heritage Month the school cafeteria served Fritos and burritos, along with nachos and tacos. No Tabasco sauce.

In the years to follow I often saw Latinos depicted a certain way on television. Initially, I felt proud because more brown-skinned people were on TV. Latinos appeared more often alongside whites and blacks. Soon enough though I noticed those Latinos (rarely was the character ever a Mexican or Cuban or Puerto Rican or Chilean – they were simply Latino) playing certain roles. They were housemaids, bodyguards, gardeners and so on. The

stereotyping became so prevalent that I knew who would play the mostly-invisible characters on a show. Otherwise, the Latino characters were the villain, a murderer, a brutal gangster and so forth. In fact, the stereotyping occurred on Mexican television as well. The darker actors often had lesser or villainous roles while the lighter skinned actors gained the important roles of businessman, the female lead or the hero. In watching the brown people playing the lesser roles I wished I was white. It seemed to me that regardless of how hard I worked in the future the color of my skin would ultimately determine my success. Like me singing along with my classmates, the rest of the American community perpetuated stereotypes by allowing that characterization to continue. The color of my skin became a prop, and I got caught up in it, further promoting the problem by gladly consuming the terrible stereotyping found in popular culture.

That October I received the school's Student of the Month Award. In the years I'd gone to that school brown kids had never received the prize. Out of the hundreds of kids, mostly white, I, a brown boy, had earned the prize. My mom, proud of my accomplishment, showed everyone the school-made poster with my photo on it. Below my face the words "Student of the Month" were prominently displayed in an effort to prove that in fact, this was not a mug shot and secondly, to show the open-mindedness of the campus. The owner of the farm on which we lived, the boss, allowed Ma to prominently display the poster on one of the packing shed walls. I went by a few times after the shed operations ended for the day to look at it.

The award brought my family pride. The majority of the farm, actually, celebrated in having one of their own highlighted at the elementary school. *Felicidades mi'jo*, many of the farm workers said shaking my hand or rubbing the top of my head.

At the time I felt I deserved the honor. I did all my work, did it well, had many friends, both white and Mexican American, I helped as often as possible and hated missing school. I wonder, now, as an adult, if at the staff meeting the person leading brought up the student of the month agenda item by saying, *ladies and gentlemen, we need nominees for student of the month and we need it to be one of the Mexican kids, you know, for Hispanic Heritage month.* The nomination may have been independent of anything else, but, coincidentally it fell on Hispanic Heritage Month and I, a Hispanic, was nominated and awarded the coveted award. I prefer to think that my teacher nominated me because I deserved the recognition regardless of my skin color and then once she made the nomination to the school my behaviors earned me the award.

When the seasonal work ended in October we returned home to the Rio Grande Valley.

Boys and girls, Mrs. Lopez, my new teacher said. The students stopped their work and chatter and looked at me. *This is Felipe. He's our new classmate.* Being a migrant student also meant being the new student every October. I hated the attention it brought me. To this day I hate being the new person.

I enjoyed being in Mrs. Lopez's classroom. Finally, after too many years, the office placed me in an English classroom unexpectedly and I felt more at home – our home language status hadn't changed though, we still spoke both Spanish and English. I didn't question their decision and happily reported to my classroom upon being told it was an English class. I liked Spanish, but the experiences I had in a bilingual classroom had been terrible - taught at a terrible pace, dumbed-down and old materials. In Mrs. Lopez's classroom, however, things moved at a steady pace, the materials were fun to use and I felt challenged. I especially enjoyed spelling.

I registered to school on a Monday and Mrs. Lopez had a habit of doing spelling tests on Mondays – this gave students the weekend to study the words.

Felipe, I want you to take this test. I know you haven't practiced the words but I want you to do your best.

I shook my head, too shy to say anything. Mrs. Lopez read out word after word, ten and then two bonus words she hadn't assigned formally. I sounded out the words in my head and jotted them confidently on my paper.

After everyone finished she asked us to hand our paper to the kid ahead of us. I cringed because I knew I missed one word. The shame set in thinking I would be the worst speller. She went down the list spelling each out verbally and writing them on the board. We checked off correctly spelled words and placed an x beside incorrectly spelled words.

I graded the paper of the boy behind me. *This word's easy, how did he get it wrong?* I figured his paper was an irregularity and that surely everyone else did better than me. Raise your hand if the person you graded failed. Several hands went up. I felt terrible raising mine, but I did. Raise your hand if the person behind you got a 100 or more. Two kids raised their hand, including the kid ahead of me.

Wow, Felipe, Mrs. Lopez cheered, you're a good speller. The look on her face showed genuine disbelief. I suppose she expected me to fail the exam due to me being a migrant student. I had seen many of the words in the books I'd read the year before when I escaped from the bilingual class to the library. For the words I hadn't seen before I applied spelling rules that somehow had come to me from the reading. I also thought all my time spent in Michigan helped. In listening to native English speakers I learned correct pronunciation of many words and could therefore spell them out correctly.

Mrs. Lopez named me the Top Speller that year and the next (she was my fourth and fifth grade teacher). Long before Mrs. Lopez's reaction, my intelligence had been doubted due to my

migrant status. I never saw our family's situation as a crutch. Instead, besides the adventure of the journey itself, I felt like I knew more than other students. I never felt any less intelligent than the non-migrant students. If anything, I felt more capable. I had been exposed to the varied use of the English language and a broader vocabulary.

At that point I straddled two worlds. I knew I spoke Spanish and that I spoke it well, but I also knew English well. Better than my peers. I felt less Mexican now that I had proven my English and, in a way, I felt proud. I felt released from the bilingual grasp that so long held me back. As I learned more English, I also let go of Spanish, and, in a way and rather unfortunately, I felt as though I was becoming a better person for it.

We returned to Michigan every summer and I relived the dreaded new-kid-in-class scenario every time, twice a year – once in Michigan and then again in The Valley upon returning. Early into my 6th grade year, my teacher directed the students' attention to her.

Attention ladies and gentlemen, it's time to talk about our first fieldtrip of the year. I loved fieldtrips and at this Michigan school district students took several throughout the year and they were fun and entertaining, unlike the schools in Texas which only took one a year and it was usually to watch a movie. I listened intently.

Next week we're going to Sarett Nature Center. We're going to engage in many activities to learn about our environment. Please bring \$5 to cover some of the expenses. She then read a couple of items from the field trip agenda. They sounded interesting but not completely riveting. Finally she got to the last item.

Please pack an extra change of clothing and a towel because we will also be canoeing. I don't expect anyone to fall in, but you never know.

The entire class burst into chatter. I had never been canoeing before so I listened to my classmates to get an idea. From eavesdropping I learned it involved being in a small boat and the use of paddles. My mind started racing with the possibilities. I became excited at the prospect of canoeing.

One more thing boys and girls, the teacher interrupted, bring your lunch. The school will not be supplying lunch. Sandwiches, ham and cheese or PB&J, chips, and a drink will be just fine, though you can bring anything practical. The students discussed their lunch plans and who would be trading with who.

Man, mom will never get me that, I thought. I decided to ask her when I got home in hopes she'd agree to it.

Felipe, we don't have the extra money to buy that stuff. No one here eats that. What we don't use will go to waste.

Please 'Ma? I promise I'll eat it. Se lo prometo.

I already said no. Instead, I'll make you some tacos. They're much better than sandwiches. She had a point. Tacos did in fact taste better than sandwiches and none of my brothers and sisters liked sandwiches much. Still, for this occasion I wanted to fit in, and I was willing to eat something less favorable.

Knowing I would lose the fight, I stopped my arguing, disappointed in her answer but not surprised. I didn't give Ma the permission slip to sign. I imagined a scenario in which we'd be in the canoe, under the noon sun and eating our lunch. The kids would get their brown bags or fancy lunchboxes filled with all sorts of unobtainable-to-me foods: sandwiches, juice boxes, Fruit by the Foot, or Lunchables. Then, I'd grab my grocery bag, pull out the foil packet, open it and grab a taco only to have every person look at me curiously. Being in the canoe, I'd have

nowhere to hide. I preferred if my classmates thought I couldn't afford the trip, at least I wouldn't be the odd one – one girl was so poor, everyone figured she wasn't going.

The next morning when the teacher asked for permission slips she reached out for mine, I looked up at her and shook my head. *Felipe*, the teacher leaned in and whispered, *bring the permissions slip back tomorrow. You don't have to pay the money.* I nodded but disregarded her. I felt embarrassed about the lunch situation. I didn't want to be the boy eating the bean tacos while the rest of the class had their sandwiches on white loaf bread.

The girl everyone assumed wouldn't go turned in her money with a big smile.

During this time in my adolescence, 5th and 6th grade, I began to have an idea how race worked in America. At home in the Rio Grande Valley I felt like I belonged. My speech started to resemble me – neither this nor that, Mexican-American, not bilingual, but Spanglish. In Michigan, however, I felt out of place because only a few other children in school resembled me and I never had any classes with them. My classmates also treated me differently. Often they spoke louder, slower, extended words or exaggerated their hand movements.

In class one day a boy explained the importance of a buddy assignment.

WE HAAAVE TO FIN IISH THIIIS WOOOORK (he points). FROM NUMERO UNO ALL THE WAY TO 12. COMPRENDE?

In all fairness, my quiet demeanor may have given the impression I didn't speak or understand English. *Got it*, I said.

He smiled widely. *Oh, hey, you know English. Good.*

At another time Amber, a girl I befriended early on one year, wondered about home.

So, do you guys live in teepees? Oh, and all of you ride horses? She fiddled with her fingers in anticipation. She wanted to confirm her speculations.

No and no, I said, we don't live in teepees nor do we ride horses.

She looked at me confused. *What do you mean? I thought that's what Mexicans did.*

First of all, I'm from Texas. Secondly, we don't live in a Western movie or in the past. We have cars and regular houses.

Her face went from being enthusiastic to being confused and finally to disappointed.

Mexican-American and migrant students tended to be a mystery to many of the white students. For too long our white classmates misunderstood us. What most of them knew about us they learned from television or uninformed adults. Further, whatever gaps in knowledge they had, they filled in with fantastical ideas. It didn't help that during school the two groups rarely mingled. During lunch the migrant students all sat together and all rode on the same bus instead of the bus that went nearer to the farm we lived on. This seemed to me strange. Our bus, with only migrant students, drove around the entire school district's zone – the route very long because of it. We were segregated and no one said anything about it – not our parents nor the students nor the teachers. That's just the way things were done.

The mystery went both ways however. I assumed then that all white students were rich and that all white children lived happy lives free of any kind of worry. I never thought any of them lived in poverty or in abusive homes. I continued to believe this until adulthood.

The company I kept in Michigan schools were often the other Mexican-American migrant students. In the instance where I was the only migrant student in a classroom or setting, I kept to myself. However, in 8th grade something very interesting happened. I traveled from classroom to classroom hating everything about them. I seemed to be the lone brown boy in all classes and the teachers seemed strict. At the end of the day I reported to my art class feeling

defeated. I sat in one of the large tables toward the back of the classroom. Three other boys sat there. White.

What's up? asked a boy looking in my direction. I must have looked puzzled. *You do know English, don't you?*

Yeah, I said. My anxiety increased. I assumed his greeting might lead to another round of get-to-know-the-Mexican like Amber the year before.

Cool. I'm Chris. And that's Jordan, he said, pointing at the cute thin boy. He also introduced the third boy whose name I forgot soon after I left that year – let's call him *Neil*. Chris, unlike me, was an extrovert and so was Jordan. I liked Chris' personality and his humor and I especially liked Jordan, with his deep blue eyes, his sly smile, his carefree attitude and his dirty-blond, disheveled hair. I looked forward to going to art class that year. I spent a lot of time with the boys and felt like one of them. I didn't feel like the token brown buddy. They didn't exaggerate word pronunciation or slow down their speech or point to everything. They treated me like one of the group, involving me in many of the pranks and jokes. I learned a lot about their lives and how similar they were to mine.

Neil rode the same bus I did (this was a different school district than the one that segregated the buses). He lived between two of the tomato fields my family picked. The house appeared small, maybe two bedrooms and a tiny kitchen and a single bathroom. I had wondered about the people who lived there and now I knew the boy. Before then I had seen other kids exit the bus to large brick homes with beautifully landscaped yards and now I knew one who lived in a house that looked smaller than mine in Texas. I learned that Chris' family wasn't much better off though Jordan lived a more privileged life.

That year I kept my eye on Jordan. Although by that time I had mostly accepted that my eyes wandered in boys' direction, until then no other boy had interested me like Jordan. Perhaps it was because unlike the rest of the boys from the Rio Grande Valley, Jordan was white, really white. He wasn't just a *güero*. According to the telenovelas the whiter a person was the more well-rounded he was as well – using that indicator I figured Jordan was better than the brown boys back home.

Besides the three boys I didn't make any other white friends. My introvert personality kept me from introducing myself to anyone else regardless of their race. It was in 8th grade that I felt that my brown skin didn't matter to everyone and also, I felt like one of the boys, the white boys.

When I turned 16 I stopped attending school in Michigan to work full-time. Instead I played catch-up when I returned to school in the Rio Grande Valley. It would be several years before I had any meaningful interaction with a race beside my own.

At 23 I joined the Navy.

Great Lakes Recruit Training Command (RTC) prepares future sailors for a career in the US Navy. The first morning there a recruit division commander (RDC) welcomed us all by screaming in our faces regarding our bad posture or the way we smelled. I overlooked his demeanor and focused on the many races which surrounded me. The Valley being over 90% Hispanic, standing in a more diverse room awed me. I stood in line behind a tall black boy and in front of a thin white boy. A few bodies ahead an Asian boy wiggled in place which granted him a spit session by a second RDC.

What the fuck, recruit? You think this is wiggle palace? Stand at attention!

I followed all instructions well and flew under the radar. In my head though I felt as I had in Michigan – out of place. A few Latino recruits joined the ranks but otherwise the majority seemed to be white or black. I had shipped with another Latino from the Rio Grande Valley and to my surprise and relief RTC placed us in the same division (training group). I slept in the bottom rack and Mena slept in the top rack of the bunk next to mine. Below Mena slept Marshall, a young 18-year-old white boy, and above me slept Clough, a 20-something black boy. I befriended all three and working together successfully completed all our tasks, from folding our clothes the Navy way to efficiently doing our racks in under 6 minutes. During holiday routines on Sundays (the hours between 8am and 12 noon in which a recruit has time to read and write letters or relax) the four of us often sat together on the floor next to our racks and attempted to have more personal conversations though we were mostly unsuccessful as the Navy kept our heads occupied. Instead we ended up studying or shining our boots and sharing tips for a mirror-like finish. Clough tended to wander in and out of our ground and around the room as he was the most social of the four of us. Initially the division seemed to self-segregate but as our training intensified the recruits worked more closely with each other and soon race boundaries mostly disappeared. The showers displayed the most evident differences in the races.

Most of the white boys and black boys were circumcised and most of the Latino and Asian boys weren't, including me. I noticed this immediately. My eyes wandered in the showers though never long enough to get caught looking at penises – I didn't want to be kicked out under the Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy. A few of the brown boys had circumcised penises, but the majority were left intact. I knew of circumcision but had never met anyone who had their foreskins removed. Most boys my age in The Valley were not circumcised – I remember a conversation in high school in which a group of kids were confused about circumcision, myself

included. Although in boot camp there were others uncircumcised, including blacks and whites, in the showers I felt like a spectacle. I turned my body in different ways to avoid too many from seeing my foreskinned penis. I felt as though my foreskin marked me as a person of less value. I wondered why our culture didn't jump onboard with the trend. As always, I assumed that whites knew better and their greater likelihood of circumcision proved the point. Later in life I learned to appreciate my foreskin and the fact that my parents, in a way, allowed me the opportunity to make the choice for myself by keeping me intact.

Once I left boot camp I made new friends and the majority of them were white. Soon after reporting to the USS Taylor stationed in Mayport, (a suburb of Jacksonville, Florida) I earned the moniker Shorty V – one of many I would receive over my four years in the service – my shipmates, unable to pronounce Vasquez, instead using an adjective they felt described me best. The Fleet, the Navy outside of boot camp, worked very differently. In boot camp we had relied on each other regardless of our color for success. The fleet self-segregated much more. It seemed only two groups existed: black and non-blacks. A few people were able to move between groups but the majority stayed within their groups. Each rating (occupation) had a mix of people, but within each rating group the subgroups essentially existed separately. Although I befriended just about anyone I spent more time among whites – the black boys I worked with basically remained co-workers while the white boys became friends.

The two-race self-instituted system aboard the ship tricked me into believing I was more white than brown. Aboard the USS Taylor, unfortunately, I neglected many of the traits of my brownness. I stopped speaking Spanish altogether, rarely listened to Spanish music, never ate Mexican food, and only gathered around whites.

Tensions among some of the white sailors and black sailors existed though no one admitted it openly. The majority of the whites had no issues with the blacks and the majority of the blacks had no issues with the whites. The rest of us Latinos, Asians or otherwise, were almost totally unaffected. Eventually the tensions rose between the few from both groups. The word *they* took on a different meaning. It often meant the person of the opposing race, with a very negative connotation.

They ain't doing shit. They skate all day.

Who the fuck do they think they're fooling?

Where the fuck are they when we need them?

Soon enough everyone understood *they* meant more than just a group. *They* was used by both groups to mean the other. *They* stood for other derogatory terms – crackers and niggers – depending on who used it.

Occasionally I caught myself using *they* for general purposes and then, after realizing, hoped no one took it the wrong way.

I don't know where they went Boats (the Boatswain's Mate in charge), I might have said harmlessly. No one ever raised an eye brow. Though I mostly congregated with the white sailors my use of *they* rarely caused suspicion because at the end of the day I had brown skin. Others weren't so lucky.

A young white boy whose name I have forgotten but whom I'll call Nickels, accidentally used the word once while angry. Someone had failed to complete a task and the Boatswain's Mate in charge tasked Nickels with completing it.

What you mean I gotta' finish paintin' the smoke deck?

That's exactly what I mean. You gotta' finish painting the smoke deck or you're not leaving today. Boats remained steadfast with his command.

It was close to 4pm, one hour left before we were released for the day.

That's fucking retarded. I done all my work already. Ain't no reason fo' me to go do someone else's fucking work.

You don't have a choice. You don't leave until it's done.

What the hell? They ain't done shit today, exclaimed Nickels. *I seen them sitting around the smoke deck for hours. Now I gotta' do they work?*

The word turned heads. One of the black sailors (who I'll call Jeffries) became suspicious. *Ey, ey, ey, what you mean they? Who you talking about?*

Nah man, it ain't like that. I didn't mean it like that. I was talking about the guys that was s'posed to be paintin'. They ain't done shit. Nickels typically had a good relationship with the black sailors (in fact, he might have been called a whigger a few times) so it came as a surprise to me when they accused him of racism.

I know what I heard. You said they. You was talking about us. A group of black sailors had walked over and stood behind him.

The fuck I wasn't, the boy spoke up obviously upset with the charge.

Boats attempted, at that point, to calm the situation but it quickly spiraled out of control when a third sailor, white, attempted to assist.

It's not worth it, he urged, you're not gonna' change a thing. They're gonna' think what they wanna' think.

What the fuck? You too? I knew it. We all knew it. You all think you're better than us. Responded Jeffries, visibly upset.

I stood nearby shocked at the unfolding events. Problems existed within the group but it had been ignored. While I had been unofficially grouped with the whites, I still retained my brownness and so I evaded accusations of racism. I realized then that I didn't really belong to the white group. I belonged to the special other group, the group that floated somewhere in the middle during times when race became an issue. The greatest rift existed between whites and blacks. Sailors of other colors mostly got along without race issues.

Soon a group of black sailors stood behind Jeffries and a group of white sailors stood behind Nickels. The tension could be cut with a knife. However, all the sailors stood down because of the likely repercussions of a brawl aboard a US Navy vessel. I volunteered to finish painting the smoke deck with two friends. We finished after six.

The following day at morning muster the Petty Officer in Charge (POIC) and the Officer in Charge (OIC) spoke to the group.

Look here you dumbasses, we're here to do one thing, and that's to make sure this boat is ready for deployment, said the POIC, Chief Boatswain's Mate, Obis, a small Filipino man. We don't got time to be picking fights. Who the fuck cares if you're white or black or brown. I don't give a fuck if you're pink with purple polka dots, you're gonna' work.

The sailors stood in ranks at attention. Some rolled their eyes or looked away from BMC.

I don't wanna' hear any more of this shit. Is that understood?

Yes, Chief, all the sailors said in unison, weakly.

I said, is that understood?

Yes, Chief!

And one more thing, next time I hear about this race shit, I'll be writing all you motherfuckers up.

The OIC, a large black man, took a different approach, his speech being more motivational and inspirational but less effective than Obis'. *The only difference between us, gentlemen, is the color of our skin. Beneath our skin we all love and fear and have ambitions. While we're on this boat, we're family. Get that through your heads.* He seemed scripted, however, OIC had good rapport with most of the guys so the boys worked hard to please him.

I wondered if there had been a brawl what side I might have taken or what side would have been considered for me. Though I spent most of my time with the white sailors, I retained my skin color and that often saved me from having to take sides. In situations of the sort I drifted between groups. However, I never really felt as though I belonged entirely to the white group.

That year I met Josiah. Josiah lived on base with his sister Carolyn and her husband, Orane, a Jamaican. Orane was my immediate supervisor aboard the USS Taylor on which I had managed to keep my sexuality private, except, eventually, from Orane – he caught me sneaking out of his house at 5 am after spending the night with Josiah.

Josiah had blond hair and blue eyes. His goatee came in shades of brown and red and his skin tanned nicely though below his waist he was pale. Josiah and I connected on a gay website and due to both of us living on base and to my lack of friends we started hanging out. Before long we were dating and I wanted to believe that in our relationship our color didn't matter. Truthfully, however, I had hoped to date a white boy since meeting Jordan in middle school. I remember, as a kid, my parents joked about me marrying a rich white woman if need be. The word white always used as though being white held even more value than being brown, even when the person was equally as rich. Although I actually liked Josiah, the fact that he was white

seemed to be the cherry on top. In a way I felt I had climbed the social ladder a few rungs by dating him.

Josiah, on the other hand, preferred to date Latinos and people of Middle Eastern descent.

Essentially, our relationship fulfilled both our wishes.

A year into our relationship Josiah moved out of his sister's house and back into his childhood home about an hour away in a small community by the name of Lake City. I spent the week on base in Jacksonville and drove an hour to Lake City on the weekends to spend time with Josiah. We lived alone for a few weeks before his nephew, David, moved in with us. I didn't mind the situation. Weeks after David moved in the rest of his family moved in also – Josiah's mom, Brenda, and his sister, and another nephew and niece.

Brenda liked me from the beginning and one Friday decided to surprise me with a meal after the hour-long drive.

Felipay (all Josiah's family mispronounced my name), she said beaming with excitement, *I know you're probably missing home. I wanted to do something special for you.*

Hold on mom, Josiah said, pulling on me.

Excuse me, I said and allowed Josiah to pull me into our room.

Mom decided to make you "Mexican" food, he said, using air quotes. *Be nice. She doesn't know what real Mexican food is but she wanted to do something special for you. I tried to tell her taco salad isn't a real Mexican dish but you know how she is.* Due to his interest in Latino and Middle Eastern cultures, Josiah had studied about multiple cultures, including their traditions and foods. In fact, besides being fluent in English, he also spoke, read and wrote Spanish fluently and spoke Arabic with equal ease.

When we returned to the kitchen Brenda finished her presentation.

As I was saying, she said, glancing sideways at Josiah, I decided to make you dinner. I hope you like it. It's the only Mexican food I know to make. I know I probably don't make it as good as your mom but I wanted you to have something from home.

I thanked her and Josiah scrambled to my side. He grabbed chiffonaded lettuce, diced tomato and black olives and threw them in a bowl. Then he spooned on some taco-seasoned beef, followed by a heap of crushed up Doritos and finished it off with Catalina dressing. *Pretend you like it*, he whispered into my ear.

I sat at the table and the memory of Hispanic Heritage Month at Watervliet Elementary immediately resurfaced. Her good intentions were undermined by her ignorance. I sat and ate the taco salad and actually enjoyed it. I served myself seconds and Brenda noticed.

I'm so glad you like it. I worried you might not like it.

I loved it. Thank you. I wished, however, I was eating some real tacos. I had longed for Ma's cooking for weeks and the taco salad had done nothing to satisfy my cravings. Ma's voice resonated in my head, tacos were always the better option, even when presented with "Mexican" food, as Josiah had put it.

When we didn't eat at home Josiah and I loved going out to dinner in Lake City, the small town of his upbringing. Often we simply picked a restaurant in Lake City to avoid having to drive an hour to Jacksonville or 45 minutes to Gainesville. On one occasion we went out to eat at a Texas Roadhouse. I expected our dinner date to go smoothly as had all the previous ones. I figured if we were to be harassed for any reason it would be for being gay as Josiah was more effeminate.

I sat across Josiah in a booth with a window. Next to us sat a family at a table. The man sat nearest to me, one of his children nearest Josiah. His wife and the other child sat across them.

Honey, I heard him whisper, make sure you got everything and keep it close.

I know, I saw, she replied. She glanced at me and forced a smile. I smiled back.

The server walked our way, took our drink order then turned to the family.

The wife called her over and motioned her to lean in close. Soon the server grabbed their plates and moved them further from us. The woman turned back to look at me once more but she didn't smile the second time. I didn't mention the situation to Josiah as I thought it would ruin his evening and also because Josiah was not one to let things go. I had experienced indirect racism before and they had been a situation in which a person had good intentions. The episode with the family, on the other hand, made me feel as though I had done something terrible. I felt villainous without reason. The family feared me though they knew nothing of me.

On another occasion Josiah asked me to get him cigarettes down the street. *They're cheaper from the local convenience store,* he said. I agreed to go because I felt a need to take a drive and get away from the noise at home – the children now ran the home along with the dog. I arrived at the small local convenience store and stood in line behind two other customers. The customers placed their items on the counter. The clerk scanned them and charged them. The customers then swiped their cards to pay for the items. The interaction took a matter of minutes and soon the customers were out the door with their items.

Good evening hun, the clerk asked, *what can I getcha?*

A hard pack of Camel Gold Turkish Blend, please.

Sure, she said, reaching for the cigarettes before passing them under the scanner. *It'll be \$3.45.*

I retrieved my debit card from my wallet and as I reached to swipe it she stopped me.

Mind if I see an ID?

Why?

I ask everyone who uses a card.

I noticed, however, that the previous customers had in fact not been asked for IDs though they had used their cards.

Oh. But you didn't ask the two customers ahead of me.

I did hun.

No, you didn't. But, ok, I'll show you my ID.

I opened up my wallet and fetched my Florida driver's license. She took it from my hand and inspected it.

You have any other form of ID? I'm afraid I can't take this one.

Why?

Well, she said, acting as though she was embarrassed to tell me, this isn't real. I need a real ID or license.

It is real, I said, upset.

I can spot fake IDs hun. I've been doing this a long time.

I realized then that she didn't intend to sell me the cigarettes though she had no way to refuse service except by making it difficult for me.

Look, I said, now angry and my voice louder than before, my card is mine, my ID is real and I also have a military ID. But, I won't show you that because I don't have to.

Well, she said, you can either show me the ID or you can go elsewhere. That's your choice.

I stuffed the card and the license back into my wallet.

This is ridiculous, I said, walking out without the cigarettes.

I returned home and Josiah immediately noticed my anger. I explained what happened.

Are you fucking serious? I've been there many times and I'm never asked for my ID.

That's fucked up. I'm gonna' go back right now and straightened this shit out.

Josiah was very passionate when it came to social injustices. I talked him out of going back to the store telling him it might get me in trouble if the Navy felt I had caused a problem. I refused to ever step foot in that store thereafter. Josiah and his family followed suit.

I always felt out of place in Lake City. In my experience smaller towns tend to have a higher rate of intolerance and I assume it's due to their lack of diversity. Though Josiah and I always went out together over our three-year relationship, I never worried about being confronted for being gay. I assumed people couldn't tell. Not that I hide my sexuality, but my personality is such that it isn't clearly evident. My brown skin, dark hair and eyes, however, I can't hide. Though the town has a sizeable black population, Latinos are few. I stood out and people stared.

During my time in the military and in north Florida I learned what it meant to live in a minority. Although I understood what it meant to be an outsider in Michigan as a kid, I learned, as a displaced adult, what it meant to be seen as a threat.

I am now back home in Texas where the color of my skin resembles that of the 90% of the population which is also Mexican-American. Racism does exist here, though in a different form. Though the majority of the people here are of Mexican heritage, our border culture somehow places people on a sliding scale. How Mexican are you? If you speak fluent English without an accent you're moved far away from the Mexican-Mexican side and more to the Mexican-American side. If you look a certain way, perhaps you're *güero*, you're moved ahead. Short? Move back a space. Tall, move ahead. Unfortunately, racism exists within our own

culture. It is evident in Spanish TV where the majority of the personalities are tall, light-skinned people. As a teacher I've learned to accept my students as individuals, regardless of how they look, how they speak or where they are coming from. Unfortunately, that is not true of all teachers, and students often admit they feel discriminated against by other brown teachers because they're not as American as they are expected to be.

Not long ago a student shared an experience at a former school. We had been discussing discrimination. *Sir, at my old school a teacher made me feel terrible. He said I must have lice because I don't speak English good.*

A few students gasped.

What's worse, Sir, is that she was a Mexican too. Like, why do they think just because I have an accent that I'm dirty or not as good as other students?

I felt angry that an adult, especially one who works with a young generation, would be so disrespectful to a student because of how she speaks. I thought of the consequences of the teacher's actions and how in behaving that way she sent the message that we have a right to discriminate on basis of language, skin color or nationality

I realize now that racism is inescapable. Fortunately, I live in The Valley where we live a mostly sheltered existence away from racism. However, this situation also causes us to sit back and relax when we should be confronting racism, pushing for more education in the area of race, teaching our children how to deal with racial harassment and raising a more tolerant generation.

CHAPTER III

MARICÓN

As a boy, maybe 7 or 8 years old, I overheard my parents and older brothers talking about the murder of a young American male in Mexico, less than ten miles from home, just across the border.

They say he was a maricón. That's why he was killed, one of my brothers said.

That's what happens to jotos. He shouldn't have been so marica, the other replied.

Before then I didn't know what *maricón* or *joto* meant though I had heard it many times. My brothers used it regularly around each other and around male cousins. Regardless, it worried me that people hurt other people for being a *maricon* – whatever that meant. Further, it shocked me that my own brothers justified his murder simply because of that fact. I wondered what one had to do to be a *maricón*. Because I didn't know the definition, I worried that I, being unable to identify the traits of one, already was one. In my mind I figured that a *maricón* or *joto* could be identified by their outward appearance. Otherwise, how did the boy's murderers figure out he was one? I examined my body closely trying to find the obvious differences between myself and the others around me. I found none. I remained uneasy, however, because the possibility still existed.

I was more aware of the word *maricón* from that moment on. I had heard it many times, but before then, the word carried less weight so I hadn't paid much attention to it. My older brothers, for example, would use the word when trying to convince someone to do something. *Just call her, no seas maricón.* Other times the word *joto* was used instead. I realized they meant the same thing, though I thought they were just the equivalent of the word coward, similar to the word chicken in English. However, after hearing about the murder I learned that *joto* and *maricón* had a second meaning, one I didn't understand. Being one of those, *really* being one of those, the unknown kind, and not just being called that by a brother, could be deadly.

At that time I didn't know that I was or wasn't gay. At that age I hadn't noticed boys or girls for that matter. In fact, it wasn't until later, in middle school, that I first heard the word gay. Overhearing the conversation about the murdered boy I became more self-aware. I didn't want to be killed for being different. I traveled to Mexico enough to warrant a fear of being *un maricón*.

I also feared being a *maricón* because my family obviously didn't like them. I wondered what treatment I might get if I was one. Would they send me to Mexico themselves?

What is a maricón? And how do I avoid being one? No one explained to me the meaning of the word. My parents likely thought at my age I shouldn't worry about it –sex being taboo, and homosexuality completely off the discussion table, better not even thinking about it. But I did worry. I feared one day finding out I was one because that meant that when I returned to Mexico, I would be killed like the young man. The word plagued my thoughts for a while as I unscrambled the meaning without success. I paid more attention to people then, wondering who among them was and who wasn't, hoping that somehow I'd find enough of them to be able to

identify them and therefore avoid becoming like them. I knew no one would explain the word so I had to figure it out myself.

By age 11 I knew the definition of *maricón* and *joto*. I learned them at school among my peers. My parents often avoided such topics – sex, masturbation, even puberty; homosexuality especially. The years between when I first heard the word and puberty I didn't fear being gay because I didn't fantasize either way about boys or girls. During middle school, however, my sexual urges awakened and I became aware of my body more than I had before. Without provocation my penis would suddenly stiffen during everyday activities. After some confusion I learned to appreciate the pleasure it gave me. I enjoyed the erections except when they happened during inappropriate times, such as during the middle of dinner, while watching TV with family or while at school. Through close observation of my environment, mainly the adult males around me, I learned of the indecency of a public erection so I made sure to control mine or otherwise hide them. In fact, no one ever talked to me about erections. In 5th grade, during the short sex education class the only thing coach told us was that hair would start growing where it hadn't before, that we might get pimples and that these were symptoms of a condition called puberty. I also noticed my testicles would hang looser and the dangling sensation, though not pleasurable in itself, felt fun, freeing. The teacher didn't discuss sagging testicles or the pleasures of erections. He didn't tell us that feeling pleasure was a natural reaction and that there is no shame in feeling it.

When I didn't have an erection and when I had privacy I started touching myself to recover that pleasure though I wasn't sure I should be feeling it. It wasn't long after that I started thinking that other boys at school must be having the same experiences.

My curiosity pushed me to find out more about the processes and pleasures of my penis. Where once it had one function, to urinate, it now did something else. Something more pleasurable than I had ever imagined. I turned to my encyclopedias (this was before the internet) and I started looking up information, grateful to my elementary school teachers who had introduced me to the world of knowledge contained within them. Because I didn't know then the correct term for penis (the few times my parents mentioned them they called it a wee-wee) I first went to a medical textbook that we had at home. I looked at a diagram of the human body and became mesmerized with the perfect male form on the page. After regaining my focus I located the word penis and testicles and then searched the encyclopedias. The information in the encyclopedias about the penis and testicles, however, didn't elicit the same kind of sensation as my private thoughts. The medical jargon, difficult to understand, subdued the pleasure. The pictures too, cross-sections of the penis and medical diagrams, failed to give me any pleasure. I returned to the medical textbook and flipped through the semi-transparent plastic pages until the full male body covered the plastic sheet with the muscles and the one with the nervous system and the one with the bones. I looked at the male body and studied the groin. Unlike me, the man was grown, his testicles larger than mine, and his penis longer. I became engrossed, mostly, on the testicles, fixed on their perfection.

The awareness that the volumes of the World Book Encyclopedia contained so much more information lingered in my head. I craved more pleasure and the limited exposure to male bodies besides my own made my imagination inadequate. I started skimming the pages of the encyclopedia volumes almost daily. Soon I found a picture of the statue of David by Michelangelo. The figure's physique was perfect in every way. The lights hitting his pale form showed off his muscles perfectly. Between his legs a slight shadow accentuated the groin. The

penis, uncircumcised like mine, rested on his testicles which protruded from between his legs. Examining the picture of David my penis reacted and the pleasure returned. I studied him as long as I could while listening for sounds of any of my family coming in my direction. As soon as I heard someone I closed the book and slid it back into its place, memorizing the page number. I returned to that page many times wishing the page was textured. I often closed my eyes and imagined my fingers going up one testicle, then down and into the valley created between the two testicles and then up and down again. I imagined the tips of my fingers feeling the surface of the scrotum, velvety and delicate. The page, however, was flat and glossy and regardless of how hard I tried, I couldn't fully imagine how it would feel in my hands. In time I found a picture of the Creation of Adam from the Sistine Chapel also by Michelangelo. I became entranced with the way Adam's penis fell over his thigh and rested on it. Soon, I came to appreciate Michelangelo, not as a painter or sculptor of the human form, but as a master of the erotic.

I never considered looking for female figures either in the medical textbook or the Encyclopedias. The thought never crossed my mind and I never wondered why it hadn't.

That same year (I was around 12) I started going to church with Ma where I became reacquainted with the stories of David and Adam – I read about them in a yellow Jehova's Witness illustrated book at an early age and had all but forgotten them. At Sunday school the lessons were mostly about how to be a better person. One morning the Sunday school teacher gave a lesson on Christian principles regarding the sins of masturbation and sex.

God is here right now, he said, waving his arms around the room. We followed his arms and looked at each other. Some kids joked that God sat in the empty seat between them. *He*

knows everything you do. He knows your impure thoughts. When you're at home, alone, and when you think no one is watching, remember, He is, he said, pointing up at the sky.

Fear and guilt crept into me immediately. Surely Jesus had seen me defile myself with the images of two of his greatest men.

When you want to do something impure, remember, what would Jesus do? He never said the words sex or masturbation. At church when the preachings or teachings had anything to do with sex the speaker used words such as *impure thoughts* and *carnal pleasures*. The teacher expected the audience to understand he meant sex.

Would Jesus pleasure himself? I felt convinced he never did. I had never given a thought about Jesus as a human person, but certainly, he didn't have any sexual urges so therefore he didn't have to worry about touching himself.

After that lesson I thought about David and Adam and I felt terrible because I had lusted over them, but also, because from that point on they became a guilty pleasure. Although I felt remorseful having lusted over the two biblical figures I continued going back to the Encyclopedia for more. Immediately after I pleased myself, however, I became overcome with fear and prayed for forgiveness.

Eventually the sensations David and Adam gave me subsided. The images didn't have the same appeal as when I first saw them. Still, I went back and looked at them often, along with the illustration on the medical textbook, but I didn't get erections the way I had before.

One afternoon I went into Pa's storage shed. In the shed one of my older brothers had a box he had made in a woodshop class. He had warned me not to go through his things and, because of his warning, I became curious to find out why. I opened the wooden three-foot box one day and looked through his personal things. I moved tool after tool out of the way, a couple

of textbooks, and some audio cassettes. At the bottom I found an unlabeled VCR cassette tape. I grabbed it and went into my room, closed the door so my brother wouldn't notice I had gone through his things, and put it in the VCR. I thought it would be a Jean-Claude Van Damme movie or maybe Predator with Sylvester Stallone. Immediately after the VCR self-adjusted and the black and white fuzz disappeared I heard a moan. I kept watching as the video zoomed from something unrecognizable and out to three nude people – one man standing over the woman and the other between her legs. As soon as I realized it was pornography, I ejected it and hid it under my shirt though I was alone. *What would Jesus do?* I felt ashamed and dirty but my mind kept going back to the images of the two men and the woman. According to what I'd learned I shouldn't watch pornography because Jesus would not watch it, obviously. Still, the image of the two very large penises burned itself into my head and I couldn't shake it.

After the shock wore off and after sneaking the tape back into the box I returned to my daily activities pretending I had not seen anything. I had a difficult time concentrating since I had never seen anything like it before. My mind wandered constantly and before I knew it the image of two erect penises, four drooping testicles and lots of curly pubic hair, much curlier than mine, returned, and I was once again aroused. I tried to picture the woman but I couldn't. I couldn't remember what her vagina or her breasts looked like. Before then I figured the only reason men brought me pleasure was because I hadn't yet seen a woman. And, now, after having seen a naked woman, I couldn't think of anything but the men in the videos. *Could it be*, I wondered, *that I'm a maricón? It can't be*, I thought, forcing myself to think of the woman in the video when I felt an erection, hoping to connect the pleasure to the image of a woman.

For a long time I tried denying the fact.

I secretly watched the video from my brother's box many times after that and fantasized about touching the penises and the testicles, trying hard to find pleasure, also, in the woman and the curves of her body, the entire time thinking Jesus sat next to me shaking his head in disappointment. I kept this secret to myself and instead I played the shy kid as a way to hide my indifference about girls.

In middle school I met Isai. He had been very friendly my first day of school

Heey, wanna' sit with us back here?

My family had just returned from Michigan and it was my first year at Todd Middle School. After being escorted to pretty Ms. Kennedy's science class and looking around the class, I realized I knew no one, once again being the new kid.

Well, there you go Felipe, Mrs. Kennedy said, pointing to the back of the room. Go ahead and take a seat between Isaí and Gilbert.

I shared my schedule with Isaí after he asked for it and learned our schedules were nearly identical with the exception of the last period. It was decided he would escort me a few days until I became familiar with the classrooms. We became good friends that year and I enjoyed spending my days with him. When I got home all I could think about was Isaí. I thought about his face with the glasses. I thought about how strangely he dressed. I remembered the jokes he told – often not funny though I dwelled on them because I loved hearing his voice.

Sharing video games with Isaí gave me a reason to call him often – the first person I ever called on the phone, which, to me, was a huge deal.

Hey, I don't know what to do in Chrono Trigger.

What do you mean? It's so easy.

Ok. Talk me through it. And don't hang up until I've beat this boss, I'd say, purposely being defeated or prolonging the battle.

In my mind Isaí was my best friend and that was the reason I thought about him so much. Only later, in eighth grade, when our friendship changed, did I realize I had a crush on him. At some point someone at home must have noticed my crush on him. I talked about him all the time and constantly asked if he'd called. No one ever said anything though.

I wonder now why no one asked me about how I felt. No one uttered a single word about my crushes, and, if they did, they asked about girls – I never mentioned any for them to ask. Someone must have noticed my obvious obsession with Isaí, but they kept their thoughts to themselves. Meanwhile, my twin, Nando started, as we said in middle school, *going out* with a girl. They asked him about his girlfriend even though he rarely spoke of her. I suppose if Isaí had been a girl I'd have been asked about him too and then I would have been able to express my feelings. When I finally accepted my sexuality years later and allowed myself to crush on boys, I figured to keep them secret. After all, when I crushed on Isaí, no one cared to ask. I knew that my boy crushes were unwelcomed.

Having a best friend, I figured I also needed a girlfriend. At school I intentionally crushed on a girl to try to become more like the other boys, more normal. I crushed on Felicia to give people a reason to ask me about girls. She never quite aroused me like David, Adam or Diagram Man though. At home I wrote her name, Felicia, over and over again, superficially obsessing about her, thinking it might do the trick, or at least hoping that this obsession might be more effective than Tape Lady. Felicia was pretty and many kids at school agreed. I obsessed over her all throughout middle school but never really felt the desire to be with her – my fascination with her was more akin to how one might admire a TV star. I studied Felicia closely.

She had full lips, hair to her shoulders and large eyes. She had a boyish body – her hips the same width as her waist and a flat chest. Perhaps the similarity between her body and boys' bodies seemed attractive to me – I can't recall if the thought ever entered my mind then.

The same year I met Isai and Felicia, another boy began picking on me. In my 2nd period class I sat toward the back of the class, near Isai, and Pacheco, who went by his last name, sat two desks directly in front of me. I refused to get up during class because walking past him meant I would receive a threat or be called a name.

Hey maricón, where the fuck you going? This was his taunt most of the times I walked by.

Fuck you, I said one day after having tolerated him for weeks.

Instantly he jumped out of his seat and pushed it away. The other students around us jumped up also and moved their desks out of the way leaving a clearing.

I bet that's what you want faggot. You want to fuck me, huh? I knew it.

Before the teacher could intercede he pushed me and I fell back. Isaí got between us and the boy fixed his chair and laughed. At that moment I wanted to grab a desk and throw it at him but I stopped myself because I didn't want to hurt him. Instead, enraged, I cried a few tears which gave him additional ammunition.

Cry, joto, he said before the teacher got between us.

I wiped my tears with my shirt and walked out of the room. On my way to the restroom I felt embarrassed because I cried in front of the other sixth graders. More than the shame, I felt scared. I wondered why he called me a *maricón* and a *joto*. Did I give the impression I liked boys? *I like Felicia,* I told myself. *Felicia is so perfect. I'm not gay.* I spent the rest of the period in the restroom and reported to my next class composed.

On a separate occasion I really had to pee and out of dread of walking past him, and, thinking I could hold it until the end of class, I didn't bother asking the teacher. Eventually, when I couldn't hold it anymore I raised my hand and got permission. Right as I walked past him my bladder gave way – I had waited too long. My jeans darkened around my groin and the warm pee trickled down my legs. I stood in shock a few feet in front of Pacheco. Without skipping a beat he burst into laughter. *Get the fuck away from me joto I don't want your piss near me.* Some of the other kids joined in laughter.

I exited the room, the pee leaking from my shoes and walked to the nurse with my head hung in shame.

Pacheco bothered me most of the year.

Look at the faggot, he'd yell out laughing.

You gonna' piss yourself again joto?

I'm gonna' get you diapers maricón.

Besides Pacheco no one ever mentioned the accident. However, anytime he addressed me directly or when he spoke of me he substituted my name with, *maricón* or *joto*. This concerned me because I didn't think I was gay. *Felicia, Felicia, Felicia. Isái.*

I became gripped with the idea that something I did gave the impression that I was gay. I figured that Pacheco called me gay because he noticed something gay about me. I realize now that he likely did it because it got a noticeable reaction out of me. I didn't think I spoke any certain way. I didn't look at boys directly. I made my crush on Felicia obvious. However, I couldn't study my walk and so I worried that I had a flamboyant or effeminate walk.

Maybe I swayed my hips too much or maybe there was too much bounce in my steps. Once I determined my walk might be what triggered the bullying I couldn't shake the thought. I

worked harder to walk more like a boy. I observed the lazy walk of my friends. They walked with their shoulders low, keeping their footsteps low to the ground, and their chins up. I also noticed that many of the tough guys at school wore baggy jeans. I made sure to buy as baggy jeans as I could get for seventh grade. In doing so, I joined the tough guys at school but also hid my walk.

I felt self-conscious with my walk for years to come. Up until my late twenties I worried I walked too flamboyantly. When walking into a crowd I became so overwhelmed with anxiety I tried to fix my walk, likely looking awkward instead of confident. Once, in graduate school, walking back to my car, a group of boys yelled out *faggot* from their car followed by laughter. I wondered, even at 30, whether my walk gave the impression I was gay.

All of middle school I challenged the idea that I might be gay. I kept my fascination with men secret because I had yet to admit my sexuality to myself. I told myself that men didn't attract me, though I couldn't stop fantasizing about them.

On my notebooks I scribbled Felicia's name next to mine. At times of random erections I immediately thought of her and Tape Lady, somehow hoping that in doing so I'd condition my body to react to females the way it did for males. At school, I desperately sought Felicia's attention. When I finally had class with her in 7th grade I sat by her and befriended her. She became a girl I knew personally and not just from a distance. I sat behind her as often as I could with the intention that she'd see me the way I wanted her to see me. In English class, the only class I had with Isai in 7th grade, I opted to sit by her instead of him.

Once, the summer after eighth grade, my family went to The Orchards Mall in Benton Harbor, Michigan for our weekly outing. The large corridors were empty with the exception of a few older people in windbreaker pants and headbands who walked tirelessly the interior of the

mall for their health, never really shopping. After an unsuccessful trip to Sears, Nando and I spent some time at the book store near one of the entrances. We were between childhood and adulthood, maybe 14 years old, and the comic books attracted us. After having our fill of bloodily animated books we exited the store in search of our family – our conversation probably about one of the comics we skimmed through the hour we spent sitting on the floor against a bookcase. Out of the corner of my eye I noticed two people coming in from the outside, walking in our direction. I turned to look and the boy instantly caught my eye. The young white man walked hand-in-hand with a pretty white girl. He had blond hair, blue eyes and a chiseled body. His well-proportioned face was balanced between being delicate and strong. His shirt hugged his body just right, his arms filled the sleeves. The jeans he wore perked up his firm butt.

Wow, who is he? I said out loud, my mouth betraying me. I had meant to think it to myself, but the words slipped out of my mouth, interrupting the chat Nando and I were having.

What? Nando asked, confused because my outburst had nothing to do with our conversation.

I went into damage control mode, trying to figure out a way to fix the problem. Before then all my fantasies about boys had been completely private. I never expected to vocalize my attraction so blatantly. Like him, I was surprised I even said it.

Oh, ummm, who does he think he is? He thinks he looks cool. He looks dumb, I said awkwardly, my heart beating fast hoping Nando went along with it.

I guess, he replied, giving me a confused look.

I realized then that my attraction to the boy, and other boys in general, had not been conscious. My reaction had been instinctive. So instinctive that I didn't give myself a warning. At that moment I had to seriously consider my sexuality. I had noticed cute boys in school but

never gave them much thought. I thought I simply appreciated their looks after I studied them, that they were like art – their faces carefully constructed but nothing more than something to admire, definitely not something to feel a sexual urge to explore. And I tried justify my sexual gratification with David, Adam, Diagram Man and the Porn Stars by shifting my arousal to the male anatomy to an arousal caused by art.

Two things changed for me that day. First, I guarded my thoughts more lest any escape and out me. I couldn't trust my mouth so I worked harder to keep my thoughts more in check. Also, I allowed myself to explore my sexuality a little more. I had tried to curb it for so long and on that day I understood that boys attracted me undoubtedly. I accepted the *maricón* part of me, though I still held on to the idea of one day dating and being sexually attracted to a girl.

Accepting my sexuality created new problems for me. I continued attending church despite my secret, even becoming deeply involved – I served in the youth board, participated in fundraising activities and sang in the choir. I continued my crush on Felicia throughout high school hoping that one day I might actually feel sexually interested in her. I recognized her beauty but I never fantasized about her in any sexual way. I attempted to court her many times only to be rejected. When I finally formalized my feelings for her in a letter her response was expected. She stated she didn't feel the same way. She stated, also, that she didn't want to hurt me because I was a nice guy and a relationship between us would ultimately result in my heart being broken. My heart did break with that letter. After many years of intentionally obsessing over her she made it clear she wasn't interested. It's not that I wanted to be with her, but I wanted my devotion to her to be worth at least one date, even if it meant nothing to me.

I had a crush on a few boys as a senior. I stopped writing Felicia's name and started writing theirs. Fidel's and Ruben's name filled pages and pages of my notebooks alongside my

writings and doodles. I guarded that notebook closely fearing to lose it and be found out by classmates.

In the privacy of my own room I masturbated to fantasies of having them in bed with me. First only one at a time and then both at once, like the porn I had seen. In my fantasies I did many things with them. Jesus, as always, hovered. I closed my eyes and pushed Jesus aside, instead having two naked boys, one on each side. Jesus' face, the one from the famous portraits, always intruding and making me feel guilty.

A pastor visited our church one Sunday. Preparations were made ahead of his arrival. Being in the youth board, the task to make invitational phone calls fell on me and the others on the board. I called many of the youth and enthusiastically invited them to what we called an *awesome service* and *words of inspiration*. Many people attended church that day, including over fifty first-time visitors. I eagerly awaited what I assumed would be the best preaching of the year.

The worship part of the service went smoothly. The praise group sang beautifully and different brothers and sisters presented special songs. The temple felt energized. I had my Bible, my pen and my notepad ready for notes for when the pastor took the pulpit. He began his preaching with the same sermons I had heard many times before. He spoke of being humble, asking forgiveness and being moral because God saw everything.

Brothers and sisters, he said about thirty minutes in, shifting his tone, *there's something tugging at my heart, let me tell you.*

Tell it, shouted someone from the middle of the temple.

The devil has someone in their grasp and he's holding tight.

Shivers went up my spine. The devil, this supernatural entity, we'd learned to fear, had invaded someone's life.

He's here and he's got you, brother. You need to ask God for forgiveness and the strength to fight the devil off.

I looked around wondering who he was talking about. I figured something would happen. Someone would fall as though struck by lightning or else someone would break down and confess something.

Preach, brother, someone said.

Amen, chimed in another.

Someone here is dealing with homosexuality, the pastor finally said.

If there is video of the preaching I'm sure I look flushed. I felt as though he was talking to me and as though the entire congregation now looked in my direction. In hindsight I'm sure the statement was a shot in the dark. In a room of 500, statistically more than one person is gay and so I am certain the statement applied to several of us, but I felt like I was the only one. Also, a good preaching always included something juicy. Fornication, abuse, drugs, homosexuality, atheism, all of the above. The pastor, I'm sure, knew this and so gave the people what they desired. At the time, however, I felt it must be me he's talking about. God must have spoken to him about me. I felt horror.

God is talking to you, he said, *you who's dealing with homosexuality.*

I didn't hear an audible voice, but, I assumed, surely, this guilt, this sense of dread I was feeling, must be God's voice. *He must be right.* I closed my eyes and began to pray.

You are sinning and God is unhappy with you. Remember Sodom and Gomorrah. Remember the defiling of men and the consequence.

I prayed harder. I knew the story of the two ill-fated cities. As they were taught to me, Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed because men engaged in sex with other men and also with Angels.

Like Sodom and Gomorrah, the fires of hell await you unless you repent.

If I felt any horror before, when he mentioned hell I became engulfed in an overwhelming sense of doom.

Then, I felt betrayal. I felt betrayed that God had made me this way, and in doing so, he condemned me to an eternal suffering.

After that service, each night during my nightly prayers I asked to be straight. I cried often because I couldn't shake the feelings. At school I caught myself looking at boys and then immediately looking away and asking for forgiveness in a silent prayer. I took the pastor's advice and prayed for forgiveness and also the strength to fight my impulses. Each night I got on my knees and prayed to God.

If you're listening, I'm sorry. I know what I'm doing is wrong. Please make me straight.

The prayers didn't feel genuine though because in the back of my mind I blamed God for this. While I prayed to him, in my head I blamed him for the situation. About it I thought, *if you disagree with this and if I'm willing to change, why haven't you done anything?* The more I prayed the stronger the feeling. I prayed harder and I cried about it. My longing to be with boys didn't subside whatsoever, though for a while I managed to curb my fantasies.

Please change me. Please make me want to be with girls. Take away this sickness, this disease, this filth. God didn't listen to me. I became angry but remained optimistic that I would be changed one day. *Please God, if you're listening, fix me or kill me.*

The church's teachings reinforce anti-gay sentiments. The church, however, didn't use the word *maricón* or *joto*. Regardless, this compounded my dilemma. On all sides my identity was invalidated. I had failed to meet the macho standards of my family and the moral values of my church. Not only was I a *maricón* and *joto*, I was also a sinner condemned to hell.

I felt ashamed that I became aroused at the sight of naked men. I felt guilty that cute boys caught my attention. I felt guilty that women did nothing for me. I also felt scared because if I didn't suffer at the hands of some homophobe (either in Mexico or at home), I might still burn in the red-hot fires of hell for eternity. I feared that it would be both.

Still, the prayers didn't work. I felt stuck. Nothing I tried helped the situation. My fascination with boys didn't change. In fact, it grew. New boys caught my attention and as my guilt grew so did my hatred toward God.

I had heard the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. For forty days Satan tempted him and yet he opposed the temptations and overcame the trials. I understood the moral of the story, but I couldn't apply it to myself because, as hard as I tried, I couldn't change the way I felt and the prayers weren't doing anything to help either. If Jesus, God-incarnate, had been tested as a man, then surely he understood my plight. He didn't do anything to help however. Instead, more temptation came my way in form of new boys. My longing for boys wasn't put out by incessant prayers as I'd often been instructed.

I came to hate myself because I figured I was the abomination I often heard about in sermons. And, being the abomination, I couldn't fix myself. I had served God – I attended church regularly, more than five days a week between church services, choir practices, board meetings and other activities – and yet, nothing worked. I prayed daily, fasted at least once a week, paid tithes with the little money I earned or otherwise received as gift, I volunteered hours

at special functions and contributed to fundraisers. None of that helped. At the end of the day, I still felt like the abomination. I still felt doomed.

At some point I began using the internet with more frequency. Because there were so many of us at home and only one computer and also only one phone line, I used the computer late at night, often after everyone had gone to bed. I initially started using it to download music and research random topics. My curiosity, however, got the best of me, and, against my will (or so it felt like it at the moment), I looked up *gay sex*.

America Online (AOL) queued up a list of websites fitting the criteria. I felt hesitant to click on the links because, obviously, Jesus was looking over my shoulder, but also because I feared, like I had when I was a kid at the encyclopedia, that someone might walk in. Still, I clicked them and became overwhelmed with images of gay sex.

AOL became my first real sex-ed teacher. No one had ever really talked to me about sex. Everyone, including my mom during the sex talk, had avoided the word sex, or penis, or condom or masturbation. The topic was so taboo I received only partial information. AOL did for me what my mom, my teacher and the church had failed to do – inform me about sex without beating around the bush.

My sexual education came from the search queue for *gay sex*. To this day, often when I sit at my computer to do research, my mind automatically thinks *gay sex*.

AOL, however, didn't do a very good job at teaching me everything I needed to know. I didn't learn the importance of using protection. In many of the images and videos (if I had the patience to wait for one to load) the men rarely used condoms. Though I knew about condoms, I didn't understand how effective they were against STDs. In fact, I didn't know anything about

STDs. I thought condoms prevented pregnancies and nothing else. Since I didn't plan on being with a woman, I didn't see the importance.

It was on AOL, also, that I first dared to seek a relationship with a boy. I met a boy from Houston through a web chat room called M4M – male for male. Toshi, a Japanese boy my age, had many of the same interests I had. We chatted often into the morning hours about many things. Soon, I began to develop feelings for this boy on the other side of the screen whose face I could only imagine as we had no way to share video or pictures at the time. We eventually traded phone numbers and used phone cards to cover long distance charges. For the first time I felt my feelings validated. On the phone with him I expressed how I felt. I told him I wished he was with me physically and how I wished I could feel his skin against mine. I listened as he fell asleep and he listened as I fell asleep. Neither of us were openly gay. At the time, few people were openly gay. I had known, from David, Adam, Diagram Man, Fidel and Ruben, what sexual attraction felt like and I knew the meaning of lust. Toshi, however, taught me that gay men could love. I felt for Toshi what I had felt for Isai many years before, but, unlike Isai, Toshi reciprocated the feeling and I freely expressed how I felt for him. I loved him though I never met him in person and only saw him in one grainy picture. Unfortunately, Toshi's father was very strict and after an extended absence Toshi told me his father caught him on the phone late one night and put away the telephone and the computer. Toshi suddenly disappeared from the chat rooms and didn't answer his phone.

Online I also met others in the Rio Grande Valley who were gay, they were the *maricónes* my brothers had talked about. I felt less alone though as now I could go to others about my fears and with my questions. Often older men solicited me for sex, but occasionally a few chatted with me about other things besides sex, a few becoming a sort of online mentors.

During daylight, however, I pretended everything was as it had always been. I still dealt with my guilt by praying, but more often foregoing the prayers for more chat time. However, now I lived a double life. I played an insecure and shy Christian boy around people, but I explored my sexuality and my true feelings online.

After high school a new girl started going to church. Jazmin immediately caught everyone's attention – boys and girls. She was about my height, slim (a boyish body, no curves or breasts), with curly hair and a beautiful face. We found out from her cousin, a boy who attended church regularly, that she modeled for the clothing company Bealls. Her good looks attracted people, including me. Though I didn't feel sexually attracted to her I recognized her beauty. After services and after Sunday school I often heard the boys talk about her. Many placed wagers on who would end up dating her. Though I didn't intend to date her when asked I pretended I wished it as much as they did. She continued attending so I continued my dishonesty. Many boys attempted to court her and she brushed them off one by one. I kept my distance playing timid.

Eventually, however, I decided to make a move, thinking Jazmin would brush me off as she had the other boys. To my surprise, however, she didn't. Though there were certainly better-looking boys vying for her attention, my manners gave me an advantage – I gave her space when the rest of the boys crowded around her. She accepted my unconventional advances and soon she sought me out. The rest of the boys backed off and I felt obligated to ask her out. I had led her on and now I had to follow through. I stopped going online to avoid talking to men. I also tried to avoid gay porn. I figured I should give Jazmin and heterosexuality a try. After all, if being straight was going to work for me, it had to work with Jazmin. Everything about her was exceptional, and I would be stupid to give that up.

Jazmin and I became official one drizzly Valentine's day. At the time I was 19 and she was 18. She had sent me a text message saying how she had never really received anything on Valentine's Day so I decided to surprise her. I found her car in the parking lot of the university we both attended and left some gifts on her windshield – a card, a rose and some chocolates. When she found them she called to thank me and, caught up in the moment, I asked if she would take me as her boyfriend. She agreed without hesitation. Although I admired and I respected Jazmin, I selfishly hoped she'd be the answer to my prayers. God, I thought, sent her my way to fix me, *finally!*.

After many years, I finally had a girlfriend – I felt convinced that God had made me wait for her. More than that, I had an intelligent, kind and beautiful girlfriend. Everyone celebrated our relationship, especially my family. I figure, perhaps at church, they too let out a sigh of relief knowing one less brother was going to hell. I couldn't celebrate with my heavy conscience.

After we became official we started seeing each other outside of church. I knew I didn't want anything sexual, or even remotely physical, to happen between us so I recommended we spend time together in public. To that end we jogged around a high school in the evenings. When she got close to me I moved away. A few times she tried holding my hand and I pulled it closer to my body, avoiding hers.

Hey, I want to do this the right way, I excused myself. I don't think we're ready for that. I want a real courtship. I want to be moral in the eyes of God. I know it'll be a blessing for us.

The rest of the run often felt awkward after I ignored her advances or after I explained how I wanted to be modest in the eyes of God.

At home I prayed that I might find a real attraction to her. I thanked God for sending her my way and asked him to help me find pleasure in her company. He didn't help me. Instead, every one of our dates felt more forced than the last.

Before long she stopped inviting me for a run and I didn't seek her out either. She also stopped going to church. Our relationship fizzled quickly and I was to blame. Jazmin never really felt like a girlfriend. She felt like a medicine prescribed for homosexuality, a medicine that didn't fix anything.

I feel terrible now for how I manipulated Jazmin. She didn't deserve what I did to her. She became my experiment and I let her believe I really liked her.

I continued my prayers though now they had changed. I blamed God for my failed relationship. If only he had helped me this once I surely could have broken the spell of homosexuality. I didn't understand what he wanted.

What do you want? I tried it. I tried falling in love with Jazmin. You sent her to me, but you didn't change my feelings. What do I do now? What do I do now?

I cried often because I couldn't understand why he made me gay in the first place. Why, if he was so powerful, couldn't he change this about me? Why couldn't I be attracted to girls? Why was I attracted to boys? Why didn't he just snap his fingers and make me straight?

Why are you torturing me with this? I know I'm not supposed to be gay and I've asked you to change me many times. I tried being straight. Why do you want me to go to hell so badly? What did I do to you? Is there anything I can do? Just tell me and I'll do it.

At home, my family felt disappointed that Jazmin disappeared. I didn't have an answer for them. I simply told them it didn't work out. I wanted to tell them that I liked boys and that, though Jazmin was perfect, she wasn't perfect for me. I wanted to tell them about the

wonderfulness of Toshi regardless of the fact that I had never met him and only seen one picture. I wanted to tell them that I had loved falling asleep to his voice. Instead, I pretended to be heartbroken.

In the absence of mental, emotion, physical or sexual stimulation, I decided the time had come to explore the nature of my sexuality. I started accepting the online solicitations for sex and for the first time I felt the textures I had longed for the many years before when I lusted over David, Adam and Diagram man. My sexual education being so limited, I took risks. My first encounter was terrible as I realized the man I had agreed to meet didn't look as he had in the pictures, still, I didn't have the courage to say no and walk away and we engaged in oral sex. The second encounter was more pleasurable, though being on the receiving end of anal sex, it felt painful initially. When I left the man's house I felt scared because I thought the world somehow knew what I had just done and judged me for it.

One day I agreed to meet a man at a local mall. In our chat I mentioned my interest in bonsai trees. He told me they sold some near a mall and I should visit the street-side vendor and afterward I should meet him. I agreed. I looked at the trees briefly and decided to hold off on the purchase. I then met him at the mall parking lot. He asked me to get in his car for a drive around town. I did and he drove me to his house about 30 minutes away in the town of Brownsville, Texas. We hadn't discussed sex and I naively thought he was being genuine about starting a platonic friendship. Once at his house he led me to his bedroom. I was twenty years old, about 140 pounds and scared. He was about 40 years old, about 230 pounds and assertive. I sat on his bed while he went into the restroom. When he returned to the bedroom he stood completely naked and erect.

Get naked, he said.

What?

You know what you came for. Get naked.

I tried to argue that I didn't intend to have sex with him and that I merely wanted to have a chat, become friends.

Fuck that, you came here to fuck and that's what we're doing.

Can you please just take me back to my truck? I want to go home now.

I'll take you back after we're done.

He now stood directly in front of me, his penis inches from my face.

He climbed on top of me and I tried to push him off but the weight difference made it difficult.

I turned around, defeated because I knew there would be a struggle if I tried to break away and also because I had no way back to my truck thirty minutes away. He pulled down my pants and penetrated me. I lay on my stomach for the few minutes it took him to finish, wishing I hadn't wanted to take a look at the bonsai trees that Saturday afternoon.

Did you like it?

Just please take me back to my truck now.

We rode in silence back to my truck and only hours later, when I had time to analyze the situation, did I realize that he raped me. I didn't cry though. I blamed myself. Perhaps I had led him on. When he showed me to his bedroom I should've known what he expected. Perhaps, I should have fought him off. I should have left his house and found my way back home, somehow. Perhaps I should have never gone in the first place. Perhaps I shouldn't have been online after the countless solicitations for sex. So many things crossed my mind and in most scenarios I blamed myself.

My experience didn't resemble the terrible rapes I'd heard about and seen on TV. Movies and television shows always depicted gruesome rape scenes and women were always the victims. I hadn't been beat nor was I a woman. I didn't know how to feel about calling it rape. Maybe, I thought, it wasn't rape at all. Maybe it was a mistake. In fact, I don't recall thinking of it as rape initially. Instead, I merely thought of it as him taking advantage of me and the situation.

Once I finally accepted it as rape, I did nothing about it. I couldn't tell my family because then I would have to explain why I had met a strange man and hopped in his truck. I feared being an out man because my family hadn't come around to the idea of acceptance. I also felt police might not take my case seriously. I had never seen or heard of the rape of a man so I didn't think it would lead anywhere. I also didn't want to appear weak by crying rape. I kept the event secret until I met my first long-term boyfriend and up until writing this, I had kept it a secret from everyone.

The bad experience didn't keep me from looking for pleasure though. I continued meeting up with men from the internet often taking greater risks but more aware than I had been before.

Years later I met and dated a boy who lived nearby. In secret I dated Rudy, often telling family that I was going to dinner with school friends. Rudy fulfilled the physical and emotional connection I sought from the men online. I hated lying to my family though. When Rudy came over to my house I presented him as a friend or otherwise snuck him into my room. Our relationship didn't last as I had already enlisted for the Navy just before meeting him and left soon after we started dating.

The Navy gave me the opportunity to serve my country. The Navy also gave me the freedom to explore my sexuality more on my terms and detached from the church or my family. When I felt able to support myself financially without the need for family support, I decided to come out.

At home one December I received a call from a friend.

Hey, I need you to come over right now, Ramon said.

Why are you crying? You ok?

Please come over. I think I might kill myself if you don't.

It was 4AM and I knew by leaving I would wake my parents with the garage being next to their bedroom and the bark of the dogs. I left anyway, realizing the importance of me being there for Ramon.

When I arrived at his apartment I found him on his bed smelling of liquor. He also seemed to be on another substance though I didn't ask. I lay down next to him and let him cry for a while. After about 20 minutes he said his family, with the exception of his sister, had stopped talking to him and he missed them. He said he felt responsible for some of the problems with his family because of his sexuality and because his parents were pastors. I listened to him and heard my own story in his. I gave him a hug and assured him I cared. I lay back down next to him and held his hand as he fell asleep. At seven he woke up and smiled at me.

Thank you, Felipe.

I love you Ramon. I have to go now though. If you need me call me. I promise I'll be back here as soon as I can.

When I arrived home my mom was making breakfast. She stopped stretching a tortilla and looked at me.

Where have you been? I've been worried sick since you left at 4.

Though I was 25 at the time and had been out of the house now two years, stationed in Jacksonville, Florida, when I returned home I resumed the title of baby boy and was subject to lectures. After listening to Ramon I knew I had to do it. I couldn't live another day hiding my true personality. *I can explain. Just listen, please.*

I explained the crisis which my mom didn't seem convinced about. I told her about Ramon being gay and about his family not talking to him and how it drove him consider suicide.

One more thing, I said, tears accumulating in my eyes, I'm gay.

Two words.

Two difficult words to express. It took 25 years to say them out loud. Two and a half decades they resonated and had only escaped my mouth once before when I came out to my twin, Nando, days before making the announcement to my mom over breakfast. Many times I had wanted to blurt them out, just get it out, but it never seemed the right time. I had no plan in case they kicked me out of the house.

Saying them out loud to others, especially my family, scared me. I felt relief also. I felt I could now live my life honestly and I felt prepared to do it away from family should their reaction be what I expected.

Mom turned off the stove and put away her rolling pin. *We figured you were gay. Your father and I talked about it. Your sisters had also assumed it. We were just waiting for you, Ma said responding to my confession. We wished we could have helped you and we're sad you had to suffer alone.*

I felt anger.

I didn't *have* to go through it alone though. They could have interceded and asked me about my life and about my feelings and even about my sexuality. Their reluctance to talk about anything to do with sex made me afraid of coming out any sooner. I wish I'd had their support when I first noticed boys. I wish they'd said something about Isai. I wish that when they gave me the sex talk they used the word penis, vagina, condom, consent. I wish the church had used the words sex and masturbation more openly. I wish the coach had been more upfront about puberty and told me to be proud of my sexuality and everything that accompanies it. I wish Ma and Pa disregarded their culture's view on sex as taboo to talk about the things that mattered to me.

I lived angry at them for a few months. I respected them and loved them, but I felt anger. In time I realized they did the only thing they knew to do. They avoided the question because they wanted to give me the space to say it myself. They felt that I would say something when I was ready. Unfortunately, I felt the opposite. I wanted someone to help me go through it. After a few months of thinking about the situation I realized that while I worked out my sexuality, they worked out their convictions, pushing their religious beliefs and their cultural beliefs aside to accept me before I admitted it to them.

I do wish, however, that they had done more to help me go through the most difficult moments of my life. Their silence kept me from seeking them the times my heart was broken and when my body was abused. They weren't around to let me know everything would turn out fine. I grew into a *maricón* on my own when I could have used their help. Even a little support from them may have been enough for me come to terms with my sexuality sooner. I could have been happier much earlier in life. Though now my family is supportive of me and my current

relationship, I could have used their support from when I first started noticing boys until the time I came out – about 15 years between the two.

The words *maricón* and *joto* are never said in my presence anymore. Even if they were, however, I'd proudly take the label. I worked hard to accept myself as one and I'm proud to say I made it.

I am a *maricón*.

CHAPTER IV

CHILLONA

At five years old the notion that boys don't cry seemed strange to me. As a boy I cried anyway, never really being able to stand the pain of a fall, though most of the time I cried simply because I felt humiliated. I wiped away the few tears shed, slapped my scraped skin of the dirt that clung to the fresh wound and continued my play, ashamed of my failure, ashamed of my crying and blood running down my leg. Also, as kids often do, I inevitably misbehaved doing something I was not supposed to and when caught the crying started, again, usually due to the humiliation of being found guilty of whatever mischief I concocted. *Los niños no lloran*, they reiterated. I cried and there wasn't much I could do to avoid it. I tried suppressing my tears with little success. I felt defective, me and my twin brother Nando, since I'd seen him cry also. I figured our boy bodies malfunctioned. If boys weren't supposed to cry and we cried, then that must mean something's wrong.

Later, in grade school, I saw other boys cry. I realized the ordinariness of crying. I started to understand that *boys don't cry* actually meant that boys aren't supposed to cry. That crying, according to my observations of macho culture in The Valley and my family, showed

weakness. Girls can cry, that's ok, but boys are supposed to be tough. Boys are supposed to have a handle on their feelings. Thoughts and emotions of men, the culture implied, needed to be suppressed so that raw aggression can overcome. I needed to be strong enough to handle anything.

I had learned to handle a lot, I thought, until in 5th grade I learned otherwise. We had been standing in line to enter the classroom when a discussion ensued between a girl named Christina and some of the boys. She was a thin girl with a strong personality who stood up to boys. Somewhat of a tomboy – she preferred playing with the boys and didn't shy from the rough play – she wore frilly dresses and her curly hair tended to be up in a ponytail. She had large brown eyes and a mouth as dirty as a sailor's, limited only by her vocabulary. Their discussion turned into an argument, the reason I can't remember now. I was a shy kid and stood there while all this happened, certain that even then I had no idea what it was about.

You're all idiots, she said to the boys.

Just like you, a boy replied which made her angrier.

I remember saying something irrelevant, possibly *excuse me*, and then without warning I felt a sting in my groin, her right leg landing a good kick between my legs. Fuck you, she screamed and walked away while I fell over, grabbing my groin, succumbing to the pain. I cried then. I cried in front of my classmates and I felt ashamed which only made me cry harder. My balls, I thought a long time, were better left on the floor that day since I showed my weakness in front of my classmates. Christina, a girl, had made me, a boy, cry. She reversed the roles that day. What did it mean to be a boy? What did it mean to be a girl? At a time when I felt I was starting to understand genders, Christina disrupted it. Thereafter, I secluded myself even more from my classmates because I felt emasculated.

No llores, my parents said all throughout elementary school. Being unable to control my crying often irritated them further. *If you want to cry, I'll give you something to cry about*, they said, taking their *chancla* or el *cinturón* in their hand. Usually I dodged the hard crying to a few, mostly silent sobs before walking away with my head low and my feelings in my throat. This scene often repeated itself in our home, mostly, it seemed, by me – my twin brother always being more resilient than me. I envied and looked up to him. Nando did what I could not. Nando often escaped the blame, and ultimately the punishment, likely because he controlled his emotions better and with a clear head skillfully weaseled himself out of trouble. Because I cried more I also received more of the blame – never lucid enough to mastermind myself out of blame with an excuse or the truth. In that way fault correlated with crying.

I never reconciled my feelings then, suppressing them to keep from being physically punished for something I could barely control. The threat of a spanking for crying missed the point entirely I understand now. Crying was not the crime but I was threatened with punishment for it, all the while the actual crime allowed to dissipate into nothing because the crying upset Ma and Pa more.

Eventually I stopped crying altogether, instead I focused all my emotions into an uncontrolled rage. Because my parents cut off my outlet, I learned to let out emotions in different ways. My tantrums often manifested themselves into screaming, punching, kicking and throwing things. The person most closely responsible for my anger faced the danger of being hurt if near. Soon enough I became the child who could not be controlled. At school my teachers praised my behavior, but at home I wreaked havoc. I realized this myself, often feeling guilty for my outbursts. After a tantrum my self-esteem lay shattered on the floor next to my glass and porcelain victims.

On one occasion, I had just gotten out of the shower in a good mood. I must have been about 12 or 13 and the shower had become one of the only places where I could enjoy privacy to explore my body, the small three bedroom house congested with a family of 8 – my two oldest brothers had already moved out by then. In my basketball shorts, my t-shirt and my hair damp, I sprung into the living room singing at the top of my lungs. I pretended to have a microphone in one hand and swung the wet towel above my head in a celebratory fashion with the other. My little sister, six or seven at the time, sat at the couch watching TV. As I neared her the wet towel became a whip, wrapped itself around a glass which sat on a short wall between the living room and the dining room and before I knew it the glass zoomed above my head. It must have made two or three revolutions before the whip released it, no more than a few seconds total, but in that time I already knew the outcome of the release would be terrible. My mom rushed out of her bedroom when she heard Angela wailing. My sister grabbed her forehead, crying at the top of her lungs and pointed me out as the aggressor. The glass lay shattered in pieces at her feet. I stood stunned realizing I underestimated how terrible it would turn out. This was many times worse than terrible.

¿Qué te pasa? Mom chewed me out, her face showing anger like I'd never seen before.

Fue un accidente, I pleaded with her, but she wasn't having it.

You hate her that much that you want to hurt her? What's your problem?

This accusation angered me. After seconds of trying to explain the accident without success I became angry and then became unstable. Where before I simply defended my innocence, I shifted gears to defend that I was not a terrible brother.

I said it was an accident. What don't you understand? It was a stupid accident!

A shouting match started and I nearly gave in to crying but refused to drop even one tear in front of Ma. I began intentionally throwing things since she assumed I already had. When mom kept me from explaining the situation, I lost it and became the person I hated. I resented myself. In bed that night I cried. From that point on I cried in secret mostly and usually out of frustration. Crying out of anger seemed ok. Somehow, crying from a rage made me feel equally as macho as...as anything else that macho men did. No one ever accused me of not being manly if I cried out of anger.

Nando and I fought many times as boys. Our play started out innocently enough until one punched or kicked too hard. Mayhem would follow and an all-out fight began. After a few punches, a couple of shoves and a curse and insult or two we'd separate, at a stalemate, each of us calculating our next move but not finding any that would win the fight, at least not physically – his agility countered my strength, and my strength his agility. Then the tears came, from me, not him. Out of frustration for not winning the fight I cried. If I beat him to near death I may not have cried, but my failure caused me to cry every time. He always expected me to cry so he'd use it against me. *Chillona* he'd taunt. Almost mechanically, I grabbed whatever was near and flung it at him and then walked away feeling like a loser. Each time I cried I felt like less of a man but at the same time I built up even more anger, against myself and everyone who put me down for crying. As we grew older and the fights came less often, I stopped crying in front of him also, and allowed the rage to overcome me, either breaking something in the area or taking him down.

In the years to come I continued to struggle with rage. I often had outbursts and then the resentment came. Each time I felt worse, like the bad child. Everyone loved Nando, who rarely had outbursts (though when he did they were terrible) and Angela, the baby of the family who

was rarely punished even though she had an equal amount of outbursts as I did or possibly more. Not only was she younger, she was also a girl, and that was more acceptable. I seemed to take the brunt of the blame and punishment.

One day, at age 16 or so, I became irritated with my older sister's hogging of the telephone line. I wanted to use the internet but she occupied the line for a long time it seemed. I knocked on her door and asked her for a turn. She told me to stop bothering her. After about an hour I became upset and banged on her door and then on the way back to my mom's room I unplugged the line from the receiver. I walked to my mom's room and laid on the bed next to her. My sister walked out of her room and started telling me off in front of my mom.

How dare you disconnect me from the call?

I asked to let me use the line for the internet. That was over an hour ago.

And I told you you'd use it when I was done.

An hour ago!

Mom interjected. *Stop. What's going on?*

In my frustration I said, *she's always on the pinche phone!* Without hesitation my mom slapped me – it was the first and last time she did. She had spanked me before, as a kid, but she had never slapped me. Stunned that I had said the word *pinche* in front of my mom and more stunned that she slapped me I quit the arguing and tired of all the nonsense, I walked away. *Fuck this*, I said to myself, going past my sister and reconnecting the line on my way to my room, the phone ringing immediately. Once in my room I screamed into my pillow, punched it a few times and fell asleep.

That day I felt something new – I didn't have to feel regretful for worsening the situation. I felt more in control. I didn't realize then that bottling up how I felt as I had that day was equally

as bad. Worse actually. In my outbursts at least I released everything that consumed me. At the end of a tantrum I felt better.

I continued using this newfound strategy to contain myself. I became an agreeable person, often the one who lost the argument. I started taking the blame and just allowing it to happen. Eventually, I became a vessel of emotions. Every emotion, good or bad, bad mostly though, became trapped inside me.

Around that time my brother Nando became part of the popular clique at our church. Being more of an introvert, I avoided groups and mostly kept to myself. In that group he met, and then later started dating Sandy. Perhaps being gay had something to do with my disapproval, but I thought Sandy, in every way, was underwhelming. Despite the fact that she had very straight hair and green eyes (rare in the The Valley), Sandy seemed plain. Acne blemishes covered the majority of her face and her skin, so delicate, had developed deep wrinkles at 17 years old. Sandy's attitude didn't help either. In front of adults she was the perfect girl who dressed modestly. Skirts just below her knees, blouses hung on her body and flat shoes because she wasn't a church hoe with the high heels. In private, however, she ranted about her exploits. The late nights out to the club, drinking in Mexico and spending the nights at random people's homes because she was *too fucked up* to go to her own home. I didn't understand how anyone could be so two-faced. I didn't then, nor do I now, care for people who mislead others.

At a carwash to fund the annual trip to a youth convention in California I unfortunately ended up working next to Sandy. She wore her typical good-girl attire and tennis shoes.

So, how are things with you and Fern, Teri asked Sandy. Teri wore her tight denim skirt, fitted t-shirt which showed off her large breasts and tennis shoes.

My ears perked up when they started talking about Nando.

Things are good, she answered, pausing the work to talk. Her sponge dripped water into the bucket but away from the car itself.

Don't hold back girl. Fern's a great guy. He's kind.

Too kind. He's gullible, actually. Sandy didn't hold back. Almost immediately her tone shifted. She looked over to me, smiled and finally put the sponge to the car. I made my way to the right rear wheel and began to brush. Sandy scrubbed the same area for five minutes straight.

What girl? What do you mean? Teri asked. I stood opposite Sandy at that point, my shirt wet, my shoes soaked and pretending not to hear a thing, though I knew she was aware I could hear her as I was only about five feet away and she was speaking out loud.

Teri, when you find a guy like Fernando, you keep him.

Aww, that's sweet Sandy, Teri replied.

I'm not finished. I meant to say, you keep him for as long as he gives you what you need. Then you get rid of him.

She must have seen my face.

Don't you agree Felipe? Your brother's too easy to use, she laughed. My hand squeezed the scrub brush. I wanted to throw it as hard as I could at her face, this time intentionally. Unlike last time where the glass shattered after hitting my little sister's face, I wanted the brush to remain intact and shatter Sandy's face.

You're a bitch, Teri joined in laughter throwing the sponge at Sandy who took the opportunity to wet her shirt, revealing her perky breasts. Another pair of girls stepped in to finish the car as Teri and Sandy laughed and jumped around throwing the sponges back and forth and spraying each other with the hose.

I dropped the brush in the soap bucket and walked away, my fist and jaws clenched. For once I wished I hadn't practiced staying cool. I needed to stay calm though because the church sponsored the carwash and it would be awful if I had a tantrum like the ones I'd learned to control. I went to the other end of the auto store parking lot to work with a different team. I acted as though nothing happened and continued scrubbing tires in silence.

Nando participated in the carwash that day but he had been washing with a third group. When we got home he noticed something bothered me. I didn't tell him anything though. I didn't want him to think I was sabotaging his relationship, instead I feigned exhaustion. We'd had conversations about Sandy before. Mostly when he went on and on about her and I listened uninterested. I blatantly told him I didn't like her and how she rubbed me the wrong way. If I told him about Sandy and Teri's conversation he'd say I overreacted. Surely he'd defend her. The story of Adam and Eve came to mind, Sandy was Eve but also the serpent and I feared my brother would be Adam, the idiot who succumbed to her fruit.

The following day at Sunday school I took my place at the front of the classroom. Nando and Sandy sat together in the back table. I could hear chatter and laughter from the direction of Sandy's clique through most of the lesson. My blood boiled as the youth pastor, Sandy's brother, gave a lesson on forgiveness. *Turn the other cheek*, he taught.

Turn the other fucking cheek? So the bitch can go and slap me on the good one? Am I supposed to let her spit on me too? The lesson didn't sit well with me. Dwelling on it only made things worse as I thought about her comments about my brother. In many ways I idolized him. He had always been more athletic, thinner, more social and more assertive in general. At some point he let his guard down and a girl brought him to his knees. I found it difficult to watch as my brother disregarded her behavior because he "loved" her. The story of Samson and

Delilah also came to mind. I'm sure if my brother had long locks of hair he would give them to Sandy willingly.

When the lesson ended I waited outside the church for my mom. The youth congregated in the area, some speaking about the lesson, most talking about nonsense. The adult session went long and I decided to walk around with no real aim, avoiding as many people as possible. Eventually I ran into the popular group where Sandy called me over.

Hey, I was just telling everyone how amazing Fernando is. Tell them. He's your twin, you know him best. She smiled as she asked me to reveal the amazing qualities my brother possessed, like how easy he was to manipulate, according to her.

Fuck you, I thought but didn't say.

Yeah, tell us, Felipe, Teri added.

I walked away not saying a word, again my fists and my jaw clinched.

I walked away and went into my dad's truck which Nando drove to church. In the truck I experienced my first anxiety attack. My arms tingled as though electricity pulsed through my veins, seeped into my flesh, through the skin and out the fine hairs all over my body. I remained conscious while my body trembled uncontrollably. I needed to punch something. I needed release. Soon I began to hyperventilate and I started to sweat profusely. I cried from the depths of my soul, everything I had put away resurfaced. Out came tears soaked in pain, humiliation, blame, sadness.

When my mom walked up to the car with Nando she found me in the midst of it.

Felipito, que te pasa mi'jo?

I couldn't speak. She fanned me, opened the doors and gave me water from a bottle she happened to have. She ordered Nando to drive us home. At home she didn't allow me to get off the car. She ran into the house, called my dad out and we were gone to the hospital.

Israel, she said, *I don't know what's wrong with him.*

¿Qué te pása, Felipe? Dad asked. I couldn't give an answer. I wanted to tell him how tired I felt of having to hold it all in. How I hated being blamed for everything. How I hated being called a *chillona*. How I wanted to just cry sometimes and get it over with. I wanted to tell him that I wish I had thrown the fucking scrub brush at Sandy and then the pail with it. How I hated that mom didn't believe that breaking the glass on my sister's head was an accident. I wanted to tell him that boys do cry and that I felt like shit because I did. I couldn't. I couldn't even say, *Nothing*.

The entire way to the emergency room I tried to relax but the memories of every time I consumed my emotions further worsened my *nervios*, an umbrella diagnosis for a multitude of mental health issues. At the hospital we waited about two hours with no help. In that time I calmed down and asked to go home. My parents seemed ok with that as we couldn't afford any hospital bills.

CHAPTER V

NERVIOS

Wekiva Springs

October 27th – November 11th, 2010

Diagnosis:

Axis I: 1. Major Depressive Disorder, Single Episode, without Psychotic Symptoms
2. Alcohol Abuse, Binge-Type

Axis II: Cluster B Traits

Axis III: No acute medical problems.

Axis IV: Related to relationship issues and worries about the future.

Axis V: GAF:55

In late 2010, at 27 years old, I lost control of my life and fell into a depression very quickly. I cried then. I cried a lot. This depression had me considering suicide and the thought of being alone scared me because every minute that passed made the idea of ending my life seem like the only solution to the never-ending pain. I was never taught to take care of my mental health so when the time came to do so, I crumbled under the pressures of life, nearly giving into it. The days before I admitted myself to Wekiva Springs Behavioral Center are a blur.

I had recently started dating Steven and shortly after he left to Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD) in Savannah, Georgia, I started feeling anxious. Though we didn't end the relationship then, his departure saddened me. I often drove an hour and a half to visit him but school work made it difficult for him to see me when I did visit. Furthermore, a Navy doctor had recently given me the news that I was ineligible for re-enlistment due to the reoccurrence of asthma which, at that point, had been 15 years absent. I then started looking for and secured a job in Savannah and had applied to a graduate program at SCAD – everything seemed to be working out regardless of the doctor's news. I would have a job, be going to school and be near Steven again. Days after the job offer, however, the manager retracted his offer and I received notice that I wouldn't be able to afford SCAD. My job search in Savannah and my visits to see Steven had left me broke which, in turn, resulted in an eviction notice – I found it taped to my door one evening after a failed attempt at seeing Steven. Feeling defeated I served myself a drink when I got home. I drank hoping to ease the heartbreak of failure but instead I fell deeper into it. Drinking reminded me I was separating from the Navy, made me think about failing to find a job, failing to return to school and failing to spend more time with Steven. Then, I served myself a few more and I lost count. This went on for days until I mostly became incoherent. Due to my erratic behaviors on the phone and in person, Steven stopped answering my calls and we broke up. The adage “when it rains it pours” is appropriate to describe the circumstances which led me to the brink of insanity and suicide. Soon enough I lost touch with the world.

After my break up with Steven I turned into the person I detested, the one with the rage. The one who destroys. I threatened Steven and stalked him outside his dorm in Savannah. It seemed two people existed within my body then. The rational one, the one who writes today and the other, the one who disregards rationality in favor of decisive, and often violent and scary,

actions. During moments of clarity I tried to meet Steven in person to apologize and, out of fear, he rejected my invitation, which in turn caused me to become furious, imagining scenarios in which he rejected the meeting because he was with other men. This further enraged me and I became obsessed with seeing him. I often sat in my car and waited for him to walk by. I waited hours, sometimes in a rage and sometimes deep in tears. I skipped many meals waiting to see him walk past. A few nights I slept in my car because I had no money for a hotel.

One day he left his dorm room alone and I followed him on foot. He saw me and walked faster. On the inside I wanted to stop myself. I knew how terrifying I must have been. How terrified he must have been – after all, he didn't know my intentions. I couldn't stop myself though and I confronted him.

Leave me alone. He walked faster with his arms crossed and head down.

I need to talk to you, I demanded, walking faster to keep up with him.

Please, just leave me alone.

We walked past other students and I tried to act casual, but I'm sure my face betrayed me. He walked toward a large cluster of students so as to lose me.

I just want to talk. I need answers. I grabbed him by his arm, forcing him to stop.

To what?

Why are you ignoring me?

I told you I've been busy, now leave.

I began crying in front of him. Though I wasn't able to hold back the tears, in a way, I felt glad I couldn't contain them, hoping he would feel sorry for me and take me back. The truth is, I wouldn't have taken me back then either.

You need to leave me alone.

Now within earshot of other students I wiped my tears and turned around back to my car.

My depression came on quick. I always assumed depressions developed over time. After a few days of feeling overwhelmed, I sought the help of a therapist to try to make sense of life – my pride in being able to handle things on my own almost kept me from going at all. The Navy counselor, also a Sandy, tried to help and I noticed her concern when I left her office the first time. And then the second. She asked that I go to a hospital if I felt the urge to harm myself. I had a difficult time deciding to seek further help. Instead, I allowed everything to pile up until I could no longer contain it. If I had been home in The Valley I likely would not have sought any help – it would have made me seem weak in front of family, unable to deal with life like a real man.

I had been taught, by my mother and the church, that suicide is an unforgivable sin and that the pain of hell's fire hurts many times worse than the pain of life. During my depression I turned on a Christian radio station seeking relief for my pain. I listened to the verses hoping that God would send me a sign. Then I thought he did, but not in the form of a verse. The man on the radio asked listeners to call in if they needed a prayer. I needed one and I needed someone to talk to.

Hello, may I know who I'm speaking with?

Felipe

How can I pray for you, Felipe?

I'm thinking of killing myself. I don't know what to do anymore. Please, I just need a prayer.

I can do that. You know, though, that suicide is a terrible sin? Anyway, will you tell me what's going on?

I explained everything that had happened. Separating from the Navy, the retraction of a job offer, the situation with school, the break up with Steven.

Ah, there it is, the man said. There's the problem. Homosexuality is a sin and you're paying for it now. You need to repent of your sins and ask God for forgiveness.

What?

Your homosexuality got you here. You need to repent, brother.

I hung up on him immediately and felt worse. I had hoped that religion and God would help me overcome the depression and after that phone call I realized I would get nothing out of religion except blame.

I considered suicide more seriously after that call. I thought of ways to do it. Some of them involved chemicals – overdosing on drugs or drinking harsh household cleaning supplies. I considered slitting my wrists but my aversion to gashes kept me from going through with it, barely breaking my skin the time I tried it. I considered hanging, but my apartment didn't have the structure necessary for it. I considered, also, driving with the intent of being in a major crash. I lied to Sandy telling her I didn't consider suicide. *If I tell her, I thought, she'll call police and I'll be detained for my safety, which will prevent my doing it.* I scared myself then. I feared being alone. I didn't trust myself.

During my drinking binges I started abusing Ambien which had been prescribed by a my doctor when I switched from working nights after three years to working days my final weeks in the navy. The effectiveness of Ambien can't be argued. If used as prescribed, Ambien helps with falling asleep and staying asleep. The effects of Ambien are quick and one of the consequences of not being ready to sleep, or fighting sleep, is the likelihood of hallucinations, both visual and auditory. I found this out one time when, after taking it, I thought I saw a boy,

about four years old, come into my room asking me to play ball with him. I also saw my hands melt into the wall against which I held it to look at it. I became fascinated with this side-effect, wondering what the hallucinations really were.

The first few days of binging on Ambien the hallucinations were subtle and rather pleasant. A cat roamed the apartment, voices whispered in the bedroom and plants grew out of walls. They soon turned ominous, though. A shadow stood against the darkness, his head turning in my direction as I walked past it. Screams echoed from the bedroom as though someone was in pain. I stopped sleeping, paranoid that I was going to be assaulted by the shadow. One day I forced myself to sleep. Just minutes later a scream woke me up and I saw the shadow exiting the bedroom. I quit trying to sleep.

Reflecting on my own experiences I remember my uncle Perico. My hallucinations were caused, primarily, by Ambien. He lives with them daily. Growing up I heard of *Tío Perico*, my uncle Pedro. In his small village, called *ranchos* in Matehuala, San Luis Potosí, Mexico, he is known as the crazy man, *el loco*. He has been known to get himself in a lot of trouble, including digging a trench in the main access road to the rancho, which the municipality didn't appreciate, throwing him in jail. However, he's most known for his struggle with schizophrenia. One summer I visited the village with my mother for a *quinceañera*. We arrived with days to spare to enjoy the beautiful mountainous scenery and fresh air, visit with my late *tía* and offer to help in the preparations. The first day Perico stayed away and I hoped he would keep away because of his reputation. The second day, however, he arrived and appeared physically normal. A tall, slender man, with poufy hair and tattered clothes, he arrived early in the morning for breakfast.

At the breakfast table he caught up with my mom having a casual conversation about their memories.

Suddenly and without provocation he turned in my direction and snapped: *What are you looking at?*

I froze in terror. Not only was I half his size, but he was also crazy. Everyone knew it. I shook my head without saying a word. Mom calmly called him back.

There's nobody there Perico. I realized he looked past me to an empty kitchen.

What do you mean there's nobody there? Look at that pendejo staring at me. You must be crazy not to see him there. Unfortunately for him, no one saw his visitor besides him making him the obvious crazy one.

It's just in your mind Perico, there's no one.

He returned to their conversation muttering obscenities. From time to time he looked past me yell out more obscenities and continue with his conversations.

When Perico left my mom and aunt had a talk.

How long has he been like this? I didn't realize it had gotten so bad, my mom said.

Está muy mal de los nervios, Emma, my tía replied.

Since that visit I've yet to see him again. At that time I felt afraid of him, now I'm afraid for him. His medical diagnosis is schizophrenia, though in the village and among his family, *nervios* is the unofficial diagnosis, the only one ever mentioned.

After a week of no sleep I didn't think I could take it one more day. I looked up mental health clinics and found Wekiva. I drove myself, somehow, to the hospital and explained the situation, though I lied about the hallucinations, not wanting to seem psychotic. The intake nurse

decided it was best to admit me. I spent seven days at the hospital, participating in group therapy, one-to-one therapy with a, psychiatric evaluation and prescriptions, recreational and art therapy. I slept the most I'd slept in days and I ate more than I had eaten in weeks. I did everything I could to get out within the week because I had to file my paperwork to separate from the Navy. Upon discharge I struggled but I was able to cope a bit better. I drained my liquor bottles and threw away the Ambien as soon as I arrived home. I also opened all the window drapes and allowed sunlight into the apartment. I left Jacksonville to return to The Valley heartbroken. I left behind four years of my life, it seemed, and I left Steven. I didn't think I'd ever be happy again. Though I had recently met Steven about four months before the hospitalization I couldn't see myself without him.

Going through a depression I became trapped within myself. The fact that I was home with family made no difference to me. In fact it only reminded me that I had left behind the place I'd called home four years. I rarely got out of bed and the skin on my back started breaking out in acne due to the inactivity. The lights in my room remained off as did my TV. I left the room only to use the restroom and have lunch and dinner. At barbecues with my family I felt detached as though I observed everything happening around me from outside, like strangers' celebrations on TV. I sat aside not caring to make conversation with anyone, even my nephews and nieces who looked up to me. I wanted to care and be emotionally there with them, but I couldn't.

I took my medications routinely, however not quite as prescribed. Though the Celexa subdued my rage and my suicidal thoughts, it also subdued any other emotions. I watched as everyone laughed at the antics of the kids having their turn at a piñata. Numb. I felt members of my family wrapping their arms around me. Numb. I heard their kind words, happy to have me

home. Numb. When I returned to my room I contemplated on how I should be feeling and though I understood the emotions I couldn't feel them. I thought back at everything I had been taught about being a boy. Perhaps being a macho felt the same as being on Celexa – complete apathy – not feeling one way or another about anything. I refused to feel that way though. It felt strange not feeling anything. I loved caring about people and I couldn't do that. Eventually I stopped taking the medication altogether. I realized that it maybe worked too effectively and I was tired of being an empty vessel. After I stopped taking Celexa, I also stopped taking Vistaril, a medication used to treat anxiety. I wanted nothing to do with medications that might leave me feeling outside my body.

Steven and I reconciled months after the incident outside the dorm. By that time I had moved back to The Valley. Soon after he moved back home as well having had trouble financing SCAD and moved in with me in a two-bedroom apartment. At the time I still battled depression. Without warning I would become enraged and often I threw things in Steven's direction. My clenched fists contained my anger, barely. Unfortunately, I tried to blame Steven for my condition. Steven, however, had nothing to do with the depression.

During moments of intense stress I again felt what I did that day after Sunday school. Though *nervios* is not the best term to describe the feeling, my nerves definitely were on edge. During those anxiety attacks my mind raced with thoughts, most irrational. My mind on overdrive, my body trembled. An unusual type of energy seemed to shoot from my pores. Steven often tried to calm me but he was unsure what to do as I would become upset if he said anything contrary to how I felt.

According to my parents, if anyone asked, I suffered *nervios* – which ran in our family I would find out.

The call came in a little after 9 am one Saturday morning in March 2011 as the sun broke through the blinds casting bars of shadow on the bedroom wall.

Felipito, Ma started, pausing to wait for my response.

Before I cued my attention, and before she went further, I knew she was delivering bad news. Perhaps in her mind by calling me *Felipito* I might psychologically revert to a childlike state in which she could soothe me as she did when I was a child – at this point I was 28, recovering from depression, free of Celexa or Vistaril and finally seeing the *light at the end of the tunnel*.

Felipito, she repeated, her voice more noticeably distraught, or perhaps I was more perceptive to it the second time around.

Instantly I sat up in bed. In my gut I already understood the seriousness of the call. Steven felt me stir, scooted closer to me and wrapped his right arm across my bent waist, likely thinking it was yet another invitation to a casual *menudo* brunch as she tends to throw.

Mánde, Ma, I prompted finally.

Has anyone called to tell you, she asked in Spanish, *about your primo Joaquín?*

¿Qué pasó?

Sé suicido, mi 'jo.

My gut feeling had been right – it had predicted the bad news before she said a word. Although in those split seconds I prepared myself for the news, her words caught me off guard nonetheless.

It is difficult to put into words how I felt at the moment. Even now, years later, I have trouble relating the event. His death hurt in so many ways. Every ounce of me mourns thinking about it. The thought of him and his final moments shakes me to the core and my eyes swell up

almost instantly. Though as adults we had drifted apart, as children we had been very close. Joaquin had been the one to dare me to literally take leaps without fear, jumping from the roof of our house to a small shed and back, a lesson later transferred to the real world. When he spent the night over we shared a bed and he'd scare my brother and me with stories of the man in the shadows – a figure I still fear to this day. He had been a social chameleon, instantly going from a group five years younger his age into a group ten years older. I looked up to him, my older cousin. One might attribute my pain of his passing to him being the closest family member to pass – in regards to death I've been sheltered as I still have both parents, all siblings and nephews and nieces. While there is truth in that and while I loved him and shared many moments of our childhood, his death resonates on many levels for me.

After giving me the details concerning his death I hung up, lay back in bed and turned away from Steven. He scooted closer still and hugged me tight.

Are you ok? he asked.

Not really, I answered, soaking my pillow quietly, *my cousin killed himself.* He held me tight.

That could have been me about to be put in a box in the ground, I thought to myself.

Joaquin had previously dealt with mental health issues I learned, though I'm unsure if he was ever diagnosed. I often wonder what kept him from seeking the help he needed. Perhaps he didn't want to appear weak by admitting he struggled with life.

In bed I wondered how I had been lucky enough to get the help I needed. Steven kissed my neck and we laid in bed quietly as I processed the information and analyzed my own struggle.

I am now 34 and depression-free nearly six years. I have studied the events which led to that episode in my life and I realize many things created it. As a child I learned not to cry, to

contain my emotions or risk the chance of being seen as less than a man. Then, when I learned to contain the crying I acted out in rage only to feel like the bad kid. When I learned to contain that anger I bottled up my emotions altogether allowing them to overwhelm me to the point of causing anxiety. Later in life I would again turn to these methods of dealing with problems only they were adult problems, much greater than the ones I had bottled up as a kid. It was only a matter of time before they broke me.

I realize now, also, that my fear of being judged stopped me from getting help early on, before the issues overwhelmed me. I didn't want to be a weak man for not being able to keep myself together. I also didn't want to be the person who succumbed to *nervios*. Many factors exacerbated my situation – factors which were avoidable.

I am now more aware of my own feelings, my own limitations and I can better cope with my emotions. I have also learned to disregard what others think as it can create greater problems for me. I realize that my health, my mental health specifically, is important, and that being called crazy or emotional or weak shouldn't keep me from seeking the help I need.

After Joaquín's suicide I gave more serious thought to my family's history of mental illness, unwilling to accept *nervios* as a diagnosis. There is a lot I don't know about my family's history of mental disorders. I refuse to accept that my family members have simply been dealing with a case of *nervios* – not my *Tío* Perico who suffers schizophrenia, or my cousin, also a Felipe, who suffered a mental breakdown, nor my cousin Winn from Monterrey, Mexico who also committed suicide or my grandmother who developed dementia at an older age.

Though I am still learning about myself, I know enough to want a change, at least within my family. I know I am not the first nor will I be the last in my family to deal with a mental disorder that is diagnosable and I hope that in time the term *nervios* will stop using the word

nervios when talking about mental health. The word oversimplifies many conditions and creates problems for the person who is dealing with the disorder – they might feel that because others have dealt with *nervios* and overcome them, then they definitely need to deal with them on their own.

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